

## **A Code of Professional Ethics for the Communication Scholar/Teacher**

**2017 Review Committee:** Scott Myers, Educational Policies Board Director; Bonnie Bow, Publications Board Director; and Mindy Fenske, Research Board Director

### **Current Statement** (*Adopted 1999*)

The National Communication Association believes that ethical behavior is a hallmark of professionalism in communication. We believe that ethical behavior is guided by values such as:

- integrity
- fairness
- professional and social responsibility
- equality of opportunity
- confidentiality
- honesty and openness
- respect for self and others
- freedom and safety

The guidelines that follow offer means by which these values can be made manifest in our teaching, research, publications, and professional relationships with colleagues, students, and in the society as a whole.

This code and its guidelines are intended to remind those in the discipline of accepted standards of ethical conduct and they serve at least three broad functions:

1. to highlight ethical responsibilities and issues relevant to members of the communication discipline;
2. to stimulate personal reflection as well as public discussion of the ethical implications of our disciplinary goals and practices; and
3. to set forth the traits and moral characteristics which are appropriate for communication professionals.

### **Teaching**

Our primary responsibilities as communication teachers rest in being knowledgeable, communicating what we know in a fair and accurate manner, acting as ethical role models for students, and establishing relationships with students that enhance learning and encourage students to behave ethically.

Most important is the area of academic integrity. As teachers, we maintain high standards of academic integrity by:

- Teaching only those courses for which we have academic credentials, that is, preparation in the subject matter area and knowledge of current thinking and research related to the course material.
- Helping all students to develop their fullest academic potential; encouraging them to become engaged in learning, to think critically about readings and lectures, to reflect on what they learn and, when appropriate, to disagree with what is presented; and to participate with faculty and other students in research projects and activities.

- Acknowledging scholarly debates where they exist and helping students understand the nature of scholarly controversy, rather than presenting controversial material as “truth.”
- Engaging in classroom practices only to the extent that one is qualified to do so. For example, communication teachers should not assign exercises requiring self-disclosure by students, unless they have provided ways for students to avoid making significant disclosures without penalty. Nor should communication teachers attempt to lead exercises designed to reduce communication apprehension without being trained to do so. In designing classroom activity, the ethical communication teacher avoids putting students at psychological or emotional risk.
- Using with care exercises or assignments that may conflict with the closely-held values of students. Instructors must be open to allowing alternative assignments when students object for personal reasons.

Communication teachers display personal integrity in the classroom by their own use of ethical behaviors and by refusing to encourage or tolerate unethical behavior.

As communication teachers, we strive to treat all students fairly and we are always concerned with fairness. We model fairness in the classroom and require that students value fairness by insisting on respectful and civil expression when discussing differing viewpoints. We encourage listening to others and presenting ideas accurately, while acknowledging differences in points of view and personal biases. We provide, and encourage students to provide, constructive feedback to others in the class while acknowledging the value of opposing arguments and evidence. We try to foster freedom of expression and a safe classroom environment in which students communicate candidly and thrive intellectually.

We respect and honor culturally-based differences in communication and presentational styles in and outside the classroom. That respect calls for encouraging students to communicate in multiple ways, depending on what is most appropriate and effective for given contexts and communication goals. We strive to treat all students equally by not allowing personal pre-dispositions or biases to influence how we teach and interact with students.

We demonstrate respect for students by acts of confidentiality, keeping grades and other personal information about students private. In other matters we are honest and open. We present course objectives and requirements fully and communicate clear criteria for grading and evaluating student achievement. We present ourselves honestly to students and others, accurately describing our professional credentials, qualifications, and knowledge.

We endeavor to assess student learning using methods and instruments that are free of bias and that provide an equal opportunity for all students to perform well. We assess students' work based on the quality of content, not the viewpoints presented.

Finally, we accept our professional and social responsibilities as communication educators by endeavoring to improve public understanding of communication theory, research, and practice. When the opportunity presents itself, we provide information and instruction to students and others about ethical communication and how to think and behave as ethical communicators.

## Research

Communication research takes many forms, but there are ethical principles that apply to a communication researcher, no matter what form of research is utilized. The ethics of social scientific research has received attention from other scholarly societies, because those studies rely most heavily on the interaction between researcher and person(s) being researched. Of the published guidelines, those of the American Psychological Association's (APA) are the most comprehensive. Communication researchers working in the social science tradition are urged to consult the APA guidelines for specific advice concerning the ethical conduct of social scientific research. Some principles specific to communication researchers need to be articulated, however.

In terms of integrity, ethical communication researchers should employ recognized standards of research practice, conducting research that they have been properly trained to do, and avoiding procedures for which they have not been adequately prepared. If in doubt about any ethical matter, they seek advice before proceeding. Their primary goal is to avoid harm to others – whether direct emotional or physical harm or harm to the reputations of those being researched.

