

Committee on Professional Ethics
REPORT TO COUNCIL

2020 Virtual Council Meeting

As chair of the Committee on Professional Ethics (COPE), I am pleased to report on the committee's activities since the 2020 Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Charge

The council Committee on Professional Ethics shall augment the *Code of Ethics* (ala.org/tools/ethics) by explanatory interpretations and additional statements, prepared by this committee or elicited from other units of ALA. When units of the association develop statements dealing with ethical issues, a copy will be sent to the committee on professional ethics for review so that it may be compared to the existing ALA *Code of Ethics* in order to determine whether or not conflicts occur.

Forward Together Response

Members of the Committee on Professional Ethics, the Intellectual Freedom Committee, and the Intellectual Freedom Round Table have expressed concern about the lack of a standing committee to address issues and topics of importance addressing professional ethics, intellectual freedom, and privacy in the Forward Together recommendations. Many expressed a belief that the decision suggests that professional values are no longer viewed as a core value or core function of the association or the library profession. COPE Chair Andy Harant and IFC Chair Julia Warga have written a letter to ALA's Executive Board and Committee on Organizations outlining their concerns and suggesting a solution for future appointees of Forward Together to consider. The letter, which outlines these concerns and the need for a Professional Values Standing Committee, is attached to this report as an information item. It was approved by both COPE and IFC.

Programs

The Committee on Professional Ethics presented a program for the 2020 PLA Conference in Nashville titled “What Would You Do? Ethical Issues in Public Libraries.” Through scenarios involving patron behavior, controversial programming, and diversity in collection development, panelists Sara Dallas and Maria McCauley led the audience in discussing ethical issues and applying the Code of Ethics to real-life situations. COPE is working with United for Libraries to recreate this program virtually to provide access to more library workers and broaden the awareness of professional ethics.

Due to the change and limitations in programming for ALA’s Virtual Event on June 24-26, 2020, COPE’s co-sponsored program with the Intellectual Freedom Committee on “Practical Applications of the Interpretations of the ALA Library Bill of Rights” will be postponed and possibly offered virtually. COPE and the Intellectual Freedom Round Table will be presenting a recorded conversation on Wednesday, June 24, 2020 titled [“Intellectual Freedom, Hate Speech, the First Amendment, and You.”](#) This conversation features Nadine Strossen, author of the book [Hate: Why We Should Resist it with Free Speech, Not Censorship](#). IFRT will facilitate a live Q&A after the recording.

Writing

To raise awareness of ethical issues and to highlight COPE resources, members, liaisons, and associates of the Committee on Professional Ethics are contributing to the Intellectual Freedom Blog.

- [Green-Dots Mean Go, Part Two: An Interview with Kate Klise, Author of Don’t Check Out This Book!](#) By Brian Wilson, ALSC Liaison
- [Assisting Customers with Digital Alteration: An Ethical Conundrum](#) By Andy Harant, COPE Chair

Professional Ethics Liaisons

Stephen Matthews served as COPE’s liaison to the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee. He has actively raised ethical issues and concerns in email conversations, in comments on documents, and in virtual and in-person IFC meetings.

The opening line of the *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association* states, “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.” To this end, COPE relies on the time and energy devoted by liaisons of divisions, round tables, and affiliates. Thank you to Nancy Bolt (ASGCLA Liaison); Gina Seymour (YALSA Liaison); Elizabeth Shoemaker (ALCTS Liaison); Jill Sodr (ACRL Liaison); Brian Wilson (ALSC Liaison); Carrie Willson (PLA Liaison); and Eboni Henry (ALA Executive Board Liaison).

COPE is seeking additional liaisons to assist in crafting resources, developing and presenting programs, providing feedback on documents and professional ethics concerns, and sharing updates from their particular group. Please see the COPE roster to view the list of representatives (ala.org/groups/committees/ala/ala-profethic). Those interested can contact COPE Staff Liaison Kristin Pekoll at kpekoll@ala.org.

Thank You and Welcome

It is with sadness that I say good-bye to ALA’s Committee on Professional Ethics. My term as chair has come to an end and it follows four years serving as a member of this important and necessary committee. I’m proud of our skit programs at ALA and PLA conferences, our work to update the Code of Ethics Q&A’s and interpretation, our joint efforts with ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee to create ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Education and Advocacy policy statement and to advocate for professional values to remain a core focus within ALA, and of personally learning so much and meeting wonderful people. I want to express my gratitude to the other members who are finishing their terms on the committee: Miranda Bennett, Sonja Eyer, Hilda Weisburg, and committee associate Rachel Turner. I would also like to express my gratitude to OIF Staff Liaisons Kristin Pekoll and Deborah Caldwell-Stone for their invaluable help and guidance to me and to ALA President Wanda K. Brown and the Executive Board for their confidence in the committee and allowing them to serve ALA.

