

Forum:

Ethics in Library/Information Science Education

(Editor's note: Representatives from the Library and Information Science programs in the state responded to questions which were posed for them. They are: Larry Auld, Chair, Department of Library and Information Studies, East Carolina University; Ben Speller, Dean, School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University; Barbara B. Moran, Dean, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and Kitty Smith, with Jim Carmichael and Bea Kovacs for Dr. Marilyn Miller, Department of Library and Information Science, University of North Carolina at Greensboro (noted in article as Smith for space purposes). Our thanks to those who contributed.)

1. How has the coming of the "Information Age" changed the climate in which professionals make decisions? What are the most important ethical issues? Please describe the situation from your own perspective.

Auld: "Print age" librarians worked in relative isolation, typically providing services within the library and only rarely going beyond its walls. Working with a local clientele and a small number of fellow professionals, the librarian was constrained by this continuing close contact. Behavior, both professional and otherwise, was controlled by the standards and expectations of persons known personally to the librarian. With social contacts exerting an effective control, ethics were externalized.

"Information age" librarians may still be institutionally based, but they carry out much their business in a national and, often, international community. They work in a venue in which many of the persons with whom they are in contact electronically are not personally known and some may never be met face to face. This absence of shared personal familiarity, local standards, and expectations, means that the librarian must rely more on ethics which have been internalized. Thus, the personal integrity of each librarian, always a fundamental ethical concern, is becoming more important.

Personal integrity takes on additional importance as we consider the number of persons affected by the work of the individual librarian. When the "print age" librarian behaved irresponsibly, relatively few others were affected.

An "information age" librarian who behaves irresponsibly may affect the lives of hundreds, even thousands of others. Cataloging is an obvious example. The damage from a bad catalog record in a small card catalog was localized, while a bad record contributed to OCLC has the immediate potential for affecting several thousand libraries and tens and hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Speller: Today's professional increasingly works in an electronic networked information environment. This environment coupled with international economic and societal structural changes have produced a truly global community. A variety of value and ethical systems are in operation in a global community. A major ethical challenge for information professionals is the identification of these various systems and the discovery of common ground between them. These technological and structural changes have magnified the climate in which professionals make decisions. In this environment, a variety of value systems may be in operation.

A global community makes the ethical challenges of decision-making especially important for all professionals because this environment will be far less forgiving of errors in judgment on critical economic and social matters than in the past. The global community increases the heterogeneity of the value systems for decision-making because this environment also carries with it an increase in ethnic identifications.¹

Ethnic identifications usually result in differences in moral and value systems.^{2,3,4} What are the most important ethical issues?

In a multi-cultural environment, i.e., the global community, one of the most important issues is "What set of ethical principles should we use?" In a global community, will a professional be capable of self-regulation which addresses issues of how to deal with the situation of the unenforceable and how to deal with matter of right-versus-right.

As a teacher and administrator in a multi-cultural population of students, I try to avoid using the terms "morals" and "values" in dealing with ethical climates in which professionals make decisions. I have found Laura L. Nash's⁵ twelve questions for examining the ethics of a business decision most useful for our students as a universal set of ethical principles. They are as follows:

1. Have you defined the problem accurately?
2. How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?
3. How did this situation occur in the first place?
4. To whom and to what do you give your loyalty as a person and as a member of the corporation?
5. What is your intention in making this decision?
6. How does this intention compare with the probable results?
7. Whom could your decision or action injure?
8. Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties before you make

your decision?

9. Are you confident that your position will be as valid over a long period of time as it seems now?

10. Could you disclose without qualm your decision or action to your boss, your CEO, the board of directors, your family, society as a whole?

