

Professional Ethics and Librarianship

BY KATHY HOFFMAN

Professional ethics are the principles of conduct that govern an individual or a group. Recognizing the importance of having a code of ethics, library associations have a long history of developing and promoting ethics for our profession. The American Library Association formally adopted its first code of ethics in 1939. The code underwent several revisions, the last in 1981, with adoption by ALA Council in 1995. In 2002, TLA Council adopted the ALA Code of Ethics as its professional code of ethics.

Earlier this year, the TLA Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee sponsored an ethics survey of TLA members. The intent of the study was to take an empirical and exploratory look at the TLA membership in relation to the standards of conduct that are set down in the ALA Code of Ethics.

Specific objectives of the study were to:

- **determine TLA member knowledge, awareness, and agreement/disagreement of/with the provisions of the ALA Code of Ethics;**
- **assess attitudes toward the code provisions in theory and based on scenarios;**
- **identify types of ethical dilemmas encountered by TLA members; and**
- **identify possible needs for professional development activities related to ethics training.**

Methodology

An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the entire TLA membership with a link to the online survey. The survey was posted on the front page of the TLA website from March 1-25, 2005. A total of 1,287 members participated in the survey.

The survey instrument was designed in four parts. Part 1 (questions 1-5) collected demographic information such as sex, age, number of years worked in libraries, type of library worked in, and the number of people supervised. Part 2 (questions 6-13) collected information about the respondents' knowledge about the ALA Code of Ethics, other professional codes, how often the principles of the code are consciously used, and whether the

Of the women who responded, 62% agreed that there are circumstances when librarians should exercise censorship in the selection of materials if they feel someone will be harmed, while only 49% of the men responding agreed with this principle.

respondents had encountered ethical dilemmas at work, and if so, what types. Part 3 (questions 14-22) presented a variety of potential ethical situations. Respondents were asked to choose between four options as to how they would respond to each situation. An effort was made to cover the eight principles of the ALA Code of Ethics in the scenarios presented. Part 4 (questions 23-39) attempted to gather information on how much agreement exists on certain elements of the code. The final question (40) gave respondents an opportunity to add additional comments.

The survey questions were based on two previous survey instruments used in Illinois¹ and North Carolina.² The Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee plans to benchmark our results against the results of the other studies.

Highlights of Survey Findings

Demographics

As expected, the majority of survey respondents were female – 90% female, 10% male. More than half of the respondents were over 50 years of age (58%), and nearly one-half (46%) were between the ages of 50-59 (Table 1). About half (49%) had less than 10 years of work experience as a librarian; 51% had 11 or more years of experience, evenly distributed (Table 2). The difference between age and length of experience revealed an interesting trend indicating that librarianship is a second career for many respondents (Table 3).

The largest category of respondents reported that they work in school libraries (45%), followed by public libraries (30%), and academic libraries (17%). The remaining 8% either work in special libraries (corporate/technical, medical, law, museum/art) or are retired or unemployed. Members

in school libraries were more likely to have fewer years of library work experience (55% less than 10 years); members working in public libraries were more likely to have 11-20 years of experience (27%); and members in academic library settings reported more years of work experience than those in public or school libraries (41% +21 years).

