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Acquisitions Archaeology -- Professional Ethics

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The pros won that, but the cons had made a good run. If there had been a betting line, they'd have beaten the spread. For an "information school" class, I thought these students had come pretty close to discussing what actually goes on in libraries. This runs counter to what's a common complaint of today's jobholders about new librarians, that they have a weak grasp of the "real world" of libraries. This group, it seemed to me, once out there in the real world, wouldn't be completely in the woods when the time came to jointly assess a journals package, or an eBook deal, or a database offer, not, at least, lost in the surrounding group dynamics.

Following a break it was my turn, and after the debate I tried to make the point that consortia aren't only and always about getting a good price. A group of libraries with money in hand can influence vendor development priorities. This kind of dynamic can produce winners all around — for the vendor, new business and a new service that can be brought to other libraries; for the libraries, a new way to stretch the budget or to gain efficiencies that hadn't before been possible. Libraries and vendors, when this occurs, can help each other grow. That seemed a new point of view, contrary to what they'd heard in other classes. "We thought," one student said, "that vendors all were evil." The class I was visiting was called "Managing Vendor Relations," but evidently other courses

took a less blandly benign view of what vendors are about.

I suppose there is evil in the world of library vendors, true enough; but so far as I can see, no more so than in any other walk of life. Part of my assignment for the day, in fact, was to talk about how a student in their chair might end up working as a vendor one day, with my own case as case in point, how I came to move from librarian to the other side, a change that had never been in my plans. It was all harmless enough. I'd been a reference librarian, after a few years needed a change of scenery, and the new job I found happened to be with a small book vendor, located nearby.

A few slides helped tell the story. Some were meant to illustrate change over the years since I'd made that switch, less any particular change than the degree of it I'd seen in libraries, and that they could certainly expect to see over their own careers. One slide showed the deep forest green of a run of **H.W. Wilson's Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature**, each spine nearly the width of a catalog card, a staple if ever there was one to librarians in the early 1980s, a "reference tool" I'd learned about in library school and must have put to use easily a thousand times for reference questions over my several years behind that desk. I am sure that even today, through muscle memory alone, I could walk a patron to the Reference shelves, remove two or three of those sturdy volumes that opened so flatly onto an index table, flip through the fine pages — thin as a membrane, almost translucent — and within minutes have

a nice list of magazine articles ready on nearly any subject a patron could raise. Where would we have been without the *Reader's Guide*?

Another show of hands. Who had used the *Reader's Guide*? The students were young, but I figured a few of them must somehow, somewhere have encountered the *Reader's Guide*. We could have a shared salute to an artifact that in its day had done good service. But there were no hands. Some of you must at least know of the *Reader's Guide*? No, no one had heard of it, not the students, not even the professor. If this was a lesson about change, it was a lesson most of all for me — whose library training was apparently closer to the age of **Melvil Dewey** than to the experience of this classroom in 2012.

I told the students they were fortunate their professor gave them some exposure to the business side of libraries, since one way or another each of them would need to reckon with it. All I'd learned about in library school were things like — and searching for the most arcane piece of knowledge I could recall — things like, my memory served up, what a main entry was. They laughed. The class actually knew what a main entry was. Another surprise. And a connection, although not where I'd have thought to find one. After class, one of the students walked up for a chat. The lesson about change must have gotten through to her too, since she said to me, referring to those *Reader's Guide* days, "It seems like a much simpler time," and what could I do but agree? 🌳

Acquisitions Archaeology — Professional Ethics

Column Editor: **Jesse Holden** (Head, Acquisitions, USC Libraries, University of Southern California) <jholden@usc.edu>

The "Statement on Principles and Standards of Acquisitions Practice" was adopted by the **ALCTS** Board of Directors at **ALA Midwinter** on February 7, 1994.¹ The "Statement" had been developed by the Acquisitions Section Ethics Task Force. While this statement seems to fulfill the destiny of the task force in a rote kind of organizational way, something is clearly wrong. How is it that an ethics task force develops a "statement on principles and standards?" *Why not develop a code of ethics?*

The "Statement" stands, to this day, as the closest thing we have in acquisitions to a code of ethics. But it does not garner the formal designation of a "code" and is saddled with a rather prosaic title. One would, presumably, know exactly what a "code of ethics" is but what, exactly, is a "statement on principles and standards?"

More than a year before the adoption of the "Statement," the conversation about ethics was well underway. **Karen A. Schmidt** declares that "ethics is the

hot topic of the nineties," and not just for libraries.² **Barbara Dean**, Assistant Coordinator for Collection Analysis at Fairfax County Public Library, takes this topic head-on in "an attempt to codify the principles acquisitions librarians, their institutions, and their suppliers agree belong in a code of ethics" in the November 1992 issue of *Against the Grain*.³ That the eight-point code she posits is not perfect should not be a surprise; ethical codes are seldom set in stone after one person puts an idea in an article. But neither should it have derailed the entire project of a professional code of ethics.