11. What is the symbolic potential of your action if understood? If misunderstood?

12. Under what conditions would you allow exceptions to your stand?

Moran: I am not sure that the coming of the Information Age has changed any of the basic "ethics" of the profession. What was right or ethical fifty years ago (or five hundred years ago) is still right or ethical. Without a doubt, however, this new age has added some complications to ethical decision-making. For instance, the increased use of technology has created new areas of ethical concern. Privacy rights may be compromised by the capability of the new technology to store and retrieve information about individuals. The growing fragmentation of society manifest in the strengthening of special interest groups of all kinds ranging from those preaching "political correctness" of various sorts to those attempting to shield children from what they consider offensive or harmful material has made intellectual freedom decisions more complicated. The growth of the information industry and the increased commercialization of information threatens to impede access to information, especially for less affluent individuals and for less affluent countries. What obligations the information rich have to the information poor is an ethical question with profound consequences. The library/information science profession has an obligation to ponder these and other ethical issues and to find ways that higher order values can prevail.

Smith: The mission of the Master of Library and Information Studies program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) is "to educate and motivate our students to become information professionals who will be capable of providing a wide array of information services to a diverse population in a rapidly changing world."

The advent of the "Information Age" has certainly accelerated change in the climate in which professionals must make decisions. It has changed people's perceptions as to the relevance of information in their lives. In the past, many felt that all they needed was access to the information that would

enable them to do their jobs and earn a living. With information more readily available now, and in formats that are more attractive to a greater variety of individuals, awareness of the need for information has increased. Change is relentless, diversity of needs is undeniable, and information is the lifeblood of survival and growth. To deal with the explosion of information, we have created powerful technologies which themselves require new ways of thinking and problem solving. The professionals who use these tools in the service of individuals and institutions, are critical elements in the very life-support system of the living organism we call a democratic society. When accurate, specific, and timely information does not flow freely, parts of the system deteriorate, and the entire system suffers. Today, the computer's presence and power is so pervasive that we barely notice it. We travel, solve problems, transact business, buy and sell, borrow and invest, pay bills, phone home, get instruction, work and play with the help of computers. It is a rare day when human beings, their lives and their occupations are not affected by applications of computer technology to the acquisition, manipulation, transmission, and dissemination of information. Computer technology enables libraries to store and process vast amounts of information in infinitely smaller amounts of space. Hardware, software, and computer communications tools have had an unbelievably swift evolution in the second half of this century. However, as with all revolutionary advances in our ability to deal positively with the challenges which face us, there is the possibility of a "dark side." For example, the pace at which human beings can adapt these tools to their intentions, and adapt themselves to new technologies, varies from individual to individual. The degree and flexibility of adaptation of information technology (and adaptation to it) affects not only a person's productivity, but also his or her sense of physical, emotional and social stability and control, in either a positive or negative direction. As information professionals we have an extraordinary capacity, literally at our fingertips, to either empower people to seek out and use information, or to control and restrain them.

In this broad systematic view, the professionals who staff libraries and information agencies are called upon to play a marvelous and immensely responsible role, particularly in regard to the means (or provision of technologies of access) and ends (uses) of information. While the pervasiveness of computer

technology is not the only element affecting the information professional's ability to make ethical decisions in the information age, it is indisputably a major one. Along with it, however, over the past several decades, there has been an increasing awareness of the social responsibility of information professionals to take leadership in their spheres of influence and to empower their clients to become active participants in the lives of their communities, particularly that diversity of client groups which were previously underserved and lacked the power and voice to satisfy their own information needs. While the essential ethical issues faced by library and information professionals today may seem virtually identical to those faced by our counterparts in past decades, decision making is much more complex. While our service populations have become steadily more diverse, our ability to communicate globally has changed perceptions of the world from that of a collection of nations to that of a global community. This "globe shrinking" has been wrought partly by modern communications technology, and partly by the increasingly intense struggle of people everywhere to affirm basic human rights and the freedom to shape their own destinies. Whom shall we serve, and how? Decision making will have to change dramatically in the near future, if libraries and information centers are to be effective, or to continue at all. Resources needed to provide all information to all who seek it are not readily available in today's economy. Professionals are going to have to rethink their roles, develop new ways of providing service, and find new directions for the use of their expertise, or risk obsolescence.

