



STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND ETHICS

(Revised 2017)

Introduction

The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) is a membership organization comprised of individuals, agencies, and organizations acting in the public trust, engaged in the practice of history, and representing its many disciplines and professions. AASLH expects its members, employees, and elected officials to abide by the ethical and performance standards adopted by all appropriate discipline-based and professional organizations.

The association and its members are to comply with all laws, regulations, and applicable international conventions. The association and its members are expected to take affirmative steps to maintain their integrity so as to warrant public confidence. The following ethical statements and related professional standards are provided for the guidance of all AASLH members and those in the field of history organizations.

Historical Resources

History organizations frequently have complex and varied collections. These historical resources—including collections of objects, documents, and other records; built environment, cultural landscapes, historical viewsheds, archaeological sites, and other evidence of the past, are the tools through which the past provides meaning and are the bedrock upon which the practice of history rests.

- A. In fulfillment of their public trust, association members must be responsible stewards and advocates and give priority to the care and management of the historical resources within their care and always shall act to preserve their physical and intellectual integrity.
- B. Institutions shall manage historical resources, in accord with comprehensive policies officially adopted by their governing authorities. Policies should be adopted proactively and reviewed regularly.
- C. Historical resources shall not be capitalized or treated as financial assets.
- D. Collections shall not be deaccessioned or disposed of in order to provide financial support for institutional operations, or any reason other than direct care, preservation, or acquisition of collections as defined by institutional policy. Institutions, particularly house museums and sites, may choose to accession their contributing (being accessible to and

interpreted for the public) buildings and landscapes. Because the distinction between building maintenance and preservation is easily blurred, the museum should delineate the two in its policy. In this case, any contributing artifacts that are deaccessioned, the proceeds can be available for direct care and preservation of objects, archives, buildings, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes that provide public benefit as outlined/defined in their collections policy.¹

- E. An object's cultural value (its ability to interpret a larger story) is often determined by its associated value (owned or used by a notable person or as "witness" to a historic event) or its representative value (of the type owned or used by many people), rather than by its intrinsic value. History organizations often contain artifacts of great monetary value which are an integral part of the collection and the monetary value should in no way be a determining factor when deciding to deaccession. When applying proceeds from deaccessioning, it may not always be possible to purchase objects with corresponding or appropriate associated or representative value; expending deaccessioned funds for direct care or preservation of the existing collection may be a more fitting use.
- F. Historical resources shall be acquired, cared for, and interpreted with sensitivity to their cultural origins.
- G. It is important to document the physical condition of historical resources, including past treatment of objects, and to take appropriate steps to mitigate potential hazards to people and property.

Access

Access to historical resources is what gives preservation activities their meaning. Providing nondiscriminatory access to historical resources through exhibitions, tours, educational programs, publications, electronic media, and research is critical in fulfilling the public trust and mission of history organizations. Access and limitations of access are governed by institutional policies and by applicable rights of privacy, ownership, and intellectual freedom.

Interpretation

Historical interpretation may be presented in a variety of formats.

- A. All interpretation must be based upon sound scholarship and thorough research.
- B. Intellectually and scholarly honest interpretation reflects the cultural and temporal context of the subject matter and recognizes the potential for multiple interpretations.
- C. Interpretation must use a method of delivery (historic marker, exhibit, book, program, etc.) that takes into consideration both the intended audience and the results of sound scholarship and thorough research.

¹ Adapted from the policy of National Trust for Historic Preservation

- D. History organizations and agencies shall act to ensure that the breadth of American cultural experiences and perspectives is represented accurately in all programming and interpretations.
- E. History organizations shall work towards inclusiveness with the goals of social responsibility and respect for different cultures and peoples.

Management

The primary responsibility for governance, institutional policies, financial stability, and legal accountability of a historical organization rests with the governing authority.

- A. The governing authority has the responsibility to hold safe the assets of its organization, including, but not limited to: the good name of the organization, the human resources, collections, facilities, property, membership, donors, finances, etc.
- B. The governing authority has the responsibility to secure resources for the benefit of their organization, including, but not limited to: finances, partnerships, human resources, etc.
- C. The governing authority must ensure proper delegation of responsibility.
- D. The governing authority must establish policies that reflect current legal, ethical, and professional practices.
- E. The governing authority must consistently review application of policies established for the organization.
- F. Institutions shall maintain financial records from which accurate information can be generated to manage in a fiscally sound manner.