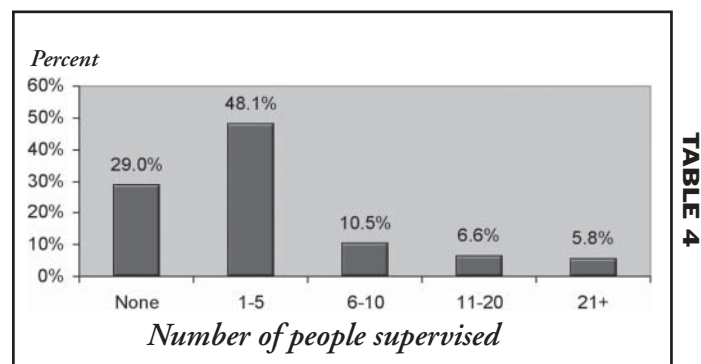
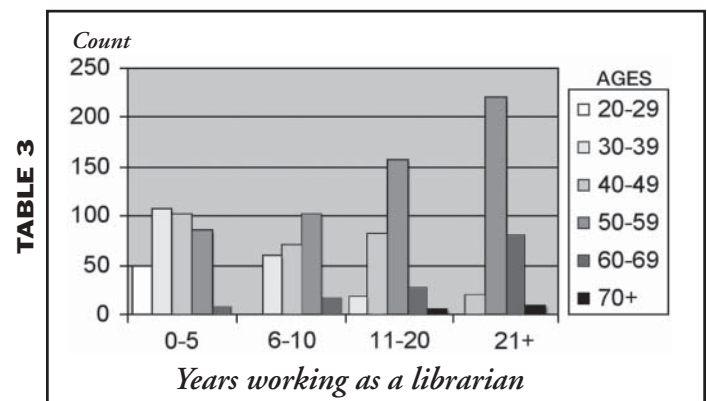
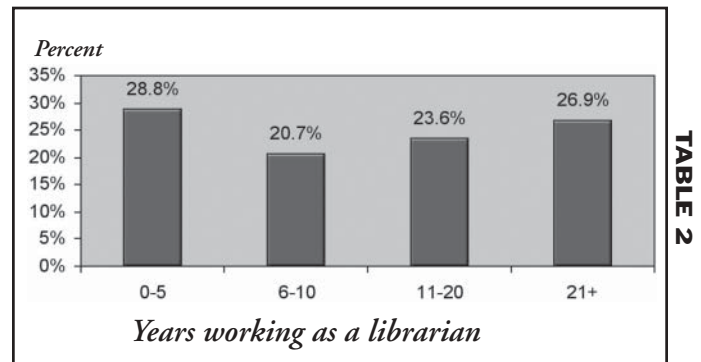
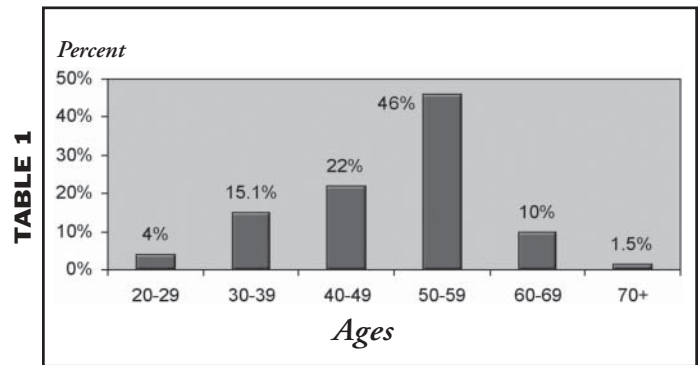
The largest category of respondents supervise 1-5 people (48%); 13% of those with less than 5 years of work experience supervise 1-5 people (Table 4).

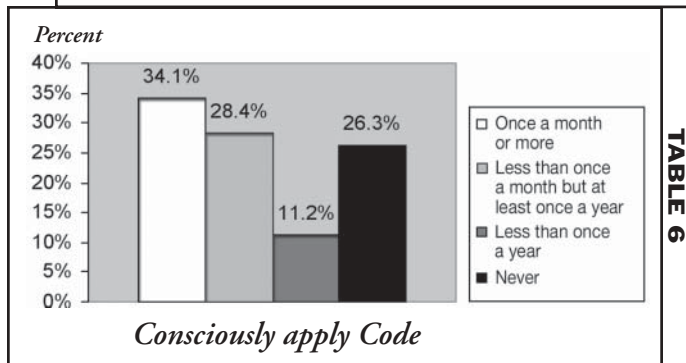
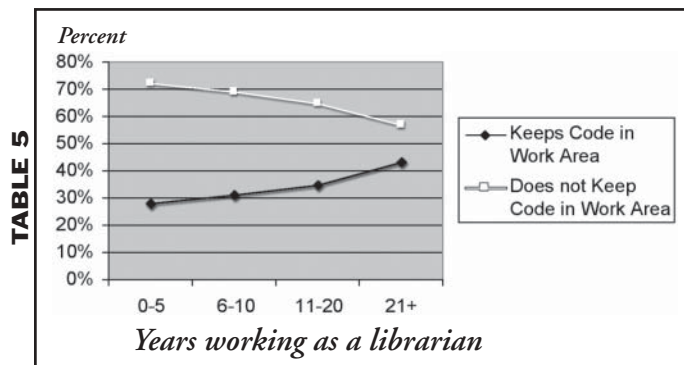
Awareness of Ethics Code