We are called upon as professionals to behave ethically, that is, to distinguish between "right action" and "wrong action," between "good" and "bad," and, when tempted by the darker aspects of our considerable knowledge and power, to constantly lean towards the light of truth and the goodness of human compassion.

The moral distinctions and the solutions to ethical questions have never been simple, because they nearly always involve a choice among values. While striving to promote intellectual freedom and access to information, for example, we experience situations in which these seemingly simple values conflict with other prized values such as the individual's right to his or her own intellectual property or privacy. We are troubled by questions like "Who owns the information?" "Is it a commodity, 'owned' by the vendor (or the institu-

tion) and accessible to those who can pay for it? " Or "Is it like the air, a universal necessity and right of everyone, regardless of power or ability to pay?" "Does the right of the individual (e.g., for privacy) take precedence over the rights of the institution or community?" "Which deserves greater loyalty: the individual's right to see or hear or express a minority point of view, or the expressed demands and standards of the majority of the community?" "As a professional, am I willing and able to take a stand on behalf of a principle my profession holds as sacred (e.g., the right of people to disagree or to present a minority opinion), when I deeply and personally believe that opinion is wrong, or when my own security and livelihood is in the balance?" When values are in conflict, these are the kinds of ethical questions which can shake the very foundations of the professional's personal integrity and honesty.

2. How useful are the professional codes and other statements, such as those on the right to read or intellectual freedom? How are these presented in the first professional degree program at your institution? Is this adequate?

Auld: Over the years the ALA and other professional library groups have promulgated a series of statements on ethics and related areas. On the whole, these have been received as bland pronouncements on what most librarians generally consider to be non-issues in their lives. I personally do not recall any one ever taking a statement of professional ethics to heart, adopting its ideals and practices as a new way of life. No, what I have seen, repeatedly, are persons who feel that they already behave ethically and, therefore, have no need for a further delineation of ethical standards. This is unfortunate, because our personal standards are not usually sufficiently developed to guide us reliably in making professional decisions which are outside our personal experience and may even run counter to our personal beliefs and inclinations. We need a statement of professional ethics to ensure that we understand what is expected of us professionally and to guide us as we encounter new situations and problems.

One statement, the Freedom to Read statement, has had a much greater impact on us individually as professionals. We enlist in the battle against censorship, committing ourselves to the principle of free access to information, because it is tangible, external to our selves, and viewed as right. But even here many of

us tend to be relativistic, tailoring our interpretation of what constitutes censorship to fit the situation.

MLS students at ECU are introduced to matters of professional ethics, censorship, and the like in our required courses. These topics recur in other courses where the concepts are reinforced. We have avoided a separate course, because we believe these concepts are better and more meaningfully taught when they are integrated into the whole of the curriculum.

Speller: The professional codes and other statements have been very useful as background readings for class discussions and case study analyses and other simulated exercises. How are these presented in the first professional degree program at your institution?

Students are introduced to the role that professional codes and other statements play in professional responsibilities of the information professional in our required core course, *Survey of Librarianship and Information Science*.

"Professional Ethics" is a major component of the unit on Effective Behavior in our required core course, *Management of Libraries and Information Systems*. In the management course students are required to read and to become familiar with the following documents:

Laura L. Nash, "Ethics without the sermon," *Harvard Business Review*, 59 (November-December, 1981): 78-90.

National Association of Counties (NACo). "Code of Ethics for County Officials." 1991.

Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), "ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct," *Communications of the ACM*, 35 (May, 1992) 94-99. (Draft, February 12, 1992).

Students are required to bring copies of local codes of professional ethics for county governments or organizations in which the work. They really enjoy this assignment because they receive such quick responses to their requests. In fact, I have been called on the telephone by several county managers to thank me for focusing on professional ethics in the management course.

To encourage integrity by ethical behavior, students are required to provide an independent analysis of several case studies of actual situations that have occurred in school, public, academic, and special library environments. They also are then required to participate in a group analysis of at least one of the case studies. Is this adequate?

I think that our depth of coverage in our core courses is very adequate.

