



**Comments by Mary W. Ghikas,  
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**Professional Integrity and the Public Interest  
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Codes of professional ethics are a defining characteristic of professional bodies. Professionals – regardless of their field – are presumed to possess knowledge within their specific field not shared by the general public. That knowledge, the result of specialized education, carries with it special responsibility to be clear with the public: to identify the areas of moral or ethical jeopardy and the professional standard to which the individual practitioner is held in those areas.

The ALA Code of Ethics defines the area of societal impact for librarians: “*We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.*”

The ALA Code of Professional Ethics goes on to outline specific areas of jeopardy or potential conflict and what “professional integrity” means in each situation:

- We provide equitable service to all library users.
- We uphold intellectual freedom and actively resist attempts to censor library resources.
- We protect a user’s privacy and confidentiality in respect to information sought and resources used.
- We respect intellectual property rights – but also advocate for balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.
- This same stance in favor of equitable treatment, access to information and privacy is carried into the workplace, where we treat co-workers with respect and good faith and advocate for working conditions that safeguard their rights.
- We do not advance private interest at the expense of library users, co-workers or employing institutions.
- We do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with providing equitable access to information resources.

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- We strive for excellence within our profession by committing to continuing development of knowledge and skills – for ourselves and our co-workers.

This understanding of professional integrity has put librarians in the center of many battles – to provide information services to immigrants and English-language learners, to welcome teens into the library, to serve the homeless, to provide unpopular materials, to protect library records from unauthorized search. Throughout, librarians have clearly understood that professional integrity carries with it potential cost – to the individual professional. There have been jobs lost, careers damaged, economic burdens carried, court battles fought and won or lost.

There is, however, also a public cost in turning away from the concept of professional integrity exercised in the public interest. From the perspective of librarianship, that cost may be in a narrowing public discourse as competing orthodoxies wall themselves off from disturbing concepts, in the minds that are not challenged, in new works that are not created.

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For ALA Statement of Professional Ethics, see:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.cfm>