

# The Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding An Institutional Code of Ethics

---

Approved December 17, 2004<sup>1</sup>

Effective January 1, 2005

## *What are the Accreditation Commission's expectations regarding an institutional code of ethics?*

**All accredited museums are required to have a formally approved, separate, and distinct institutional code of ethics.**

Museums are required to submit a copy as part of an accreditation review.

### **Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum Related to Ethics:**

- The museum is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust.
- The museum is committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and operations.
- The governing authority, staff, and volunteers legally, ethically, and effectively carry out their responsibilities.

## *What constitutes a separate and distinct institutional code of ethics?*

The Commission expects an institutional code of ethics to:

- put forth the institution's basic ethical responsibilities as a *museum and nonprofit educational entity* (not solely be about individual conduct (e.g., conflict of interest issues))
- be tailored to the museum (it cannot simply be a restatement of the AAM *Code of Ethics for Museums* (2000)<sup>2</sup> or a declaration of adoption of AAM's code, or simply a copy of a parent organization's code)
- be consistent with the AAM *Code of Ethics for Museums* (2000)
- state it applies to members of the governing authority
- state it applies to staff
- state it applies to volunteers

- be a single document, not a compilation or list of references to other documents
- be approved by the governing authority

In addition, the following may be incorporated into the institutional code of ethics, or exist as separate documents, in which case they should be referenced in the institutional code of ethics:

- Sections on individual ethics, personal conduct, and conflict of interest issues that spell out such details for staff, volunteers, and members of the governing authority. May exist separately in, for example, a personnel policy.
- Sections on collections-related ethics. This may exist separately in the museum's collections management policies.
- The museum may also adhere to codes of ethics specific to its discipline/collections (see below) and/or professional museum functions (e.g., *AAM Curators Code of Ethics*). Adoption of these codes cannot replace a separate institutional code. However, if the museum chooses to adhere to these codes, its code of ethics either should incorporate appropriate language from those codes or cite them and indicate that the museum will abide by them.

## *Why does the Commission consider having an institutional code of ethics important?*

To ensure accountability:

The effectiveness of a nonprofit institution is directly related to the public's perception of its integrity. A formally stated institutional code of ethics is evidence of a critical internal process: to write an institutional code of ethics, an institution must collectively discuss the issues it faces and determine what ethical principles are needed to guide its operations and protect its integrity.



## The Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding An Institutional Code of Ethics

To ensure informed decision-making:

Developing and implementing an institutional code of ethics leads to informed oversight and benefits the institution in several ways. It creates internal agreement about which actions are consistent with the institution's mission. It serves as a self-made reference point for institutional choices. It also is a practical and effective tool in risk management—protecting both assets and reputation.

An institutional code of ethics:

- expresses the institution's policies, consistent with the public service it affirms in its mission statement
- puts the interests of the public ahead of the interests of the institution or of any individual
- encourages conduct that merits public confidence
- acknowledges applicable laws (including the institution's own bylaws or charter)
- acknowledges appropriate discipline-specific professional practices and meets or exceeds them (see below)

### *What ethical issues should a museum address?*

The Commission expects an accredited museum to have ethical guidelines—either as part of its institutional code or in other approved policies (e.g., personnel policies, collections management policy)—that address:

- Ethical duties of the governing authority, staff, and volunteers
- Ethics related to the relationship of the governing authority and director
- Conflict of interest (for example: disclosure, gifts and favors, loans, outside employment, personal collecting, purchases of museum property, use of assets, and confidentiality)
- Collections ethics issues (for example: acquisition, deaccession, care & preservation/conservation, appraisals, dealing, access to the collection, truth in presentation)

- Museum management practices (for example: legal compliance, ownership of intellectual property/scholarly research, personnel management)
- Responsibility to the public

In addition, it is also considered best practice to have policies that address (where applicable):

- Management of business or individual support
- Commercial activities
- Political activities

The institutional code of ethics should also contain a section addressing how the code will be implemented.

### *When is a museum expected to abide by discipline-specific ethics statements or guidelines?*

As indicated in the Two Core Questions<sup>3</sup>, the Accreditation Commission expects museums to abide by “standards and practices as they are generally understood in the field.” Some discipline-specific associations have issued ethics statements or guidelines applicable to their disciplines or members. The Commission expects a museum to adhere to these ethics guidelines if they are:

- broadly applicable to all museums in that segment of the museum field
- non-prescriptive—describing desirable outcomes rather than endorsing particular methods of achieving these outcomes
- based when possible on applicable existing, widely accepted principles in the field
- developed through a broadly inclusive process that gathers input from museums of relevant disciplines, geographic location, size, governance type, and other relevant variables

(See also the Accreditation Commission Adoption of Statements or Guidelines Regarding Standards.)

## The Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding An Institutional Code of Ethics

---

For example, history organizations are expected to adhere to *The Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics* of the American Association for State and Local History. Art museums that are members of the Association of Art Museum Directors are expected to adhere to *Professional Practices in Art Museums* of that association. When developing their codes of ethics, general museums (those that encompass two or more disciplines) must decide how these discipline-specific codes apply to their overall operations and make the reasoning behind those decisions clear.

### ***What are the Accreditation Commission's expectations regarding institutions that are part of a museum system or parent organization?***

Museums governed by a larger institution/organization that does not have museum management as its primary operating purpose are required to have an institutional code of ethics that addresses the museum-specific issues outlined in this Expectation.

---

<sup>1</sup> First issued by the Accreditation Commission in November 1999. This revised version supercedes the 1999 version.

<sup>2</sup> A copy can be found [www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics](http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics).

<sup>3</sup> A full version of the Two Core Questions is available at [www.aam-us.org/accred](http://www.aam-us.org/accred).