Moran: Professional codes and statements can provide only rudimentary guidance in making ethical decisions. The skeleton is there but it lack flesh. For instance, the ALA Statement on Professional Ethics (1981) provides very little guidance for a personnel manager seeking to making ethical decisions related to employees. As library and information professionals become more aware of the importance of ethics in a growing number of areas, these codes will likely be expanded to provide more guidance in decision making.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, students are given an introduction to many of the professional ethical codes in a required course taken at or near the beginning of their program. Certain codes are examined in greater depth in some of the advanced courses. These opportunities provide a chance for students to become familiar with the most important professional codes and statements. Students become aware of their existence, we hope they know the reasoning behind each code, and they know where to go when they need to refer to them in the future.

Smith: Professional associations provide some guidance in "right action" in the form of documents such as the Code of Ethics, the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read Statement, and so on. These provide a framework within which individuals can find a context for the job they are doing. In addition to the provision of forums for discussion and continuing education on ethical questions. However, it is the responsibility of programs of graduate education in library and information studies to initially introduce and inculcate in our students the specific concepts represented by these professional association statements and activities. It is our responsibility as library educators to challenge and prepare our students to think clearly and critically, as self-responsible and socially-responsible adults, about problems and issues they are likely to encounter in their professional lives, and to make rational, yet compassionate, decisions regarding them.

3. How does your program address ethical issues in preparing candidates for the first professional degree? In required courses, such as reference, cataloging, collection development? Specific courses on ethics? Extracurricular forums? Mentoring? Etc.? Is this adequate?

Auld: Because we feel that ethical issues should not be segregated, we attempt to integrate them into all of our courses, albeit it, some more than others. The

best time and place to deal with an ethical issue is in the context of a particular aspect of library service or operation. In this way, the ethical problem is more clearly identified, and the different ways of dealing with the problem can be examined in terms of its effect on the library client. We handle ethical issues in continuing education events in the same way we do in classes. As mentors, our faculty and professional intern site supervisors are expected to exhibit ethical behavior suitable for emulation by our students.

Is this adequate? How do we measure adequacy? I am unaware of any of our graduates being sued for embezzlement, and I have not heard of grossly dishonest or deceitful behavior on their part. Is this because we instilled a high standard of ethics? I would like to think so, but I must admit that much of their behavior follows patterns laid down many years earlier in childhood. Perhaps we did build at least a little onto that already firm foundation. Perhaps that is all we can do.

Speller: Ethical issues in preparing candidates for the first professional degree are covered in specific units in two of our core courses, *Survey of Librarianship and Information Science* and *Management of Libraries and Information Systems*. Ethical issues appropriate to the situation are integrated in reference, cataloging, collection development, library and information technology, and administration by type of library environment courses. Guest lectures are included as part of all of our courses and these activities are open to all students through public announcements.

As Dean of the School, I have emphasized the importance of professional ethics by giving each graduate since 1985 a copy of the ALA Code of Professional Ethics for their offices. The responses from the students, faculty, and media have been very positive. The local newspaper ran an article about my gift and its professional implications.

American Libraries and *LJ Hotline* considered the gift to recent Master of Library Science graduates as newsworthy also. One of our faculty, Lee W. Finks, took a closer look at the ALA Code of Ethics and thought it did not meet current needs. He submitted an article to *American Libraries*⁶ stating his position on the need for a new code. The subsequent publication of the article in *American Libraries* resulted in a lively debate^{7,8} which ultimately led to a series of public hearings at annual conferences of the American Library Association and a proposed revision of the "ALA Code of

Professional Ethics."^{9,10}

Another faculty, Pauletta B. Bracy, has maintained an active participant role in forums on intellectual freedom and the right to read. Is this adequate?

Comments from faculty and students would suggest that current teaching/learning strategies relating to ethical issues are adequate.

Moran: As mentioned above, the basic introductory course has a section dealing with professionalism where the basic professional codes are discussed. In addition, one lecture in that course is an introduction to information ethics which provides students with a beginning knowledge of the importance of ethics in the profession. Ethical issues are discussed in most of the advanced courses in management, collection development, reference and other areas. For instance, I cannot imagine a course in reference which did not cover some of the ethical issues such as privacy and confidentiality involved in information provision to individuals and groups.