The value of confidentiality demands that the identity of those being researched be kept confidential except in cases where the research is carried out on public figures or publicly available material. Criticism of another's language, ideas, or logic is a legitimate part of scholarly research, but ethical researchers avoid *ad hominem* attacks. Avoiding personal attack does not mean that critics or reviewers refrain from commenting directly and honestly on the work of others, however.

Professional responsibility requires that ethical communication researchers know and comply with the legal and institutional guidelines covering their work. They do not use the work of others as their own, plagiarizing others' ideas or language or appropriating the work of others for which one serves as a reviewer.

Responsibility to others entails honesty and openness. Thus, the ethical communication researcher:

- Obtains informed consent to conduct the research, where appropriate to do so.
- Avoids deception as part of the research process, unless the use of deception has been approved in advance by an appropriate review body.
- Provides adequate citations in research reports to support theoretical claims and to justify research procedures.
- Discloses results of the research, regardless of whether those results support the researcher's expectations or hypotheses.
- Does not falsify data or publish misleading results.
- Reports all financial support for the research and any financial relationship that the researcher has with the persons or entities being researched, so that readers may judge the potential influence of financial support on the research results.

Likewise, the value of personal responsibility mandates that:

- Communication researchers will not accept research funding for projects that are likely to create a conflict of interest or where the funder controls any of the research design

or procedures. If funding is accepted, communication researchers honor their commitments to finish the work on schedule.

- Communication researchers who work with human subjects honor their commitments to their subjects. Those who work with communities honor their commitments to the communities they research.
- Communication researchers share credit appropriately and recognize the contributions of others to the finished work. They decide before research is conducted how authorship will be determined and the order of authorship. They also decide through mutual consultation whether authors should be added or deleted from the finished product.

### **Publication**

Ethical responsibilities in the scholarly publication process exist for authors, editors, and reviewers. The author's primary responsibility rests in an extension of the ethical parameters for conducting research. The editor's and the reviewer's responsibilities rest primarily in insuring that the author's work receives a fair review and an opportunity for publication based on a fair, ethical evaluation of the merit of the work.

Ethical considerations for each of these three groups of participants in the publication process will be addressed in turn.

#### For Authors:

- Authors have an obligation to submit their work to professional conventions or to scholarly journals in proper format and according to the guidelines set forth by the publication or convention call for papers.
- Authors have an obligation to acknowledge properly those who contributed to the research.
- Authors have an obligation to submit their work to only one scholarly journal or to one programming unit of a convention or conference. Editors or convention planners must not be put in the position of allowing an author to choose between two venues after each has evaluated the work as acceptable for presentation.
- If portions of the submitted work have been presented previously, the author has an obligation to note that fact, and the editor or planner has an obligation to take this disclosure into account in deciding whether to accept the present version of the work.
- Authors have an obligation to communicate in a manner that is sensitive to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, and gender.

#### For Editors and Convention Program Planners:

- Editors and planners have an obligation to select associate editors and manuscript reviewers based on scholarly acumen, accomplishments and openness to various methodologies, topics, and theoretical perspectives. To maintain fairness in the review process, reviewers should represent a variety of geographic regions and a diversity of gender, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds.
- Editors and planners should maximize the likelihood that the peer review process is blind with the identity of the author(s) concealed from the reviewers.
- Editors and planners have an obligation to forward submissions to the reviewers in a timely fashion and to monitor the review process to insure that reviews are returned in

a timely fashion. If a manuscript's review exceeds the amount of time normally allotted to review, an editor should notify the author of the review's progress and should take steps to insure that a speedy conclusion to the review process is reached.

- Editors and planners, to the extent possible, should select manuscript reviewers who are qualified to review the submission, able to render a fair judgment, and have no relationship with the author that might bias judgment.
- In communicating a decision to the author, editors and planners should provide copies of reviewers' comments where appropriate, explain the basis or reasons for the decision, and maintain a professional demeanor toward the author and the work.
- Editors should maintain accurate records of their expenditures and use subsidies from sponsoring organizations solely for publication and editorial expenses.

#### For Manuscript Reviewers:

- Reviewers should acknowledge any factors that might unfairly influence their assessment of a manuscript and promptly return that manuscript so that it might be sent to a different referee.
- Reviewers should render judicious, professional assessments and evaluations, devoid of personal attacks.
- Reviewers should thoroughly elucidate the reasons for their recommendations and provide constructive criticism and advice for the benefit of the author.
- Reviewers should submit their reviews in a timely manner or notify the editor or planner why a delay is necessary. Necessary delays should be minimal in length.
- Reviewers are obligated to advise the editor or planner of any elements in the manuscript that may be unethical, unprofessional, or of questionable validity.

