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Introduction

Maynard Brichford
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Introduction

Maynard Brichford

Historically, ethics relate to moral principles or values and involve moral obligations or duties. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1966), ethics also means those principles of conduct governing an individual or a profession. Associations have prescribed standards of behavior for their members. Despite contemporary meanings and practices, there are problems in equating standards of professional conduct with ethical decisions. Laws, institutional regulations, and the wide range of conditions in which archival practice is carried out may require decisions that are at variance with optimal conditions and practices.

Every archivist has a code of ethics. Many decisions will involve only the archivist's own personal standards of ethical conduct. Often based on religious or cultural heritage, such decisions are reinforced by family relationships and peer group pressures. Other decisions

will be made on legal grounds. Thousands of federal, state, and local laws and regulations legislate personal conduct. These laws and regulations also provide a bureaucracy for their application and a judicial system for their enforcement. A third type of ethical standard is usually established by one's employer. The federal government has a thirty-eight page regulation on "standards of ethical conduct." Many government and corporate policies control basic ethical decisions. A fourth level of ethical decisions may be established by professional associations. Codes of ethics adopted by professional bodies tend to set forth norms, standards, and policies adopted by study groups and ratified at annual meetings.

In a century characterized by governmental growth, corporate centralization, and the professionalization of vocations, proponents of legal, personnel, and professional ethics have sought to codify personal ethical systems. For archivists, the rapid increase in the number of governmental, academic, corporate, and private archives and an accelerating rate of technological change in communications and records systems have contributed to an interest in professional ethics. A code of professional ethics may benefit practitioners and society. It can create a bond among people who work in different institutions or specialize in different aspects of a common field, recognize the basic elements of theory and practice, reflect a consensus of practitioners about shared obligations to society and influence personal ethical standards, government legislation, and institutional regulations. The 1980 and 1992 ethics

codes represent the Society of American Archivists's efforts to define the role of professional ethics in archival practice.

Archivists have understood the importance of stating the basic ethical obligations of their professional colleagues and publicizing their common commitment to standards of conduct. They have gradually overcome unfortunate tendencies toward self-glorification, over-reaction to criticism from other professions, and the perceptions that ethics were intended for their competitors or those who were slow to accept a standard promulgated by a grant-funded advocacy group. The membership's response to general requests for views on the ethics codes has been disappointing, but sessions at meetings and workshops have produced lively discussions of ethical issues. Legislators, administrators, and professional colleagues may continue to adopt educational and enforcement procedures, but individual decision-makers must still apply ethical standards in the context of their daily activities.

The papers in this issue of *Provenance* are a notable contribution to the continuing process by which ethical standards will be shaped to guide future professional development. Thomas Wilsted's article on the ethics of collecting relates the development of collecting policies in periods of "unbridled competition" and "archival excesses" to the development of ethical codes and stresses the importance of donor relations and documentation. Virginia Cain's article on the ethics of processing reviews code statements, provides commentary on the interrelated nature

of arrangement and description, gives examples of ethical decisions and discusses the need for care in processing. Ronald Becker's article on the ethics of access draws upon personal experience at Rutgers University in identifying major ethical issues and relates the practical decisions to appropriate sections of the "Code of Ethics for Archivists."

Maynard Brichford is University Archivist, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Brichford served as chair of the Society of American Archivists Ethics Task Force, from 1988 to 1992.