Human Resources

Operational responsibility rests with the staff, paid or volunteer.

- A. Individuals employed in the practice of history deserve respect, pay, and benefits commensurate with their training, dedication, and contribution to society. Volunteers deserve the same consideration as their paid colleagues.
- B. Institutions shall maintain personnel policies, adopted by the governing authority and distributed to all staff, documenting the terms of employment.
- C. Institutions have the responsibility to engage personnel, including volunteers, who have appropriate training and expertise and to provide them with opportunities for additional training necessary to continue to meet their responsibilities.
- D. If the governing authority employs an administrator, that person alone is responsible for the employment, discipline, and release of all other staff, subject to established personnel policies.
- E. An employee or volunteer is never wholly separable from the institution and actions by an employee or volunteer may reflect upon the organization or be attributed to it. Therefore, the employee or volunteer must be concerned not only with his or her motivations as he or she sees them, but also with the way those actions could be perceived by others.
- F. Institutions have the responsibility to respect the privacy of their members, volunteers, and employees and act in their best interests.

- G. Institutions shall not discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, color, creed, age, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, or gender identity.
- H. Employers and volunteer managers shall not engage in or condone any type of harassment or discrimination.
- I. Institutions and individuals working and volunteering in the history field shall observe confidentiality and treat colleagues with respect, fairness, courtesy, and good faith, avoiding relationships with others which could compromise professional judgment or their reputation.

Revenue Producing Activities

Activities that involve the marketing and sale of products, programs, services, and facilities are acceptable ways to produce support revenues and increase public awareness of, and participation in, historical activities.

- A. No such activities shall be undertaken that violate or compromise the integrity of an institution's mission, the ability of an institution or individual to meet professional standards or an institution's nonprofit status.
- B. Control of products (e.g., exhibitions, publications, collections, programs) shall neither be delegated nor abrogated to outside parties in order to obtain financial support.
- C. History organizations shall review the potential cultural sensitivity of materials considered for commercial use with representatives of the appropriate affiliated communities.

Conflict of Interest

History organizations exist to serve the public interest and must always act in such a way as to maintain public confidence and trust.

- A. All governing authority members, employees, and volunteers shall be careful to avoid the appearance and the reality of using their positions or the information and access gained from their positions for personal gain or for the benefit of another organization. They must exercise discretion and maintain the confidential nature of proprietary information.
- B. Board members, volunteers, and employees shall refrain from personal collecting in any manner that conflicts with the interests or credibility of the institution and its policies. Institutions are encouraged to obtain statements of personal collecting interests before individuals become associated with them.
- C. Collections shall not be made available to any individual on any basis for personal use, either on or off the premises or for any other purpose and contrary to the adopted collections policies.
- D. History organizations and their representatives must protect the integrity of their institutions from both the reality and the appearance of undue influence by donors, sponsors, and other sources of financial support.

Social Responsibility

- A. History organizations and agencies shall act to ensure that the breadth of American experiences and perspectives is represented accurately in staffing and operational activities.

- B. History organizations shall provide leadership to the field in becoming representative of our diverse society through equity in staffing, training, collecting, programming, and marketing.

Intellectual Freedom

Historical scholarship and interpretation depend upon free and open exploration and interpretation of the human experience.

- A. Historical institutions must respect other legal, ethical, and cultural standards regarding individual privacy, human-based research and access to and use of sensitive cultural materials.
- B. Historical institutions and their representatives shall respect the rights and authority of individuals and cultures that had no voice in the disposition of those collections related to them.
- C. AASLH recognizes the diversity and variety of historical interpretation and therefore supports open and thoughtful scholarly debates.
- D. Once employed or engaged, all persons deserve the professional respect and support necessary for professional growth and advancement. Such respect precludes unequal treatment based on any nonprofessional criteria. In particular, it precludes any harassment or discrimination, which is unethical, unprofessional and threatening to intellectual freedom.