When asked if members were aware, prior to receiving the survey, that TLA has a Code of Ethics, just over two-thirds (68%) responded that they were and a third (34%) reported that they keep a copy of the code in their professional work area. The likelihood of keeping a code in the work area increases with the years of experience (Table 5). Members with 6-10 years of work experience were the least aware of the ALA Code of Ethics with only 14% of that group reporting they were aware of the code.

One third (34%) reported that they consciously apply the code to situations in their daily work once a month or more often (Table 6). When asked if their institutions had additional codes of ethics incorporated into their policy and procedures manual, 62% reported that they did; 19% did not, and 19% did not know. When a conflict occurs between the ALA Code of Ethics and institutional policy, 85% of respondents reported that institutional policy prevails in their actions.

Just over one-third (37%) reported that they had experienced an ethical dilemma as a librarian, administrator, or teacher. Those with the most work experience were the most likely to have encountered an ethical dilemma (45% with more than 21 years of experience). Of those reporting they had experienced an ethical dilemma at work, 39% work in school libraries, 34% in public libraries, and 16% in academic libraries. Of those who reported that they had faced an ethical situation at work, only 12% reported that they later regretted their action or inaction. In addition, 23% responded that they had been told by a supervisor to do something they felt was ethically improper. The types of ethical situations encountered included censorship issues (31%), copyright issues (18%), patron privacy issues (18%), personnel issues (8%), computer use/Internet filtering issues (8%), plagiarism (2%), sexual harassment (0.5%), with other miscellaneous issues making up the remaining 14% (Table 7).





Agreement with Code Provisions

Two types of questions were posed to assess the level of agreement with the provisions of the code. “Do you agree with ...” and “what would be your course of action, based on this scenario ...” were used to examine attitudes and consistency of attitudes toward the code. The scenarios used “forced choice questions.” “No response” and “other” were not included as options in the list of possible responses. Several members found this section of the survey to be problematic and difficult to answer, stating that the questions were too absolute, provided unrealistic options, or they were ambiguous. However, other members found this

section to be thought provoking, and it helped raise their consciousness about professional ethical issues.

Respondents clearly demonstrated their feelings about most of the “do you agree ...” statements relating to the provisions of the code. On average, between 82-98% agree with the provisions of the code. The least amount of support was given to questions relating to censorship and the obligation of librarians to “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.” When the responses were examined by gender and age of the respondent, several interesting details emerged. Of the women who responded, 62% agreed that there are circumstances when librarians should exercise censorship in the selection of materials if they feel someone will be harmed, while only 49% of the men responding agreed with this principle. When age was considered, both men and women in the 30-39 age group had less agreement with this principle than in any other age group. In the 30-39 age group, 51% of the women agreed that librarians should exercise censorship in the selection of materials, while only 29% of the men agreed with this principle.

When the censorship issue was examined by type of library, school librarians clearly had a conflict in supporting this provision of the code; 73% of librarians in school libraries agreed that librarians should exercise censorship in the selection of materials, while 53% of members in academic libraries agreed and only 49% of public librarians agreed. What does this tell us? Based on open-ended responses given in the final survey question, it appears that school librarians are under greater pressures from school administrators and parents to exercise censorship of materials. Many feel obligated given the age of their users. Quoting from several of the responses, the following opinions were expressed:

TABLE 7: *Types of Ethical Dilemmas*



- *Although I know that ALA would disagree, I think school libraries should have a different set of standards as far as censorship is concerned.*
- *I think that it is harder for school librarians to select controversial materials than for public librarians. In a perfect world, it shouldn't be, but I think that the truth is that school librarians face more challenges.*
- *I am not an advocate of censorship, but I am employed by an Elementary Library and work in the Middle School Library at times. I do feel that some material is inappropriate for these age groups so I do advocate limited access to some materials.*

Clearly, this provision of the code is controversial and needs further exploration, study, and discussion by TLA members.

