

Ethical Foundations for an Evolving Field: AIR's New Statement

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[CHRISTINE]

I am Christine Keller – welcome to today's webinar. Our goal for the webinar is to introduce AIR's new statement of ethical principles. Michelle and I will share the background story of how and why the AIR Board of Directors decided to revise the previous Code of Ethics and Professional Practice.

We will then present the new principles and describe the how, what, and why of each one, including how we see them at play in the work of data professionals and their relevance for higher education overall. Finally, we are eager to get your input and answer your questions about this work.

The conversation about the ethical principles is not limited to today's webinar. Additional resources are hosted on the ethics page of the AIR website to support and inform the application of the principles. These resources are dynamic and will evolve and expand based on the needs of the community.

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[MICHELLE]

I am Michelle Appel. Let me start by sharing the background for our work as a Board to update AIR's position and resources for ethical data use.

The original AIR Code of Ethics was adopted in 1992 and was the result of conversations that had happened at regional conferences and among a core group of concerned members. The goal was to provide broad ethical statements that guide professionals and identify relevant considerations when ethical uncertainties arise. The original code was introduced in a spring 1992 *New Directions for Institutional Research* volume and approved later that year. That code was updated in 2001 to incorporate a new preamble, and again 2013, at which the time was the title was amended to include the words "professional practice".

In 2018, the Board decided to revisit the Code of Ethics and Professional Practice in response to member concerns that it did not address concerns introduced by new technology and methods around data analytics and "big data." The Board noted that the Code was fairly detailed and contained both ethical principles, which are underlying beliefs, with practice, which are the nitty gritty details of how we get things done. This made it cumbersome to identify those true underlying beliefs and risked losing the nuance of context and institutional setting. The Board ultimately decided to separate the ethical statement from the practice, recognizing that the Executive Office provides numerous resources regarding the practice of institutional research. The new Statement of Ethical Principles being discussed today is the result of numerous rounds of feedback from members – we are appreciative of the consideration and thoughtful advice given by so many throughout the process. The Board approved the Statement in September 2019.

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[MICHELLE]

The new Statement of Ethical Principles was designed to be easy to remember and clear in its values. It even fits on one page! We share the URL for a printable PDF at the end of this presentation.

The Board also sought to make the principles broad and expansive. The goal is inclusion, not exclusion. That is, AIR recognizes that the IR, IE, and related professions encompass many different types of work in a large variety of settings. The ethical principles need to be applicable and focus on the underlying beliefs that can be applied in all of our work.

It's important to note that the new principles reflect input from a large number of AIR's stakeholders. The entire AIR community was invited to provide feedback on an earlier draft of the principles, and additional input was sought in conference sessions and through other communications and events. The Board used that feedback to shape and amend the final principles.

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[CHRISTINE]

The AIR Statement of Ethical Principles is intended to be a guide for use of higher education data. It outlines overarching principles and is a statement of integrity. It is NOT a code of conduct that could be used to sanction individuals, nor it is not legal advice.

There is no inherent ranking or value in the order in which these principles are listed. You may see natural connections in the flow of the list, but we don't intend to convey that any of these principles are more or less important than the others.

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[MICHELLE]

The introductory paragraph indicates that these are principles affirmed by the Association, with the clear purpose of data use to facilitate insight and improve higher education. This introduction is intentionally broad – the principles being affirmed can apply to a wide variety of professionals. It also makes clear that these should guide us as we promote the use of analytics, responding to members' desire to address this growing area.

The principles start by saying "We act with integrity:" and then each statement defines an aspect of integrity.

The statements themselves have key words that stand out – this was designed as a way to make it easy to both identify the main theme and to refer to the statement. For example, "accurate and contextualized" can be used as a shorter way to refer to the fifth statement in the left column. It is noteworthy that the statements are not overly specific, for example the rights statement does not mention GDPR specifically but rather notes legal principles that can cross national borders. This allows application of the principles to a wider range of laws and eliminates the need to change the principles every time a law changes.

The concluding paragraph reflects member feedback that we must be mindful of the many ways in which changing technology impacts our work.

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[MICHELLE]

Consequences.

AIR believes that the recognition and awareness of the consequences of our work are paramount. That is, the work we do impacts people and their experiences. This principle addresses big data and analytics as well as policy analysis and traditional IR. The principle reads: "We recognize the consequences of our work. The analytic algorithms and applications we build and/or implement, as well as the policy decisions incorporating information we analyze and disseminate, impact people and situations."

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[CHRISTINE]

Rights.

The principle reads: "We acknowledge that the individuals whose information we use have rights, derived from both legal and ethical principles that can cross national borders. We make intentional efforts to protect their information from misuse or use that could cause them harm." The rights of people impacted by our work are both legal and ethical. This principle reminds us that it's not enough to just follow the law. Rather, we need to go beyond to do no harm.