#### **Professional Relationships**

Members of the National Communication Association are most likely to be employed at institutions of higher education as faculty members or administrators or be students at such an institution. Those members have an ethical responsibility to make appropriate and effective contributions in terms of service to their campuses and their communities.

NCA members employed outside of academia may be governed in their ethical conduct by the standards of other professional groups (e.g., the American Society for Training and Development). Those in academic settings may be governed by codes of ethical behavior adopted by their institutions, in addition to the guidelines stated here.

Because communication scholar/teachers value the role of ethics in interactions with others, it is appropriate to comment in this code on three kinds of professional relationships, those among: faculty and students, faculty colleagues, and employers and employees.

#### **Faculty and Students:**

The faculty-student relationship inherently involves power differences. The faculty member may serve as mentor, guide, counselor, advocate, and judge of a student's work. Faculty and students may become friends in the process, but as long as each is in a particular role, dynamics of power in the relationship are a consideration. It is easy but potentially dangerous for either faculty members or students to ignore the impact of the roles they play, and they do so at their own peril and possibly at the peril of others.

Faculty members and students should be honest with each other and avoid manipulating the other person's outlook or emotions to serve their own ends. Faculty must be sensitive to the differing needs of different students and mentor and advise accordingly. Mistakes may be made, but faculty members should insure that their advice is as accurate and responsive as possible.

When faculty members and students work closely, emotional attachments may sometimes form. While there is nothing inherently unethical about these attachments, it is easy to forget the unequal nature of the relationship under those conditions. Since students are usually more vulnerable in these relationships, it is faculty member's responsibility to maintain a high degree of personal integrity in all dealings with students.

#### Faculty Colleagues:

Conflicts inevitably occur among faculty colleagues who work together for long periods of time and may occur in interaction with comparatively new colleagues. Some of these conflicts may relate to philosophical or methodological differences, others may arise from personal animosity, and still others may result from slights, real and imagined.

Whatever their differences, faculty colleagues have an obligation to work together in the best interests of their department, students, and the discipline. It does the communication discipline little good when internal struggles in one of its programs affect the quality or reputation of that program. Communication faculty members have an obligation to treat each other professionally and to manage--if not resolve--their conflicts. They have an obligation to separate personal dislikes from reasoned judgments of proposals advocated by other faculty members. Their ethical responsibility is to work for the good of the communication program and the discipline as a whole, over personal gain.

#### Employers and Employees:

Employment, tenure, and promotion processes require ethical decisions because these decisions are both personal, with lasting impact on an individual's career, and professional, requiring the meeting of standards set by faculty of the program and the institution. Therefore, the values of integrity, responsibility, honesty, and fairness should apply to these situations.

Candidates for positions have an obligation to state their qualifications honestly and to include all material about themselves that is relevant to the decision process. Applicants should pursue a particular position only so long as they have an interest in that position. They should not pursue positions in which they have no interest, in order to provide themselves with a better bargaining position with other employers. If they accept one position, they should remove themselves from other positions for which they are being considered.

Employers have an obligation to treat all candidates fairly, to adhere to principles of equality of opportunity, and to provide accurate and clear information about the position and the status of the search process.

All faculty members have rights to due process whenever they or their behaviors are scrutinized for any employment-related reason. Probationary and temporary faculty should be fully informed of the terms and conditions of their employment, and probationary faculty members should be advised in clear terms what they will need to do to achieve tenure.

Faculty colleagues have an obligation to evaluate each other based on the merits of their work and not on personal considerations. Faculty members who may have a conflict of interest in an employment decision should withdraw from the process of making that decision.

Department chairs and other administrators are governed by the same standards as other faculty with regard to hiring, retention, tenure, and promotion processes.

### **Conclusion**

Members of the communication discipline have a special responsibility to model ethical communication practices. Communication scholars are particularly concerned with free and responsible communication among all members of society. Ethical communication should begin with ourselves and govern our interactions with others. The principles set forth in this document represent general agreements on principles and procedures at the time this code was adopted and as agreements are subject to later modification. But our obligation to behave as ethical communicators and to model ethical communication behavior endures as long as we call ourselves members of the scholarly discipline of communication.

### **Other Professional Ethics Codes**

*Code of Ethics*. American Sociological Association.

*Code of Ethics of the Education Profession* (1975). National Education Association Representative Assembly.

*Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. American Psychological Association.

*Statement on Professional Ethics* (1995). The American Association of University Professors.

### **Proposed Revised Statement (June 2017)**

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2. to stimulate personal reflection as well as public discussion of the ethical implications of our disciplinary goals and practices; and
3. to set forth the ethical practices that are appropriate for communication professionals.