One of the survey questions asked if members agree that the ALA Code of Ethics sets sufficient and appropriate guidelines for the proper conduct of librarians. While 89% are in agreement, 11% are not. This question also had the highest non-response rate, with 10% choosing not to respond. When examined by type of library, 92% of school librarians stated they support the code, even though a large percentage, as noted above, had a conflict with the censorship provision. Public librarians also support the code, with 88% reporting in the affirmative, and academic librarians had the lowest support, with only 85% giving a positive response. Overall support or non-support of the code does not appear to correlate with gender or age group. On average, 88-90% of all respondents in all age groups agree that the code provides sufficient and appropriate guidelines for the proper conduct of librarians. Between 87-91% of all respondents, regardless of length of time in the profession, believe that the code is sufficient and appropriate.

The survey ended with an open comment field. Two hundred members (16% of the total respondents) chose to take advantage of this opportunity. The comments fell into four groupings: 1) general comments about professional ethics, 2) general comments about the survey instrument, 3) favorable comments toward the survey instrument, and 4) unfavorable comments about the survey instrument.

The majority of the unfavorable comments were directed to the survey instrument itself and dealt with the case scenarios. Many felt the scenarios were too absolute, did not represent the full spectrum of courses of action, or were just plain nebulous. However, even

though some members had difficulty answering every question, or may have objected to some of the case scenarios, the overall response was positive. The fact that so many members took the time to add their thoughtful comments is an indication of the importance of ethics in the library profession. A sampling of the feedback received includes the following:

- *This is a very important issue and I think it is one that every librarian/association needs to explore in more depth. I appreciate your efforts in doing this.*
- *Answering every question was hard! Thanks for the consciousness raising.*
- *I have long thought that TLA should continue to process through all units issues related to ethics. Thank you for putting this survey together.*
- *Librarians are in general, I believe, facing increasing numbers of ethical gray areas and need sound guidance. I think any effort to provide extra guidance, support, and clout to librarians including considering a state certification is a worthy endeavor.*
- *We need a lot more discussion and training in this area.*

Conclusions

This survey is an empirical study of TLA members' knowledge and awareness of the ALA Code of Ethics. It also examines TLA members' agreement or disagreement with the various provisions of the code and explores the types of ethical situations encountered by TLA members. The survey represents the first step in the association's efforts to study its members' views and knowledge of professional ethics. The initial results reported in this paper will be used to identify areas for professional development activities related to ethics training for association members. Additionally, the survey data will be examined by the newly created TLA Task Force on Library Professionalism to identify the elements of preparation of library and information science professionals in the areas of professional ethics, advocacy, and leadership.

Kathy Hoffman is the executive director of the Research Medical Library at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center and former chair of TLA's Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee, 2002-2005.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank TLA executive director Patricia Smith and TLA's former network administrator, Lavinia Baumhoff, for their assistance in compiling and administering the online survey; Florence M. Mason, principal with F. Mason and Associates, for presenting the preliminary results of the survey data at a program session at TLA Annual Conference, April 2005; and Christina Hoffman for her assistance with the SPSS data analysis.

NOTES

1. John A. Moorman, "Knowledge of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics Among Illinois Public Library Directors: A Study." *Illinois Libraries* 77 no. 3 (Summer 1995):140-146.
2. Martha M. Smith, "The Ethics Quiz," *North Carolina Libraries* 51 (Spring 1993): 28-30. ★

Code of Ethics of the American Library Association

As members of the American Library Association, we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees and library staffs.

Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict. The American Library Association Code of Ethics states the values to which we are committed, and embodies the ethical responsibilities of the profession in this changing information environment.

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 principles of this Code are expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making. These statements provide a framework; they cannot and do not dictate conduct to cover particular situations.

- I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.
- II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.
- III. We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.
- IV. We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.
- V. We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.
- VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.
- VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.
- VIII. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

*Adopted by the ALA Council, June 28, 1995
Adopted by TLA Council 2002*