An individual course on ethics would be useful because it would allow interested students to focus exclusively on the topic during the course of a semester. Lacking such a course, a section dealing with the ethics is appropriate in most courses offered in the curriculum.

Smith: The ways in which these responsibilities are carried out in the MLIS program at UNCG are outlined in our statements of program goals and student objectives. The faculty are challenged "To provide strong flexible educational programs, advice, and leadership to individuals, and ethical role models to prepare effective innovative library and information professionals....To exercise a leadership role in defining the social, ethical, and service responsibilities of library and information professionals in a democratic society....To foster individuals who are committed to ethical principles, knowledgeable in major curriculum areas, competent in technical skills, able to think critically, able to communicate effectively, and who have appreciation of the value of lifelong learning and the interdisciplinary nature of library and information studies." Students are challenged to become professionals who are able to "demonstrate a commitment to the ethics of the profession, including intellectual freedom and cooperation among libraries and other information agencies;...respond to the needs of diverse populations;...demonstrate essential competencies in the technology...communicate effectively..."

and to "devise and implement a plan for personal professional growth."

While our program does not offer a specific course on ethics, ethical issues, principles and practices are integrated into virtually every course. This is especially true of our required courses, which cover foundations, reference, collection development, organization and management, library administration (general and specific types of libraries), and research methods. For example, in the Foundations course, students have the opportunity to hear about and discuss issues and trends in specific aspects of the profession with faculty and a variety of practitioners, each of whom provides insight into their own particular area of expertise and concern. There is a specific class session devoted to the topic of ethics, in which students participate in skits illustrating ethical dilemmas, and then explore the values in conflict and potential "right action" solutions (none of which are simple). Each student researches and prepares a paper discussing an issue of his or her choice, in which the student explores and documents various points and view, and then takes and justifies his or her own personal stand on the issue. This type of exploration of the ethics of an issue is assigned in many subsequent courses, and regularly appears as part of the comprehensive examination.

In other basic courses, (e.g., reference and administration) considerable time is devoted to experiential activities and discussion related to ethical behavior and communication among patrons, co-workers, administrators, and the community at large. In the course on organizing library collections, constant stress is placed upon the ethical practice of cataloguing and classifying for access by the clientele of the library in an understandable, non-discriminatory fashion. Objectivity, neutrality, and accuracy are emphasized. In addition, problems related to network participation and the individual right to privacy are addressed and discussed. In the course on collection management, class sessions are devoted to issues such as copyright, censorship challenges, ethical disposal of materials, and proper conduct of community analyses, as well as responsibilities of membership in resource sharing consortia, and the ethics of acquisitions and relationships with vendors.

Courses pertaining to specific types of library settings (i.e., public, academic, school media, special) concentrate as much on the particular environment and its political realities as on library operations themselves. For example, the

academic libraries course has been dealing with such ethical issues as the academic canon versus "political correctness." The elimination of bias, discrimination, and prejudicial treatment based on race, religion, sexuality, nationality, socioeconomic class and other social differences is an ideal strongly emphasized throughout the curriculum.

While each student is formally assigned a faculty advisor to assist in planning his or her course of study and in monitoring progress towards the degree, faculty also provide more informal leadership, mentoring, and individual attention to students, both in and outside of the classroom. By continually attempting to enhance the quality of academic programs, the quality of students' experiences, and the quality of research and scholarship, the faculty carry out their own commitments to the ethics of the profession.

4. What kinds of continuing education programs do you believe would be useful to those already in the field? Is your school offering anything which we might announce for you?

Auld: A lecture on ethics (i.e., on how to be good) is not likely to attract much of an audience. However, a workshop in which situational ethics are explored or a discussion of specific professional problems (e.g., dealing with the homeless or responding to conflicts of interest) would have more appeal. We are in the process of selecting our continuing education topic for next year.

