

ETHICS NOTES: MARCH MADNESS

Beware the Ides of March, or at least the Madness of March! Every March, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) hosts the bracket busting basketball tournament known as March Madness. As you are filling out your brackets and looking forward to watching the games with friends and family, it's important to remember your ethics playbook on participating in March Madness pools.

BOTTOM LINE: Federal personnel (military and civilian) are prohibited from engaging in ANY gambling while on federal property or while on duty (JER § 2-501, 5 C.F.R. § 735.201). Gambling includes any game of chance that offers a reward or prize in exchange for money (or anything of value). Examples include, but are not limited to, operating a gambling device, conducting a lottery or pool, participating in a game for money or property, or selling raffle tickets. This means that any March Madness bracket pool that requires a contribution of value to participate constitutes gambling and is prohibited while on federal property or while on duty. Many offices participate in March Madness brackets for "bragging rights" only, which does not violate the gambling prohibition since there is no reward or prize and nothing of value is exchanged. However, participants in such office brackets must ensure that they are not creating other ethics issues by misusing official resources and time (e.g., excessive use of government computers to check scores/watch games while on duty).

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Of course, Federal workers may join a pool away from the office, on their own time, and using personal equipment and resources. They may also join an office pool provided there is no cost to participate, no prize given to the winner, and no misuse of government time or resources to conduct the pool. Any questions or concerns should be directed to your local legal office ethics officials. For OSD personnel only: contact the DoD Standards of Conduct Office (SOCO) at osd.soco@mail.mil.