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[MICHELLE]

Privacy and Confidentiality.

In all of our work, we protect privacy and maintain confidentiality. Often, this means protecting the privacy of the people we study, but it also refers to the institutions we serve. We must be mindful of privacy and confidentiality in everything we do, for every reason.

The principle reads: "We protect privacy and maintain confidentiality when collecting, compiling, analyzing, and disseminating information."

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[CHRISTINE]

We are responsible data stewards.

The principle states: "We act as responsible data stewards. We secure the data and information over which we have control, following generally accepted guidelines and professional standards for physical and electronic security and data sharing."

It is not enough to simply keep data safe. Responsible data stewardship also means attending to the appropriate sharing and documentation of data.

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[MICHELLE]

Accurate and Contextualized.

The principle says: "We provide accurate and contextualized information. We do not knowingly or intentionally mislead the consumers of our information."

Context is the “superpower” of IR. Without context, nuance and understanding is lost, or worse, misinterpretations result.

Also, we make mistakes, but we don’t intentionally mislead in any of our work. Our reputation depends on this.

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[CHRISTINE]

Appropriate.

The principle reads: “We deliver information and analyses appropriate to the questions being asked, to the quality of the data available, and to the context in which the questions are asked.”

This principle reminds us to try to understand the real question posed and the context in which it’s asked. All of us know that the first data request from a new user seldom results in the information they actually need.

Our work and our answers must be appropriate for the questions and for the quality of data available to us. For example, we should not engage in complex analyses when the question doesn’t call for it or when the data are too dirty or too incomplete to support it.

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[MICHELLE]

Fair and Transparent.

The principle states “We seek to be fair and transparent, minimizing our own personal biases in our research assumptions, methodologies, and conclusions.”

When this principle was crafted, we debated whether we should use the term “unbiased.” We recognized that we can’t get rid of all of our biases. Instead, we must try to minimize our biases and be clear about what work we did, how we approached it, and why.

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[CHRISTINE]

Conflicts of Interest.

This principle reminds us that we can’t have confused roles or duplicate loyalties. We need to put our institutions, students, and stakeholders first.

The text of the principle reads: “We avoid conflicts of interest, and disclose them when unavoidable, particularly with third parties and vendors. We act in the best interests of our institutions, students, and stakeholders.”

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[MICHELLE]

Accessible.

We don’t do our work for the sake of doing it. It might sound silly to say that, but in reality, our work doesn’t have value if it isn’t accessible because it doesn’t illuminate others’ understanding or inform decisions. This means thinking about the base knowledge others have, as well as the ways in which others process information and striving for accessibility in those ways as well.

Additionally, we must actually share our work with those who need it for it to generate insight. We cannot hoard information or be the sole guardian of it.

The principle reads “We strive to make our work accessible to those who need data, information, and analysis to generate insight and make decisions.”

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[CHRISTINE]

Knowledge.

As members of the greater higher education community, we are called to share our underlying knowledge with others to help improve our institutions and to ultimately contribute to student success. Sharing methods, techniques, and tips is a foundation of the IR community and this principle reminds us of our responsibility to do so in our own institutions as well.

The principle says “We share knowledge of the Institutional Research field and its application so we may facilitate insights and promote common understanding to our institutions and stakeholders.”

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[MICHELLE]

Scholarship.

As with knowledge, as members of the greater higher education community, we have a commitment to each other and to the field to continue to grow that knowledge and to learn what we need to do our jobs to the best of our abilities. This means staying abreast of emerging trends within and external to the profession.

Additionally, this principle recognizes that we should not use a methodology or technique for which we are not capable. Scholarship means finding the knowledge necessary as well as knowing one's own limits.

This final principle states “We value lifelong learning and the enhancement of our field. We draw on and contribute to relevant and emerging scholarship and educate ourselves on developing trends. We utilize those methods and techniques for which we have, or can obtain, appropriate knowledge and capabilities.”

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[MICHELLE]

These 11 principles and their descriptors are available in a one-page printable PDF for easy reference. It is our hope that this succinct format makes it easy for you to reference the material and, when relevant, to share it with colleagues.

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[CHRISTINE]

We will continue to update the resources and materials offered by AIR to reflect the new Statement of Ethical Principles.

The ethics webpage currently has scenarios to provide examples of how the principles could be used in practice.

And we will be adding promotional materials and tools for outreach to our colleagues in other communities such as researchers, IT professionals and business officers.

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[Christine]

We are also interested in learning about the types of resources that would be helpful as you strive to apply the principles to your work. Please send us your thoughts and ideas.

We now have time for your questions about what we presented today and for that I turn it back over to Conor.