However, that is exactly what seems to have happened. Three responses to **Dean's** "Code" are included in this issue of *ATG* immediately following her proposed code that all seem to converge on one point: the apparent impossibility to codify the ethics of professionals involved in library acquisitions.

Of course, it is clearly possible to codify ethics of a professional organization.

Most professional organizations have an official code of eth-

ics (including, significantly, **ALA**). A quick glance at **Merriam-Webster Online** will give us a working definition of "ethics" as the "principles of conduct governing a group" or, even more simply, "a guiding philosophy." The threshold for having ethics in the general sense, therefore, is quite low. In a more technical sense, *ethics* is "the philosophical study of morality."⁴ This latter definition is significant because it underscores the moral dimension of any ethical investigation.

The first respondent to **Dean's** "Code" indicates, while the effort of seeking and defining ethical standards is "a noble cause," the effort "may be impossible" — and seeks to demonstrate as much by pointing out that many facets of acquisitions librarianship may fall into a gray area.⁵ This is a troubling notion, that as a group of professionals engaged in ostensibly the same kind of work that we are not able to define our ethical standards; the working definition of ethics noted above casts a wide net indeed.

The second respondent notes that failing to write (that is, *codify*) our own ethics allows us to endow ourselves with "flexible ethics," used specifically to "assuage any guilt for

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an action of our own that we think someone else might have avoided.”⁶ Such a shifting rationalization of personally uncodified “ethics” seems a potential danger in day-to-day practice and, therefore, a reasonable call for writing a professional code of ethics. But this possibility is dismissed with the assertion that it is not possible “to write a standard, universally applicable code of ethics.”⁷

The third and final response to **Dean’s** proposed code comes from a vendor perspective. In this response, it is observed that ethical principles are actually simple but their application in day-to-day situations is complex.⁸ This may be true, but is this not how we would expect ethics to function, simply defined but broadly applied? And further confounding this particular objection to the creation of a professional code is the statement that “ethics refers not to moral issues of right and wrong, but rather to acceptable professional conduct.”⁹ This is simply not the case, at least in the technical sense. While the practical goal of a code of ethics for acquisitions librarians is acceptable professional conduct, such a code is derived precisely from the study of moral issues of right and wrong. An ethics of professional conduct cannot exist in moral vacuum, nor would we want it to. To state that the quest for an ethical code is separate from the morality of right and wrong is misleading.

Whether specifically discussing the principles of conduct governing the collective of acquisitions librarians or more generally discussing the guiding philosophy we presumably share, are we not always mindful (and frequently concerned) about right and wrong action in our professional conduct?

The guiding principles that developed out of this ongoing conversation remain critical to our mission as a profession. But the premise that we can function as ethical professionals without an ethical grounding as a profession is nonsense. It is alarming that just a little more than a year after this debate was published, the profession ended up with a formal “statement” rather than a “code,” and was given “principles and standards” rather than “ethics.” While the “Statement” has become our de facto code of ethics, it lacks the courageousness and moral authority of the latter. **Dean** bravely put forth the groundwork for a true code of ethics, but the profession failed in the end to convert it to a real ethical stand.

In a world shaped by recent ethical lapses that collapsed the global economy, we (individually and collectively) cannot shy away from the moral dimension of our work nor, by extension, the ethical considerations of our profession. In the emergent business, information, and educational environment in which we now exist, the time has come to embrace ethics. We must work together to find those universals that make our discourse and practice possible. 🐿

Endnotes.

1. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/explanatory/acquisitions>
2. **Karen A. Schmidt**. “Ethics is like Pornography: A Reaction to ‘Toward a Code of Ethics for Acquisitions Librarians,’” *Reactions*. *ATG*, v.4#5, 1992, p. 20.
3. **Barbara C. Dean**. “Toward a Code of Ethics for Acquisitions Librarians,” *ATG*, v.4#5, p. 20.
4. **John Deigh**. “Ethics.” in R. Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999; p. 284.
5. **Schmidt**, p. 22.
6. **Joseph W. Baker**. “Sorting out a Code of Ethics for Acquisitions Librarians, Reaction to **Barbara Dean’s** ‘Toward a Code of Ethics,’” *Reactions*. *ATG*, v.4#5, p. 22.
7. **Baker**, p. 22.
8. **Gary Shirk**. “Comments on **Barbara Dean’s** ‘Toward a Code of Ethics for Acquisitions Librarians,’” *Reactions*. *ATG*, v.4#5, p. 23.
9. **Shirk**, p. 24.