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Codes of Ethics for Museums

By Karen DePauw, Manager, Local History Services

If you have ever worked for or volunteered for a museum, you have likely heard reference to a Code of Ethics. But what exactly is a code of ethics and why do they exist?

To understand the importance of codes of ethics for museums, it is helpful to first understand why museums exist. Although their primary purposes may vary, history versus science versus art, museums function under the public trust, meaning they exist to serve the benefit of the public. Museums also function as moral agents, which means they can determine the difference between right and wrong and can be held accountable for their actions.



Teacher Recognition Day at School 37 (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

At some point, every individual must learn right from wrong. As human beings, we often find guidance in determining right from wrong in a variety of places: our families, our teachers, our religious traditions, and even our laws. When you start work in a profession, whether teaching, medicine, or museums, you are often provided with guidance specific to what is considered right and wrong in that particular field of work. This guidance usually takes the form of a Code of Ethics, something museums have been employing since the early 20th century.

For museum professionals there are general codes of ethics, but also codes written to further guide specific groups of people within the museum. There are codes of ethics for museum educators or board members and several for those engaged in work with collections. Although it can feel like there are recommendations coming from all directions and each code of ethics might address a specific group of people or be written with a particular institution's staff in mind, the crux of them is all the same. They all help people dealing with collections understand how their work fits with the broader values of the museum field and how their specific role in the museum can embody these values and put them into practice, determining right from wrong.



Nurses Aides at St. Anthony's (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

One of the most important things about codes of ethics is that they are not stagnant documents. They should be frequently reviewed and revised. This is because they not only reflect the values of the specific institution and the museum field in general, but also those of the broader society museums serve. For instance, in the latest update of the [*Code of Ethics and Professional Practices for Collections Professionals*](#) careful consideration was made to include a section on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, which reflects a shift in our society's priorities.



[Police Officer Gwen Black at Recognition Ceremony](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

If you are ever struggling with ethical issues, know that guidance is out there in the form of field-wide museum codes of ethics, profession-specific codes of ethics, and sometimes even institution-specific codes of ethics. And if you are still struggling, discuss the dilemma with a trusted colleague or your local field services department.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [AASLH Statement of Standards and Ethics](#) (American Association for State and Local History)
- [A Practical Guide to Museum Ethics](#) (Sally Yerkovich)
- [“Codes of Ethics and Museum Research,” Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies](#) (Alexandra Bounia)
- [Code of Ethics for Archivists](#) (Society of American Archivists)
- [Code of Ethics and Professional Practices for Collections Professionals](#) (Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists)
- [Ethics, Standards, and Professional Practices](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [The Handbook for Museums](#) (Gary Edson and David Dean)
- [ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums](#) (International Council of Museums)
- [Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation](#) (Steven Miller)
- [NCPH Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct](#) (National Council on Public History)

Collection Trainings

[All Together Now Webinar Series](#)

March 9, 10, 14, 16, 23 and 30 – (Conservation Center for Art & Historical Artifacts)

[Bite-Sized Learning: Ask Me Anything – Nonprofit Law](#)

March 24 – (Minnesota Council of Nonprofits)

[Following, Leading, & Managing in the Current Climate](#)

April 4 – (American Association for State and Local History)

[Pulling it All Together: Citywide Museum Events](#)

April 7 – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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[Local History Services](#)

(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

