Ethics & Fairness in Reference for the Academic Library

Wendt Annotated Bibliography

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Forty-nine American Library Association accredited programs were analyzed to compare their library ethics curriculum. Buchanan determined that the programs taught ethics using variety of methods and focuses. Some of the ethics found in courses focused more on professional standards than moral ethics. The ethical focus was designed to create a framework for librarians to apply situations to. Confronting ethical challenges at reference relies on training, teaching, and personal belief. It is important to understand how professional programs are teaching ethics in order to understand new librarians and guiding them through the challenges.


Davis outlined his moral and ethical professional framework and discussed the difference between good and evil. He claimed that a librarian may be obligated and justified to act when a situation challenges one’s ethics. This raises questions of the level of professionalism in library reference. If a patrons’ question present an ethical challenge for the librarian, what actions are they morally bound to take. Questions of personal beliefs conflicting with professional ethics are found in most professions, but having it specifically addressed for librarianship was unique.


Librarians and student affairs/life professionals both work toward the same goal of supporting and assisting student learning. This shared goal allows both professions to be advocates for students. Forrest stresses partnerships should be developed between the
two in order to advance both professions. These partnerships increase the communication and interpersonal relationships with students and allow better service. The increased relationships formed in these partnerships provide librarians the ability to be more effective models of character and ethics.


In 2005, a survey was conducted with 1287 members of the Texas Library Association to determine the awareness of a code of ethics, the attitudes toward it and the ethical dilemmas facing the members. The survey discovered varying degrees of agreement with the American Library Associations (ALA) code of ethics. A large majority supported the code overall but had concerns with intellectual freedom and censorship sections. The question was raised that different educational settings allow different interpretations of censorship. This issue is relevant when assisting patrons in a private Christian college. How librarians ethically interact and model character is important in dealing with questions of censorship.


Isaacson reflects upon a reference interaction where upon answering the question in detailed he received a negative reaction. The question is raised if the accurate answer is the one the user wants to hear. He questions whether the focus should be on pleasing the user or finding the correct answer. The article discusses using alternative sources that provide a different answer than traditional sources. Similar exchanging to this occur in the academic setting where students what a quick answer that fits into there existing assumptions. At times when the actual answer contains varying degrees of correctness, it raises a question of character. In an academic setting librarians do not simple provide answer but also teach. Providing the truthful answer to the patron is as important as providing a fair representation of alternative sources.

The researchers ran an experiment to see how various librarians would react to reference questions on moral issues, suicide, necrophilia, and pictures of corpses. While this research is focused on public libraries, the results apply to academic libraries as well. The librarians answered the questions, but did so in a limited basis. They used very little creativity in advising the patrons and ran simple searches. To provide enough to allow the patron to feel helped is the easy action to do, but taking an ethically challenging question and seeking it to the fullest calls upon fairness within the profession. The article encourages the librarians not to take the easy way out in complex and ethical questions but to treat them with the seriousness of all questions.


McKinzie argues that using support staff and paraprofessionals to answer reference questions from patrons is unethical since it does not provide the highest level of service as outlined in the ALA Code of Ethics. Support staff are not always trained to handle moral and ethical questions and may not provide the same level of fairness as professionals. Librarians do possess additional training that stresses the need to provide fair, high quality service in any patron interaction. Academic librarians provide additional services than support staff and are called to be fair and treat all patrons with the service they deserve.


This London based publication provides a summary of the librarian feedback received by the Canadian Libraries Ethics Panel regarding the draft of a Code of Ethics. One significant distinction made the article is to acknowledge that often “ethics” is confused with “professional standards.” This is a distinction that is rarely clear. The author created categories for “professional standards” and for “ethical principles.” This distinction allowed the author to focus on larger ethical principles that provide a guide for approaching a variety of situations. A similar distinction within academic libraries would
provide the opportunity for additional discourse of the ethical and moral issues facing the profession.


Palmer identifies that the American Libraries Association Code of Ethics is more a code of professional conduct, but that other ethical and moral questions and challenges exist within the field of reference services. The article discusses equal treatment for all in terms of fairness. Not every patron will receive the same answers to the same questions, but every effort must be given to treat each question with the same weight and concern. Fairness is essential to good reference at all levels. Palmer describes providing the best possible service given each unique set of circumstances. Reference cannot be ethical without fairness.


This essay provides a historical overview to library reference, discussion of the ethical codes of major library associations and current ethical issues facing the profession today. Although the article blurs the line between professional standards and true ethical issues by treating them as the same, it does provide a good discussion about how librarians apply ethics in every patron interaction. The author discussed how librarians can teach and model ethics and pass along character through individual interactions with the students.


Salonen’s article is a response to an article written by McKinzie in *American Libraries* about the unethical use of paraprofessionals answering reference questions. Salonen argues that paraprofessionals can be trained to intelligently and ethically answer many types of reference questions. This provides a fair use of staff skills and talents. At an academic library, any staff member that interacts with students, models ethics and
character to the student. It is important to recognize this, as the article does, and train the staff to respond to questions and interactions ethically.


This expanded paper is based on a speech by Samek titled “Conversations about Ethics.” It describes a wide variety of ethical concerns and how librarianship should address them. Samek addresses the ethical need to seek out and provide help to all patrons which is relevant within an academic setting with varying demands between students, faculty and staff. Samek discusses the need for continued education in the field and professional development within reference. Given the changing cultural and generational differences of patrons staying educated allows librarians to adapt to the increasing ethical challenges of the field.