

My Impressions of the ALA Code of Ethics

Christian J. Burris

LIS 600

April 1, 2008

When I began taking Foundations in Library and Information Studies, I was vaguely aware of the ALA Code of Ethics. I had worked in a library for many years, and even though the library had policies and guidelines for its operation, I didn't know that there was a framework that supported them. In addition, I didn't know that there was a certain philosophy for why the Code of Ethics had been adopted. Now that I've learned more about the Code both in class and through readings for class, I have begun to appreciate its purpose. Other professions have adopted a code to outline their values and standards, and our library is no exception.

One of the questions that some people have asked has been "why have a code of ethics at all?" Since its initial adoption in 1938, the ALA Code of Ethics has continued to serve a valuable purpose for everyone who is involved in the operation of any library, whether as an employee or a trustee. I have come to believe that the Code not only guarantees the expectations of patrons, but those of the library staff as well. The Code has service at its heart, and each principle reflects an aspect of service at every point: service to patrons, service to colleagues, and service to self. In fact, the first statement of the code pledges service of the highest quality and caliber in order to help patrons find what they are seeking. This is a bold statement, and it demonstrates exactly where the energies of a librarian must be placed. Service is why I am here, and I realize that even though librarianship doesn't carry the same level of risk that either a doctor or an attorney would consider, the value of leading someone to information contributes to the execution of my duties. These are a set of beliefs, standards, and guidelines that place patrons at the center of all things, whether it is a question at the reference desk or cataloging an item for later access.

The Code is important to current librarianship because it establishes where a librarian stands on principle. It uses strong words of action for each tenet: strive, uphold, protect, respect, and so forth. As stated in its leading text, these principles are not meant for a librarian to derive any particular rules for a specific situation. I feel that they serve in the context of a starting point of consultation; the foundation where all library policies should be based upon. The Code is placed at the center of any decision in terms of new or revised policies, and if they cannot be reconciled the policy should have no meaning. The Code should represent the best of what a library has to offer and must be consistent in all areas. Should times of difficulty arise, the Code responds by becoming a reminder of what the library should represent to all of its users. This allows the Code to become a living document rather instead of existing as words on a page. It also can be adaptable to changing technologies and changes in society: the fact that it has been revised four times since its initial adoption lends credence to its overall importance.

Recently, a situation developed that brought the Code squarely into an aspect of my current library position. I was asked to place an order for a journal that a professor in one academic department of the university was interested in for the collection. After the order had gone through, I placed a record in our library system that would inform patrons that this title was currently on order and not yet available. Another professor from another department on campus saw this record and contacted the library, saying that this title shouldn't be ordered. He said that the editorial board for this journal was tenuous as far as presenting proper research and asked for us to reconsider this order immediately. The director of the library settled the dispute in this manner: she stated that due to a lack of contrary viewpoints from scholars about the editors of the journal, the library was free

to order the journal and would not engage in self-censorship. She recommended that the two faculty members resolve their differences about the journal on a personal basis while the order would proceed. This incident related directly to the section of the code concerning intellectual freedom as well as areas of mutual respect. The position of the library was upheld while hopefully contributing to intellectual discussion. As a library school student, it appears to me that the Code was effectively used to settle the dispute, even if it was not actively suggested in the decision by the library director.

My formal introduction to the Code, at the beginning of my course of study, has crystallized several points about what will mean to be a librarian. I believe that I can support each point within the Code, especially in terms of privacy and individual rights. In today's environment of compromised guarantees represented by the USA Patriot Act and domestic spying, the respect that applies to patron discovery has become even more fundamental. As an earnest learner, I recognize the need to remain current on the issues and trends facing the library community. Proper respect and fairness should also be paramount issues that cannot be bargained or reduced. Each point within the Code resonates strongly with my own personal beliefs; as an extension of those beliefs, I feel that to honor the code would pay homage to those who instilled these values within me. In essence, I would become another aspect of the Code, as an example of it in operation. I would not have to wear the exact text of the Code on my clothing for others to understand it, but through my actions it would be apparent to anyone whom I would serve that I observe its principles.

The ALA Code of Ethics is a statement of the values central to the American Library Association. With service at its heart, the Code has become the underpinnings to

library policies and procedures across the country. As such, it should act as a mirror to our society at large and reflect it as much as possible. Its nature to be revised and updated when circumstances warrant is another factor in its longevity. As a future librarian, I have taken its principles to heart and I have seen how important they are as they relate to my own values. By observing these values, I believe that I can not only be a better librarian by example, but also a better citizen as a whole.