



Professional Principles and Ethics in LIS Graduate Curricula

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As a degree, the master of library science is regularly questioned as to whether it is still effective as preparation for professional roles in the field.¹ Concerns range from a lack of technical proficiency and practical skills in graduates to whether a graduate degree is even necessary to be a librarian. Defenders of the degree talk about the theoretical foundation given to graduates of library and information science (LIS) programs, including a grounding in the principles and values that undergird the professional work of a librarian. If that is one of the primary justifications of the degree, then it is important to understand how those principles and values, including professional ethics, are taught in library and information science programs. More than twenty years have elapsed since Shelley Rogers conducted a comprehensive review of ethics education in LIS program,² so the American Library Association's Committee on Professional Ethics decided to undertake a survey of all accredited LIS programs to ascertain the current state of ethics education in graduate programs, compare it to historical approaches, and discover how the committee can best use its resources to support the teaching of ethics to future librarians.

Literature Review

When we discuss ethics education, what do we mean? How do we agree upon the values that are covered by the broad topic of ethics in library and information science (LIS)? Koehler drew upon the LIS literature to identify commonly supported values within the library profession, including intellectual freedom, privacy, intellectual property, professional neutrality, preservation of the cultural

record, and equity of access.³ Koehler also noted that examining codes of ethics from a variety of professional library and information organizations revealed six common topics: patrons' rights and privileges, social issues, access issues, selection issues, responsibilities to the employer, and professional practice.⁴ Surveys conducted by Koehler and others found that while librarians tend to share these common professional values, there is no agreement within the



profession as to how they should be ranked in importance. Therefore, Koehler believes that LIS students should be exposed to the range of thinking on ethics within the field.

How professional ethics are taught in LIS programs has been studied in varying degrees of detail. Rogers conducted a survey of ALA-accredited LIS programs in 1992 regarding ethics in the curriculum.⁵ With responses from 52 out of 59 institutions, Rogers determined that while only six programs had stand-alone ethics courses, virtually every institution reported that ethics was woven throughout the curriculum, with many programs introducing related topics in foundational or introductory courses.⁶ Only one of the programs with an ethics course required all students to take it. Rogers noted that the majority of respondents felt that a stand-alone course was not the best approach because of the importance of ethics to so many topics within library and information science. Prior to the publication of Rogers's survey results, there were attempts to document approaches to ethics education at the state level. Blake examined the distributive approach to ethics in LIS curricula at graduate programs in New York State and suggested three options for ensuring that all graduates are exposed to ethical concepts: take a required course, pass a competency exam, or complete a required non-credit colloquium series before graduation.⁷ Representatives from the LIS programs in North Carolina also reported a distributive approach to ethics education in the curriculum.⁸

Other scholars have written about ethics education in their own institutions. Woodward detailed the topics covered in an ethics class in Drexel, including ethical theory, freedom of information versus privacy, ownership of information, social responsibilities, affirmative action, and censorship.⁹ Woodward believed that anyone working with personal information or making decisions about information curation should be required to take an ethics course.¹⁰ White discussed the heavy use of case studies in his ethics classroom and noted the challenge of getting students to think analytically about the cases rather than to just rush to finding solutions.¹¹ White also noted that the library profession's primary ethical concern is access to information, and therefore it is the primary focus of ethics education.¹² Paskoff described the distributed approach to ethics in the curriculum at Louisiana State, giving examples of ethical topics embedded in the new student orientation all the

way through a required seminar on issues in LIS in the final semester.¹³ Dow et al. noted that case-based learning for ethics was an effective approach for enhancing the ability of students to describe basic principles of ethics, apply those principles when faced with a dilemma, and increase overall interest in information ethics.¹⁴

As part of the broader topic of professional ethics in LIS, the field of information ethics has also been the subject of some discussion regarding its place in the curriculum. Holverstott-Cockrell made the case that information ethics needed to be added to the LIS curriculum, as the

concerns of traditional professional ethics may not reflect the complications of information use in the digital world.¹⁵ Carbo and Almagno reported on the University of Pittsburgh's multiple projects related to information ethics, including a course, information ethics fellows, a website, and a lecture series.¹⁶ Carbo followed with an update detailing their institution's approach to the course, including the importance of examining decision-making models and how to address the challenges of teaching students from diverse backgrounds.¹⁷ Britz and Buchanan

advocated for an immersive approach to information ethics education, and suggested that the topic should be embedded across the curriculum, not restricted to a single class or relegated to one week in another class.¹⁸

Whether it is the broader topic of professional ethics in library and information science or the narrower topic of information ethics, the literature shows that most programs have been taking a distributive approach to ethics in the curriculum, though a handful of programs continue to highlight ethics through dedicated classes. More than twenty years after Rogers' research was published, this study aims to discover if the same trends for ethics education are continuing.

