

Case 12: University Donor

You work as a fundraiser for a big Midwestern university. Your job centers on raising money from individual donors to support a wide range of university activities, from scholarships for low-income students to faculty research projects. While most donations come in the form of checks or transfers of stock, some donors choose to make gifts of tangible goods, such as real estate or artwork. These tangible goods might be added to the university's possessions or sold by the university for their cash value.

For years, you have worked with a wealthy donor who has made gifts of cash and stock, and even on one occasion donated her expensive condominium in Florida. The donor is an alumna of the University and loves to come back to campus, both for cultural events and football games. You often meet with her during her visits, and over the years have struck up a friendship. You share a love of music and plays, and often attend concerts and performances together when she is in town.

Two days before the big football season opener, the donor calls to tell you that she has six extra tickets for the football game and asks whether you or anyone in the university community might want them. Normally, one of your responsibilities during the football season is to help distribute unused tickets to alumni. But, because this home opener is against a vastly overmatched opponent, you expect attendance to be low. You are sure that the game will not sell out, and you know that there is a backlog of available tickets for any alumni who might decide at the last minute that they would like to go to the game. You suggest that the donor should try to sell the tickets on Stubhub or perhaps look for other recipients; she tells you that she doesn't have the time or energy, and that if you won't accept them, she'll simply throw them away.

An idea occurs to you. For the past several years, you've volunteered at an after-school program for children with disabilities. You could use the tickets to take several of these children, and one of your co-volunteers, to the game. You think this would be a great experience for the kids — not to mention your co-volunteer and you, both big football fans. However, the university has a policy against fundraising staff accepting gifts from donors.

Study Questions:

1. Should you accept the tickets? Why or why not?
2. Suppose you were thinking of passing the tickets along to your co-volunteer, but not attending the game yourself. Would this affect your answer to the previous question?
3. In light of this scenario, should the University rethink its policy that prohibits fundraising staff from accepting gifts? If so, how might that policy be revised?
4. When, if ever, is it permissible to violate a generally sensible policy? Should we violate a policy whenever doing so would allow us to do something good?