

ALLIANCE ACTIVITY GUIDE

Code of Ethics Activity

A museum's institutional code of ethics specifies how the museum will behave in certain circumstances, as well as describing appropriate behavior for members of the staff, governing authority and volunteers. Each institution's ethical issues will vary from museum to museum, depending on subject area, mission, values, programming choices and other activities. This exercise can help your museum identify ethical issues that can be addressed in your institutional code of ethics and improve your museum's understanding of what "institutional" ethics issues are, and which are relevant to their museum. It can be used in assessing an existing policy, or to help create and review a draft policy.

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Museum Assessment Program

Since 1981, the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) has helped museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and peer review. Supported through a cooperative agreement between the Alliance and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, MAP helps museums do one or more of the following: prioritize goals; plan for the future; strengthen communications between staff, board and other constituents; and build credibility with potential funders and donors.

Part of the MAP process includes a self-study questionnaire, which uses questions and activities to provoke exploration. The activities provide museums with the opportunity to assess the knowledge about its operations in action. The activities are designed to be conducted as group exercises in order to stimulate dialogue about issues and challenges that the museum faces. MAP participants assemble an assessment team to work through all of the activities and self-study questions. Museums not participating in MAP may find it helpful to create a team of appropriate participants for each activity.

This activity is one of many designed by MAP as part of the self-study process.

Materials

- » Copies of your museum’s institutional plan, if you have one.
- » Copies of [*Code of Ethics for Museums*](#) (optional)
- » Copies of the Alliance’s [*Standards Regarding an Institutional Code of Ethics*](#) (optional)

Participants

Suggested participants include a representative group of staff, including the director, and at least one member of the governing authority. It is important to include people involved in performing all the different functions that go into running a museum—operations management, scholarship, sales, education, fund-raising, etc., whether these are performed by volunteers or paid staff. It may also be helpful to include “outside experts” from advisory groups or from another museum. Large groups can sometimes inhibit some people from speaking up, so opt for a smaller group and look to get broader input in other venues.

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Part 1: Mine Your Institutional Memory

Many of the ethics issues your museum potentially faces in the future have actually come up in your past. In this activity, you will draw on the “institutional memory” held by your staff and governing authority to compile a list of such issues. Before starting the activity, consider the scope of this exploration—are you revising your code of ethics or writing one for the first time? It may be helpful to provide copies of your existing code, the Alliance’s *Code of Ethics for Museums* and *Standards Regarding an Institutional Code of Ethics*. Think about the most useful way to give your staff this information, knowing some people will read handouts and others won’t. It may be helpful to explain the exercise at a staff meeting, departmental meetings, or a brown-bag lunch.

Ask people to describe an ethical decision they had to make in the course of working at the museum. Tell participants that it is ok to say “none,” but encourage them to list more than one if appropriate. While this activity calls for there to be group discussion—as they stimulate each other’s thinking—your museum may find it helpful to collect these answers through email. You may consider more than one method—perhaps an email inviting input from all staff and one or more discussion groups of staff with key roles or who have been at the museum a long time.

Part 2: Identify Relevant Ethics Issues

In shaping a code of ethics, a museum may consider differences between individual and institutional ethics issues. *Individual* ethics issues concern choices made by individuals about their own behavior. For example, it an employee deciding to take outside employment, or a board member contemplating buying something for his or her private collection that the museum might want for its own collection. *Institutional* ethics issues concern decisions made on behalf of the organization about how it will behave. Even though these decisions may be made by an individual, that person is acting for the museum. For example, the museum may need to make a choice about accepting money from a tobacco company for a health exhibit. Both types of ethics issues should be covered in the museum's code of ethics.

- » Step 1: Distribute the handouts listed in Part 1 and an explanation of the difference between individual and institutional ethics issues given above.
- » Step 2: Have each participant prepare a summary of any institutional ethics issues related to the functions they are involved in at the museum. This includes researching discipline or profession-specific codes of ethics. For example, the person who manages the museum store might summarize relevant material from the *Museum Store Association Code of Ethics*. Assign one person to collect internal museum documents related to ethics standards, including the museum mission and (if one exists) its values statement.
- » Step 3: Have the participants meet and present their summaries. Discuss how the general principles expressed in these standards apply to the museum's operations. Explore whether participants think the museum faces institutional ethics issues not addressed by any of the standards examined, and what sources of information might help shape the museum's ethics choices in these areas.

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Summary

Based on these discussions, take the written responses and notes from each discussion group and organize similar issues together to start a list of issues to address in the museum's code of ethics. Compare this list to your existing or draft code of ethics. Consider any issues it does not deal with and decide whether the museum wants to add corresponding sections to the code. If you have not yet written a code of ethics, use the notes and responses to shape the table of contents of your draft.

Core Documents Verification

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practice for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program. An institutional code of ethics is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations. Use this Alliance activity guide to help your museum develop or strengthen its code and its understanding of ethics. For more on developing a code of ethics, please see the Alliance's reference guide on this topic.

Standards

The Alliance's standards address "big picture" issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

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Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum's performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, "Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business."

Having a strong code of ethics helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance's website at www.aam-us.org.

Where to Find Out More

The [Museum Assessment Program](#) (MAP) helps small and mid-sized museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and a site visit from a peer reviewer. IMLS-funded MAP grants are non-competitive and provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums. For more information, visit www.aam-us.org.

» [Code of Ethics for Museums](#) (AAM Press, 2000)

This code provides a framework for developing an institution's own code of ethics and reflects the current, generally understood standards of the museum field. Issues covered include governance, collections and programs.

» [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. An introductory section explains how virtually anyone associated with museums will find the book valuable, from trustees to staff to funders and the media. It is followed by a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF for all museum members](#).

» [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.