Method

This survey was proposed in the spring of 2015 by the Committee on Professional Ethics (COPE) of the American Library Association (ALA).¹⁹ Deans and directors of LIS graduate programs that offer a master of library and information science accredited either by the ALA or jointly by the American Association of School Librarians and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (AASL/CAEP) were contacted by email and asked to



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complete a survey asking about the institution’s approach to teaching ethics, as well as how COPE could be of assistance in supporting ethics education in their programs.²⁰ The survey is available in the appendix.

Data collection began in the summer of 2015 after a lengthy approval process by the institutional review board (IRB) at the author’s previous institution. When the author moved to his current institution in September 2015, he was required to halt data collection and resubmit his project for review by his current institution’s IRB. The project was approved in October 2015 and data collection resumed, with another round of emails sent to the target institutions in October 2015 and again in January 2016 after the author presented at the annual Association for Library and Information Science Educators (ALISE) conference in Boston and made a plea for greater participation. Of the 97 institutions contacted (59 ALA accredited, 38 AASL/CAEP accredited), the total number of responses after seven months of collection was 36 (27 ALA accredited, 9 AASL/CAEP accredited), with an overall response rate of 37.1% (45.8% ALA accredited, 23.7% AASL/CAEP accredited). For the institutions that did not respond, the author examined their websites and course catalogs to determine (when possible) which classes included professional ethics and principles as part of the course objectives. Other parts of the survey could not be completed using this method.

Results

Ethics Courses

Of the institutions that responded, 17 stated that they had a required course specifically focused on professional

ethics and principles at the master’s level. However, upon further examination of the course descriptions, only 4 met the criteria used by the author when examining the offerings of non-responding institutions, so there is a large gap in what the institutions believe to be a specific course on ethics compared to the author’s perception. Of the institutions that did not respond, an additional 5 had required courses clearly identifiable as having a specific focus on professional ethics and principles, bringing the overall total to 9 out of 97 institutions (9.3%).

For elective courses with a specific focus on professional ethics and principles at the master’s level, 18 of the responding institutions indicated the existence of such a course, with another 13 identified from the non-responding institutions, for a total of 31 out of 97 institutions (31.96%). For courses that include professional principles and ethics as part of the learning objectives, 30 of the responding institutions listed qualifying courses at the master’s level, with another 42 non-responding institutions identified as having courses in this category. Additionally, 4 of the responding institutions reporting a required core class that was later judged by the author to be in the wrong category did not give an answer for this question, so those courses will be included here, leading to a final total of 76 out of 97 institutions (78.35%).

Of those programs offering a doctorate (all in institutions also offering an ALA-accredited master’s program), only 1 out of 24 (4.17%) has a required course on professional principles and ethics, while another 10 (41.7%) have elective courses on these topics. That means that the majority of doctoral programs (54.17%, or 13 out of 24) have

Table 1. Courses with Ethics Content in LIS Programs

Master’s Programs	ALA (n = 59)	AASL/CAEP (n = 38)	Total (n = 97)
Required Ethics Course			
Reported*	2	2	4
Observed	3	2	5
Elective Ethics Course			
Reported	16	2	18
Observed	12	1	13
Course(s) with Ethics Content			
Reported**	25	9	34
Observed	28	14	42

* includes only those classes judged to be focused on ethics

** includes classes with ethics content reported elsewhere



Table 2. Use of COPE publications in LIS programs

Document	No. (%) of Respondents (N = 36)
Code of Ethics of the ALA	33 (91.7%)
Copyright: An Interpretation of the Code of Ethics	22 (61.1%)
Questions & Answers on Ethics and Social Media (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)	14 (38.9%)
Questions & Answers on Conflicts of Interest (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)	13 (36.1%)
Questions & Answers on Enforcement of the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association	13 (36.1%)
Questions & Answers on Speech in the Workplace (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)	10 (27.8%)

no identifiable courses with professional principles and ethics as a focus. Given that the majority of master’s programs in LIS offer courses in this area, perhaps the doctoral programs can assume that entering students will have been exposed to these concepts at the master’s level.

Comparing programs accredited by ALA to those accredited by AASL/CAEP, overall the ALA programs are much more likely to have courses with content related to professional principles and ethics, though there is a slightly higher percentage of AASL/CAEP programs with required courses (10.53%, or 4 out of 38 AASL/CAEP programs compared to 8.47%, or 5 out of 59 ALA programs). Looking at electives focused on professional principles and ethics, 47.54% of ALA programs (28 out of 59) have such a course, while only 7.89% of AASL/CAEP programs (3 out of 38) offer a course in this category. Likewise, 89.83% of ALA programs (53 out of 59) have courses that include ethics as part of (but not the focus of) the content, compared to 60.53% of AASL/CAEP programs (23 out of 38). Without knowing enrollment patterns in the courses with ethics content, it is hard to say how many students in a given program are exposed to those professional values, but it does appear that a student in an ALA-accredited program is more likely to have an opportunity to learn about professional principles and ethics than is a student enrolled in an AASL/CAEP-accredited program.

