

Professional Ethics Unit Discussion Questions and a Sample Discussion Thread from IRLS 520

Note: This discussion takes place early in the semester before we have discussed ethical theories. The goal is to get students thinking about the sorts of ethical dilemmas they may face in their careers.

Discussion Questions: Answer one or more of the following questions or post a comment or question of your own on this week's topic. If you post on more than one issue or question, make a separate post for each answer. Also, be sure to read everyone else's posts and comment on those posts where you feel you have something to say.

1. What do you think the Prospect Public Library should do in the "Schamltz Brewing Presents Teen/Tot Stories" situation? Defend your answer.
2. Are there any situations where a librarian should act according to his/her personal beliefs rather than the code of ethics? Explain your answer.
3. What is the correct balance between professional neutrality and social responsibility? Use the cases from the Preer reading (143-155) to illustrate your answer.
4. How ought a cataloger balance the interests of (1) avoiding biased language, and (2) ensuring the integrity of the record and the accessibility of the content? For instance, if you are cataloging historical material on Native Americans written by whites who refer to Native Americans as "savages," should you use the term "savages" as a controlled vocabulary term or replace it with a less biased term? What reasons would there be for and against each course of action?
5. Do you think it is ethical to accept gifts from vendors? What about meals or perks at conferences? Why or why not?
6. Suppose that someone wishes to donate a very valuable set of documents to your archive, but they want to place very tight restrictions on when it can be accessed and by whom. At what point would you decide to pass on the donation rather than abide by the restrictions? In other words, what sorts of restrictions do you think would go to far?

Discussion Thread

Student 1

Since my particular area of interest is Youth Services in Public Librarianship I found myself most drawn to the ethical dilemma presented by the Schmaltz Brewery presents scenario. I found myself annoyed by the very idea of any corporate entity, not just a brewery, sponsoring a library activity. In my opinion, programs at a public library should be publicly, not privately funded. To me, it doesn't matter if the company sells beer, candy, puppies or donuts; it's the idea of "buying" the library that upsets me.

Granted, my library district does currently offer several co-sponsored events - for example we offer a story time in the summer centered on nutrition and good eating habits, but this is sponsored and presented by the county Health Department. No money changes hands, no one tries to sell anything and we take great care not to try to "push" any agenda on the attendees (we don't for example tell them to become vegan or eat only organics, we simply show them why an apple is probably a much healthier choice than a bag of potato chips). I think the part that bothers me most is the idea of the library being paid by a corporation. It makes me feel as if the library is just a shell, and in my opinion, the library should never be trying to sell any one concept, idea, or business above any others. Am I wrong? I would love to know what others think about this.

Student 2

There appears to be a key assumption underlying your intuitions against corporate funding. The assumption is that funding is to be used to advance interests of the corporation rather than the interests of the public. I agree that in some cases this assumption may hold. It could be as subtle as the sponsor being able to advertise (e.g. "this week's story time is brought to you by Schmatlz Brewery") or it could range to sponsorship that pushes an agenda.

However I am curious if in all cases corporate funding is unethical. It is possible that a corporation makes an anonymous monetary donation to a library without any stipulations to use the money to advance an agenda. It doesn't seem inherently unethical that a corporation donate other materials. Perhaps a corporate holds a book drive and donates books to a library.

I am curious to hear your thoughts.

Student 1

I just think it sets a very dangerous precedent. It leads to the question of which corporations are OK for libraries to take money from, and what does that do for the public's perception of what the library is and will become: is it going to become like a lot of sports arenas where it's "Library: Sponsored by McDonalds?"

In the case we are referring to here, they are asking the library to put their company's brand name on t-shirts - so the library will be associated with their brand of alcohol. So where do we draw the line? Alcohol is ok, but not cars or cigarettes or even say, a legal marijuana dispensary?

It leads to questions of Public Relations and whether people will begin to associate the library negatively if they perceive the sponsor negatively.

Student 2

Perhaps I should be clearer as to my question. What I am asking is different than the Schmatlz brewery situation in order to see if you have the intuition that it is wrong in *all* cases to accept corporate funding.

I pose the scenario where a donation is made anonymously by a corporation (to avoid

issues of advertising the sponsor -- they can't make t-shirts if they don't know who made the donation) and the donation is made without any stipulations that advance an agenda (to avoid any issues with the library neutrality being in question). Does your intuition suggest that accepting a donation in this scenario is unethical?

My intuition is that there is something unethical with advancing an agenda and advertisement of sponsorship rather than corporations themselves. We could imagine a situation where a non-profit, rather than a corporation, makes a donation with stipulations to support an agenda. To me it seems as though advertisement and advancing agendas are the root issue rather than there being an inherent issue with corporations.

I am curious if you share the intuition or if you think that there is something inherently wrong with corporate funding regardless of advertisement or advancing an agenda.

Student 1

Yeah, I actually do think that in the case of public libraries, corporate funding should be avoided at all costs. And I do mean corporate funding as in large national corporations - I think it would be alright if, say, a local small business were to donate an item for a raffle for summer reading or make a small cash donation (so long as the library was still able to determine how the money was used).

Student 3

I was talking with my boss about this just the other day, after I read the chapter. Her suggestion was to let the corporation donate to a Friends of the Library group. This would help the library by still getting the money, but it would sort of filter their sponsorship because once the Friends have it they can give it to the library in any way they see fit. She did say that under no circumstance should the library advertise as such and such a program was brought to you by this company. Her suggestion was that this should be a policy for any company not just one like the brewery. I thought bringing the Friends into the picture could be a good compromise.

Student 1

I like that compromise - because this way they are donating to a non-profit group (as most Friends groups are) and not to the library in itself.

Student 4

I too like the Friends of the Library suggestion. It allows an organization to let society know how great it is for being so philanthropic, without corrupting the mission of the library, which is to serve the public, as opposed to serving at the behest of private interests. Preference goes to anonymous donations however :)