Speller: I would like to see "Ethical Issues" incorporated where appropriate into the current continuing education programs on reference, management, research, publishing, and collection development.

I am planning to include a session on "Ethical Issues" in our Information Science and Policy Conference during the spring semester of 1993.

Moran: The School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill at this time has no continuing education program focusing on ethics planned. Once professionals are in the field it would be hoped that they are familiar with the basic codes, etc. that provide guidance in ethical questions. Continuing education for practitioners should focus more on ways to analyze ethical problems and to practice decision-making techniques that can be employed when hard decisions have to be made.

Comments:

Auld: As I said before, much of an individual's behavior is already developed as a small child. Our typical MLS student, some 35 years of age, is long past the point of building the foundations for her/his ethical behavior. Perhaps we can build on these foundations—if the student is interested and willing. Otherwise, we are mostly at the mercy of what parents, teachers, and others taught our students half a lifetime ago.

You may ask, Is that an optimistic or a pessimistic statement? Because a considerable majority of the people I have dealt with in libraries during the last 35 years have been honorable and basically good persons, I would have to say that I am optimistic. If I am wrong, we have long since lost the game.

Speller: Professional ethics should be stated more prominently as an educational outcome for the first professional degree than is current seen in most library school bulletins. The major crisis in our society and in our profession is the result of significant breaches in ethical behavior of our corporate and professional leadership. Much of this behavior can be ascribed to ethnic heritage and the lack of concern for the national or global human population.

One of the major issues that is especially challenging for ethical behavior is "whose ethics: yours or mine?"

All of the current ethics codes are presented as a homogenous set of principles. Enforcing the ethics codes still is largely dependent upon many behavioral variables that are confounded by ethnic identification. The current ethics codes do not address business protocol. A statement of business protocol would not be needed in a homogenous community. Because of attitudinal and related behavioral interactions which would vary along ethnic and cultural lines, a statement of business protocol one is definitely needed in a global community.

Finally, how do we deal with adult students in professional education programs who bring ethical behavioral problems with them?

References and Notes

¹I require students in the management class to read an old but still very relevant article by Daniel Glaser, "Dynamics of Ethnic Identification," *American Sociological Review*, 23 (February, 1958): 31-40.

²Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-*

Related Values, Abridged Edition, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1984, pp. 14-23.

³Another old classic which I require students to read is A. L. Kroeber and Talcott Parsons, "The Concept of Culture and of Social System," *American Sociological Review* 23 (October, 1958): 582-583.

⁴Larry Martin and others, "Cultural Diversity in the Workplace: Managing the Multicultural Work Force," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 48 (Winter, 1990): 45-54.

⁵Laura L. Nash, "Ethics Without the Sermon," *Harvard Business Review* 59 (November-December, 1981): 78-90.

⁶L. W. Finks, "Librarianship Needs a New Code of Professional Ethics," *American Libraries* 22 (January, 1991): 84-88.

⁷"Finding Fault with Finks" and "Ethics Committee Plans a Hearing," *American Libraries* 22 (March, 1991): 217-218.

⁸"Problems With a New Code," *American Libraries* 22 (April, 1991): 290.

⁹R. N. Stichler, "On Reforming ALA's Code of Ethics," *American Libraries* 23 (January, 1992): 40-44.

¹⁰"Testimony Points to Need for New Code of Ethics," *American Libraries* (March, 1992): 249-250.

Additional References

Andrews, Kenneth R., "Ethics in Practice," *Harvard Business Review*, 89 (September-October, 1989): 99-104.

Kidder, Rushworth M., "Ethics for the 21st Century," *Foundation News*, 33 (September-October, 1992): 46-49.

Membership Contest

The NCLA Membership Committee is sponsoring a contest to seek out and encourage new members which will run through registration for the 1993 NCLA Conference. Prizes will be awarded during the general sessions as follows:

- \$100.00 for the person who recruits the most new members
- Recruiting three or more members gives eligibility for a drawing to award:
 - A "Get Away" weekend at the Conference Hotel
 - Free membership in NCLA for the next biennium

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