When asked to “briefly describe your program’s approach to ethics education in the curriculum,” the vast majority of respondents, including all AASL/CAEP programs that commented on this question, reported that the teaching of ethics was distributed throughout the curriculum. A few noted that ethics was a focus in a required foundations class, while one respondent from a program

with a required ethics course said that ethics is covered both in the required class as well as in other classes across the curriculum and also noted that there are a few ethicists on the faculty. Finally, two programs noted that the ethical use of information is emphasized through either through learning citation styles or using anti-plagiarism software, in addition to discussions of professional values in various assignments.

COPE Documents and Activities

COPE spends a significant amount of time on developing policy statements and other documents intended to provide guidance to librarians in the field. As a result, the committee wanted to know if any of the various documents produced by COPE were covered in their curriculum. Table 2 shows the results by title. The Code of Ethics, as a core document, has a solid place in the curriculum at responding institutions. The copyright interpretation, though the most recent of the documents, is also used by a majority of the respondents.

Since the survey was conducted on behalf of COPE, some of the questions were geared to potential future activities of the committee, such as new explanatory statements related to the Code of Ethics and other services that could be useful to LIS programs. When asked to rank topics for new documents related to the Code of Ethics, the most popular response was for “Personal Beliefs and Professional Responsibilities” followed closely by “Professional Conduct.” Almost half the respondents also indicated that a statement on “Professional Development” would be useful, while one respondent also suggested that the existing question and answer documents maintained by COPE could be customized for the K-12 setting.



As for other services that could be offered by the committee, two-thirds of the respondents said that infographics, pamphlets, or other brief publications would be useful, and another third of the respondents said it would be helpful to get support or assistance in creating ethics courses or curricula. The idea of direct connections between students and COPE such as chat sessions or mentor connections was less popular, so the higher level tasks of producing policy statements and offering curricular advice were the clear priority for the respondents.

Discussion

The majority of LIS graduate programs include an element of ethics education as part of their curricula. However, it is troubling that some programs have no apparent focus on ethics in their courses based on published materials, including 1 ALA-accredited program and 13 AASL/CAEP-accredited programs. While it is certainly possible that the actual levels of ethics-based content are not apparent from course descriptions or titles, the very lack of prominence regarding professional ethics and principles is an indicator of their importance (or lack thereof) within the curriculum.

When asked about their program's approach to ethics education, one respondent included their program's student learning outcome addressing professional values and ethics and noted that the application of the outcome in each class varies depending on the expertise of the instructor. Ultimately, this is the issue when the teaching of ethics is distributed across the curriculum, as students may have different levels of exposure to and engagement with professional values and ethics depending on which instructors they have.

Comparing these survey results to those from Shelley Rogers's of more than twenty years ago, the number of ALA-accredited institutions offering stand-alone, required ethics courses is virtually unchanged, and it appears that the approach of weaving professional principles and ethics

throughout the curriculum is still the favored method. What remains to be seen is how effective this method is. Though this survey was able to document the stability of the place of professional principles and ethics in graduate LIS curricula, it did not assess the effectiveness of this approach. Future research is necessary to develop an assessment tool for measuring whether the current practice of distributed ethics education achieves the goal of inculcating new librarians with the core values of the profession.

During the revision process of the most recent ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies,²¹ COPE submitted comments regarding the place of professional principles and ethics within those standards and pushed for more specificity regarding student learning outcomes. COPE should continue to work with the ALA Committee on Accreditation to assess the impact of ethics education in accredited programs and should consider establishing a relationship with AASL to look at the place of ethics in CAEP-accredited programs. Meanwhile, there are a number of opportunities for COPE to expand its library of documents and statements related to professional ethics. The popularity of the copyright interpretation is notable given its relative newness. Whether this high usage rate is because of the content or because of the document's status as an interpretation, the committee may want to consider choosing to create interpretations over question and answer documents when addressing new topics if they believe that the content warrants more attention.

The second paragraph of the preamble to the ALA Code of Ethics closes with the following sentence: "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."²² In order for those values and ethical responsibilities to be embraced by future generations of library workers, they must be a central learning outcome of any library education program.