### **Teaching**

We accept our professional and social responsibilities as communication educators by endeavoring to improve public understanding of communication theory, research, and practice. Our primary responsibilities as communication instructors rest in being knowledgeable, communicating what we know in a fair and accurate manner, acting as ethical role models for students by providing information and instruction to students about how to think and behave as ethical communicators, and establishing communication relationships with students that enhance their learning and encourage them to communicate ethically.

As communication instructors, we strive to treat all students fairly and we are always concerned with fairness. We model fairness in the classroom and require that students value fairness by insisting on respectful and civil expression when discussing differing viewpoints. We encourage listening to others and presenting ideas accurately, while acknowledging differences in points of view and personal biases. We provide, and encourage students to provide, constructive feedback to others in the class while acknowledging the value of opposing arguments and evidence. We try to foster freedom of expression and a safe classroom environment in which students communicate candidly and thrive intellectually.

We respect and honor culturally-based differences in communication and presentational styles in and outside the classroom. That respect calls for encouraging students to communicate in multiple ways, depending on what is most appropriate and effective for given contexts and communication goals. We strive to treat all students equally by not allowing predispositions or biases to influence how we teach and interact with students.

We display personal integrity in the classroom by our own use of ethical behaviors and by refusing to encourage or tolerate unethical behavior. As instructors, we maintain high standards of academic integrity by:

- Being prepared for the courses we teach by accessing the subject matter area and exposing ourselves to the knowledge of current pedagogical thinking and research related to teaching the course material.
- Helping all students to develop their fullest academic potential; encouraging them to become engaged in learning, to think critically about readings and lectures, to reflect on what they learn and, when appropriate, to disagree with what is presented; and to participate with faculty and other students in research projects and activities.
- Acknowledging scholarly debates where they exist and helping students understand the nature of scholarly controversy, rather than presenting controversial material as “truth.”
- Engaging in classroom practices that help students achieve a better understanding of the course material without putting them at psychological or emotional risk.
- Using with care exercises or assignments that may conflict with the closely-held values of students and being open to allowing alternative assignments when students object for personal reasons.
- Demonstrating respect for students by following federal, state, and institutional laws that guarantee confidentiality and student privacy.
- Presenting course objectives and requirements fully and communicating clear criteria for grading and evaluating student achievement.
- Assessing student learning using methods and instruments that are free of bias and that provide an equal opportunity for all students to perform to the best of their ability. Students’ work is assessed based on the quality of content, not the viewpoints presented.

## **Research**

Ethical principles apply to all communication researchers, regardless of the form or method of inquiry. Ethical communication researchers should employ recognized standards of research



practice, conduct research that they are properly trained to perform, and avoid procedures for which they have not been adequately prepared or trained. The primary goal of ethical communication research is to avoid harm to others—whether direct emotional or physical harm or harm to the reputations of research participants. Ethical communication research requires respect for human dignity, integrity, privacy, and right to confidentiality. Researchers have the obligation to protect vulnerable populations and to strive for accurate representations of all cultures and communities.

If in doubt about any ethical matter, ethical researchers seek advice before proceeding. The value of confidentiality demands that the identity of those being researched be kept confidential except in cases where the research is carried out on public figures or publicly available material. Criticism of another's language, ideas, or logic is a legitimate part of scholarly research, but ethical researchers avoid *ad hominem* attacks. Avoiding personal attack does not mean that critics or reviewers refrain from commenting directly and honestly on the work of others, however.

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Responsibility to others entails honesty and openness. Thus, the ethical communication researcher:

- Obtains Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the appropriate institution(s) before conducting the research.
- Obtains informed consent to conduct the research, where appropriate to do so.
- Avoids deception as part of the research process, unless the use of deception has been approved in advance by an appropriate review body.
- Provides adequate citations in research reports to support theoretical claims and to justify research procedures.
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- Does not falsify data or publish misleading results.
- Reports all financial support for the research and any financial relationship that the researcher has with the persons or entities being researched, so that readers may judge the potential influence of financial support on the research results.

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### **Rationale and Supporting Materials for Revision**

The Directors of the Educational Policies, Publications, and Research Boards are requesting that the Legislative Assembly pass this resolution in support of the role that professional ethics should play in the academic lives of NCA members. It has been 18 years since this code was adopted; this revision addresses the ethical issues with which academic teachers and scholars continue to be confronted. Adopting this revised code of professional ethics would provide NCA members with a list of ethical guidelines to consider when engaging in their academic endeavors.

This revision does not call for any new action to be taken by either external parties or the association. The expectation is that the Association will continue to pursue its mission of serving the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching.

This code does not explicitly require any resources for implementation. However, in keeping with the association's mission, there is an expectation that the NCA create and continue programs to pursue its mission of serving communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners.