

AALL and the Code of Ethics: Time for a Change?

by Margaret Maes Axtmann

ALL President Judy Meadows appointed the Special Committee on Ethics earlier this year and gave it the following charge:

The AALL Special Committee on Ethics will review the current AALL Code of Ethics and report to the Executive Board by its Fall 1998 Board Meeting, its recommendation for a revision or replacement with Model Rules of Professional Conduct. The Committee is asked to take into special consideration both the recommendations on ethical issues of the 1996 Report of the AALL Special Committee on the Renaissance of Law Librarianship in the Information Age and the newly revised Code of Ethics of the American Library Association.

The Special Committee will build on a history of ethics activity in AALL as well as continuing the work of two recent AALL task forces that also worked on the Code of Ethics. Although the issue of ethics has not been written about much in the law library literature, it has been discussed, sometimes heatedly, at several Annual Meeting business meetings. An Ethics Committee worked from 1969 to 1974 to draft an ethics code, only to have it fail to be adopted at the 1974 Annual Meeting. Almost immediately another group began to work on a new draft that would be a more general statement of ethical principles. The Code of Ethics we have today was approved by a straw vote at the 1978 Annual Meeting and subsequently adopted by mail vote of the entire AALL membership.

Part of the recommendation of the Ethics Committee that proposed this code was that AALL establish an Advisory Commission on Ethical Standards. The Ethics Commission was appointed and served at least from 1981–1984. Its purpose was to provide advisory opinions on ethical questions and to serve as the continuing review committee for possible revisions to the AALL Code of Ethics. The Commission was abolished on January 5, 1984, as a result of a study indicating that these activities might jeopardize AALL's tax exempt status and because of a concern that conducting such activities properly was not then feasible. Correspondence from the AALL Archives indicates that the Commission had been largely inactive, with only two queries and no action on record.

In 1992–93, a Special Task Force on Ethics reviewed the 1978 Code of Ethics, surveyed the library literature, and examined ethics revision in related associations. All of the other major library associations were engaged in an examination of their codes of ethics at that time, and the Task Force recommended to the Executive Board that AALL take steps to draft a revised code of ethics. A new Task Force on Ethics was appointed in 1993–94, and it produced a document entitled Proposed Rules for Ethical Conduct. The Executive Board asked the Task Force to solicit comments from the AALL membership on this proposal, but the project stalled for a variety of reasons. The new Special Committee on Ethics will build on the work of the previous task forces while also continuing to review the status of ethics revision in other library associations.

The Special Committee has laid out an ambitious agenda in response to its charge. The most important element of that agenda is the solicitation of member input into the process of code revision. To that end, AALL members should expect to see a series of articles in *AALL Spectrum* outlining the issues that must be considered during the drafting of a new code. The first of these articles, introducing the topic, was written by Ralph Monaco and appears here. The Committee solicits and values members' ideas about the content and format of a revised code of ethics. As we work toward our goal of a draft document to be available by the late spring of 1998, we hope that AALL members will participate in the process by sending comments to any Committee member. The Committee will establish a variety of ways to inform the membership and to gather feedback. We want to hear from you.

Special Committee on Ethics: Margie Axtmann (Chair), Anne Abate, Wes Cochran, Ralph Monaco, Kay Schlueter, Kate Martin (Executive Board liaison).

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