Notes

1. Michael Kelley, "Can We Talk about the MLS?," *Library Journal* 138, no. 8 (2013): 8; John Bertot, Lindsay Sarin, and Paul Jaeger, "Re-Envisioning the MLS," *Public Libraries* 54, no. 6 (2015): 23–33; James L. Mullins, "Are MLS Graduates Being Prepared for the Changing and Emerging Roles that Librarians Must Now Assume Within Research Libraries?," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 1 (January 2012): 124–32.
2. Shelley L. Rogers, "Accredited Library School Education in Ethics," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 35, no. 1 (1994): 51–55.
3. Wallace Kohler, "Professional Values and Ethics as Defined by 'The LIS Discipline,'" *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 102.
4. *Ibid.*, 105.



5. Rogers, "Accredited Library School Education in Ethics."
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Virgil L. P. Blake, "Ethics and Intellectual Freedom in the Education of Library and Information Science Professionals," *Bookmark* 48, (1989): 28–31.
8. "Ethics in Library/Information Science Education," *North Carolina Libraries* 51, (Spring 1993): 23–27.
9. Diana Woodward, "Teaching Ethics for Information Professionals," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 30, no. 2 (1989): 132–35.
10. Ibid., 135
11. Herbert S. White, "Teaching Professional Ethics to Students of Library and Information Science," in *Ethics and the Librarian*, ed. F. W. Lancaster (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1991), 41.
12. Ibid., 36.
13. Beth M. Paskoff, "Teaching Professional Ethics in Library Schools," *LLA Bulletin* 58 (1995): 39–42.
14. Dow, Mirah J., et al., "Case-based Learning as Pedagogy for Teaching Information Ethics Based on the Dervin Sense-Making Methodology," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 141–57. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, EBSCOhost* (accessed August 13, 2016).
15. Michael Holverstott-Cockrell, "The Need for Information Ethics: A Graduate Student's Perspective," *Library & Archival Security* 14, no. 2 (July 1998): 67–73.
16. Toni Carbo and Stephen Almagno, "Information Ethics: The Duty, Privilege and Challenge of Educating Information Professionals," *Library Trends* 49, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 510. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 26, 2015).
17. Toni Carbo, "Ethics Education for Information Professionals," *Journal of Library Administration* 47, no. 3/4 (2008): 5–25.
18. Johannes Britz and Elizabeth A. Buchanan, "Ethics from the Bottom Up? Immersive Ethics and the LIS Curriculum," *Journal of Information Ethics* 19, no. 1 (2010): 12–19.
19. At the time of the survey's proposal, the author was chair of COPE.
20. The survey was developed by COPE members and initial research assistance was provided by COPE members Mary Jane Santos and Stephen Phelan, who compiled the contact information for the graduate programs.
21. American Library Association, "Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies," accessed August 31, 2016, www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/sites/ala.org/accreditedprograms/files/content/standards/Standards_2015_adopted_02-02-15.pdf.
22. American Library Association, "Code of Ethics of the American Library Association," accessed August 31st, 2016, www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics.

Appendix: Survey Instrument

The purpose of this survey is to examine the inclusion of professional ethics and principles in LIS education. For the purposes of this survey, we will define professional ethics and principles to include access to information, intellectual freedom, privacy, copyright, and professional conduct.

- What is the name of your institution?
- For your master's program, please list the title of any **required** course or courses specifically about professional ethics and principles.
- Include an option for "NA"
- For your master's program, please list the title of any **elective** course or courses specifically about professional ethics and principles.
- Include an option for "NA"
- For your master's program, please list the title of any other course or courses that cover professional ethics and principles as part of the coursework
- Name of course: % of course about professional ethics and principles:

- [open text boxes]
- If you offer a doctorate, please list the title of any **required** course or courses specifically about professional ethics and principles.
- Include an option for "NA"
- If you offer a doctorate, please list the title of any **elective** course or courses specifically about professional ethics and principles.
- Include an option for "NA"
- If you offer a doctorate, please list the title of any other course or courses that cover professional ethics and principles as part of the coursework
- Name of course: % of course about professional ethics and principles:

- Briefly describe your program's approach to ethics education in the curriculum.



- Do the course(s) that cover professional ethics and principles include any of the following ALA statements in the course content? Check all that apply.
 - the Code of Ethics of the ALA
 - Copyright: An Interpretation of the Code of Ethics
 - Questions & Answers on Conflicts of Interest (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)
 - Questions & Answers on Enforcement of the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association
 - Questions & Answers on Ethics and Social Media (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)
 - Questions & Answers on Speech in the Workplace (An explanatory statement of the ALA Code of Ethics)
- On which topics would you find additional interpretations of the Code of Ethics and/or Q & As to be useful?
 - Professional Conduct
 - Professional Development
 - Personal Beliefs and Professional Responsibilities
 - Other _____
- How can the American Library Association and Committee on Professional Ethics support your faculty in the teaching of ethics and related principles? Check all that apply:
 - Mentor connections
 - Email/Chats with students in related classes
 - Infographics, pamphlets, or other brief publications
 - Other _____

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