

Everyday Ethics for Libraries*

Part 1: Introduction and Overview

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My name is Pat Wagner and I'd like to share some ideas with you of ethics in libraries today. I spend most of my time going around the United States for the past 30 plus years, working with libraries of all shapes and sizes. [Inaudible] ... with the work I did with trustees. And I got interested in the issue of ethics. And it started with my educating myself about the history of ethics in the United States, which is basically about the political history of the United States and western civilization.

When it comes to libraries, let's go for a very simple explanation about what ethics is – or ethics are – that's in itself kind of a fun discussion which words you should use. Ethics is simply the study of morality. It is the study of right and wrong, good and evil. And we use the word study in a very particular manner. First of all it means that we do research. We educate ourselves. We use our brains to find out about issues like science and technology, about science and accounting, about culture and language. So it's insufficient to say that ethics is simply about what you think is the right or good thing to do. We use our brains so that we can encompass the knowledge of the world to make good decisions. Another thing about study is that when you are studying something, you don't necessarily react to situations. So the study of what's right and wrong also means that before we make a decision, we do research. We think about it. We talk about it. We listen to people. So that at the end of the day when we make that difficult decision, or we take that difficult action, we've incorporated not just feelings but facts as well.

Another thing that's interesting about ethics is that ethics isn't something that you necessarily do alone. We are fortunate because we live in a country whose basis for behavior in the public sector goes back not just hundreds but thousands of years. You're not doing this alone, and it's not just arbitrary. You

have contracts – documents that have been written – like the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Kansas. You have rules and laws that have been arranged. You have case law, where just the examples from everyday life over decades have taught people what works or doesn't work. So by the time you as a library director or board or a staff member have to make a decision or take an action, you have a lot of information that you can go back to to support what decisions you're making.

And I tell people that ethics is not about perfection, it's not about having some sort of guidebook that lays out 1,2,3,4 what's right and what's wrong. But at the end of the day when you make that hard decision, you feel that you've done a good job. If you do that good job where you listen to people and make what people feel is a fair-minded decision, you build credibility for the library and for yourselves. It's a way of earning trust and respect, even with people who disagree with you. And in this very difficult time that we live in, it's going to be impossible to please everybody in your community or your institution. But what you are working for is that people are able to say, regardless of the fact of whether I agreed with you or not, I felt that what you did and the process you used was fair and that I trust you had the best interests of everybody in mind, not just one person or a small group of people. So that even though I don't agree with the decision, I will accept the decision as well.

Ethics can be a little slippery. Ethics evolves. So that something that people thought was ethical at one point in time may not be seen as ethical today. And we have to accept the fact that good decent people who are honest and rational, who study the facts, may have very different ethical systems. And one of the challenges of dealing with ethics in the United States is we have a very diverse community of people from all sorts of backgrounds, from all walks of life, from different religious and political philosophies. And we have to figure out a way that we can work together and live together. So ethics is not just about what you feel, but it really is an intellectual process as well. And for most people it's a process of

growth, and the growth comes through contemplating questions. So ethics is the study also of the questions that we ask. And good questions usually end up giving us a good outcome.

Now what's hard about ethics in general? I think the hardest thing is two-fold. First of all we're human beings, and we respond to people. And we tend to respond to people out of our feelings, out of our point of view and emotion. And that becomes kind of our tribal response to the world. And ethics is about civilization. Ethics is not just about what you can do, but to be honest with you, a lot about ethics is what you can't do, even if it seems like at the time, it feels good. So that's something hard for people. Folks will even state that ethics works against our personal nature, or human nature, so that's tough for people.

The second thing that's very difficult about ethics is, as I mentioned before, two very good people can have two different very good views about the world that contradict. For example, you may have an ethical position that it's very important to support your family and friends, that you are someone who goes out your way to make sure that your family and friends, the people you love, that you invest your time and energy in, are taken care of well. On the other hand, if you work for a public sector agency like a library, you also have an ethical standard where you are required to treat people fairly, which means that you are not supposed to give special favoritism to your family – that's called “nepotism” – and so what do you do when your favorite cousin comes into your library, someone who you love and trust and adore, and she's really having trouble fulfilling the requirements for her advanced placement program in high school. And you know that you would have the power to let her check out reference books, even though she would be the only high school student in your county who to have that privilege. Is it ethical to deny her what you can offer her as a blood relative? Or is it ethical to say, you know I love you sweetie, and because I love you, I need you to abide by the same rules that everyone else in the county

does. So those sort of ethical conflicts are difficult.

In the library community, particularly, there are some ethical issues that make it difficult. One issue is that when the Bill of Rights was written, there were no publicly supported libraries or schools in the United States. We don't have any evidence that the founders really thought about the implication of tax-supported libraries and schools. Well, very simply, if you are taking money from people for taxes and putting them in a pot for the general welfare, you are going to inevitably find times when you are taking people's money and buying books or teaching classes that violate people's value systems at a very important level for those folks.

So those sorts of conflicts were not really anticipated in the writing of the Bill of Rights, and we have to understand that to a certain extent we are kind of making things up as we go along. We're basing them on historical precedent. But if you go and look at the founding of this nation, you will find that there was terrific conflict. And that many of the arguments that we still have about what power does the federal government have vs. state government and local government, those kinds of things were fought over 200 years ago in the arguments people had during the founding of this country. And they're still going on today. So when you're dealing with libraries, you're dealing with something that wasn't really covered at the time – even though we always refer back, particularly, to the first amendment about these issues.

The second thing is that, even though librarianship is itself a profession, it's not the same as the Vatican. And it's certainly not the same as having a licensed profession like doctors or architects or engineers. If somebody is a doctor or an architect or an engineer or a school teacher or a dentist, and they violate the ethical codes of their profession, they can lose their license. They can lose the ability to practice

medicine, to build buildings as an architect, or to practice their trade as an engineer. Even though we have the Medical Library Association and the American Library Association and the Special Library Association and the American Association of Law Librarians – in no case do we have an agency that says this is what it takes to be a librarian or to work as a paraprofessional or support staff in a library and if you violate these rules, we are going to remove your license. So the truth is a lot of people can have a lot of different interpretations about what ethics means at the national, state, and local level. And no one is going to say you have now violated a rule that we all agree upon and so we get to now in effect kick you out of the fold.

So that leads to a lot of ambiguity in the library community about what's right and what's wrong. So for today what I want to do is keep it pretty simple, to look at some very, very basic issues, and to see if you apply these to the library that you work at – no matter how big it is, or wealthy it is, or how much it might seem it is a cutting edge library – if you can use these principles to improve what you do and how to do it for the libraries and the people you serve.

**Edited with the permission of Pat Wagner to enhance readability.*