I look forward to what the incoming members of the committee will do. Please join me in welcoming Natisha Harper, Nancy Kirkpatrick, Rory Patterson, Catherine Smith, and committee associate Dr. Sheri Edwards.

Respectfully Submitted,

ALA Committee on Professional Ethics

Andrew Harant (Chair)
Miranda Bennett

Sonja Eyler
Sarah Houghton
Alexia Hudson-Ward
Stephen Matthews
Hilda Weisburg
Ellen Spring (Committee Associate)
Rachel Turner (Committee Associate)

Committee on Professional Ethics and Intellectual Freedom Committee's Letter Addressing Forward Together Recommendations

May 14, 2020
ALA Committee on Organization
Chair, James G. Neal

Dear Chairperson Neal and members of ALA's Committee on Organization:

We are writing to express concern about the lack of a standing committee to address issues and topics of importance involving professional ethics, intellectual freedom, and privacy in the Forward Together recommendations. As we understand it, the Forward Together proposal is now being reviewed by the Committee on Organization (COO), as the Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE) has finished its work with its final report.

At the outset of this tremendous and complex task, SCOE was charged, in part, to "embrace the Association's core values." In the proposed new leadership structure for ALA, there is not a clear and discernible path to ensure that core professional library values, such as Intellectual Freedom, Professional Ethics, and Privacy, have a consistent voice and seat at the table in order to inform the association's mission and practice. Many members of the Committee on Professional Ethics, Intellectual Freedom Committee and its Privacy Subcommittee, and Intellectual Freedom Round Table have expressed concerns that such a decision suggests that professional values are no longer viewed as a core value or core function of the Association or the library profession.

We respectfully propose the addition of a seventh standing committee to the Forward Together recommendations—Professional Values. The Professional Values Standing Committee would be the arm of the new ALA leadership structure that would focus on Intellectual Freedom, Professional Ethics, and Privacy. It would combine the work of the Intellectual Freedom Committee, Committee on Professional Ethics, and IFC Privacy Subcommittee and align with ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

The work these committees do is important. They monitor and respond to ongoing intellectual freedom and privacy developments in libraries, including technology, politics, legislation, and social trends. They also ensure that the association's statements concerning intellectual freedom, privacy, and ethics remain current and responsive to the needs of the profession. For example, within the past year, the Library Bill of Rights, one of our profession's most important statements of our core values, was amended to include a new article that codifies Privacy as a core right. ALA's Code of Ethics was also re-evaluated, a regular practice that ensures our values remain grounded in the experiences of libraries and library workers. The Forward Together leadership structure gives no clear direction of how this work would get done or who will be charged with the responsibility for these foundational documents, along with their various interpretations and accompanying documents, that guide the practices of library workers.

Hot-button issues for libraries that generate media attention and social media debates seem more often than not to involve intellectual freedom issues. Recent examples include anti-transgender rights groups using public library meeting rooms, controversies involving drag queen storytimes, facial recognition technology being implemented in schools, and legislation designed to impair library workers' ability to develop diverse collections and allow the censorship of library collections and programs. For ALA leadership to best be prepared to mobilize and respond to such issues effectively, there should be a standing committee to ensure expertise in intellectual freedom issues within the ALA leadership structure.

We recognize the need for change in ALA governance structure and appreciate the amount of time, energy, and thought that SCOE has put into its recommendations and that COO is currently undertaking. Aligning ALA structures and reducing the financial footprint will allow leaders to implement a vision for a reimagined association as outlined in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association to "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." As we move forward together through this process, we must also endeavor to "treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith." It is within this spirit that we make this proposal to ensure that intellectual freedom, privacy, and ethics remain a vital part of ALA and our profession.

Thank you for all of your hard work and efforts, and for considering our proposal.

Sincerely,

Andrew Harant
Chair, Committee on Professional Ethics

Julia Warga
Chair, Intellectual Freedom Committee

Cc: Wanda Brown, ALA President
Julius Jefferson, ALA President-Elect
Patty Wong, incoming ALA President-Elect
Tracie Hall, ALA Executive Director
ALA Executive Board
ALA Committee on Professional Ethics
ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee