



AASLH STATEMENT OF STANDARDS AND ETHICS

(Revised 2018)

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 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.

Diversity and Inclusion

Everyone makes history. American History is inclusive history. Through staffing, training, collecting, programming, and marketing, history organizations should reflect the diverse communities they serve. History organizations should be attuned to issues and ideas reflective of the breadth of American experience, particularly those relevant to their local communities and should avoid bias in their documentation, collections, preservation, and interpretation.

Intellectual Freedom

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

History institutions must respect all legal, ethical, and cultural standards regarding individual privacy, human-based research and access to and use of sensitive cultural materials.

Historical Resources

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

- A. In fulfillment of their public trust, association members must be responsible stewards, giving priority to the protection and management of the historical resources within their care and preserving the physical and intellectual integrity of these resources.
- B. Institutions should manage their historical resources in accord with comprehensive policies officially adopted by their governing authorities. These policies should be reviewed regularly.
- C. Historical resources should not be capitalized or treated as financial assets.
- D. History organizations should detail the process for deaccessioning objects¹ from their collections in their collections management policy. Decisions to deaccession should be based upon the relationship of the object to the institution's mission, the object's cultural value (i.e., its ability to interpret a larger story), the physical condition of the object, and/or the ability of the institution to continue to care for the object. Under no circumstances should the decision to deaccession an object be made on the basis of its monetary value.
- E. Funds from the sale of collections may be used for the acquisition of collections, or the direct care² or preservation of existing collections. Funds should not be used to provide financial support for institutional operations. In the case of institutions that accession their contributing buildings and landscapes (cultural and historical assets that are accessible to and interpreted for the public), funds acquired through deaccessioning can be used 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. Institutional policy should distinguish between building maintenance and building preservation.
- F. Historical resources should be acquired, cared for, and interpreted with sensitivity to their cultural origins. All efforts should be made to be transparent about and representative of these origins.
- G. The physical condition of historical resources, including a record of their past treatment, should be maintained and appropriate steps taken to mitigate potential hazards to people and property.

Access

Access to historical resources gives preservation activities their meaning. Providing and promoting equitable 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 to access are governed by institutional policies and by applicable rights of privacy, ownership, cultural standards, 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. Sound scholarship includes reference to and respect for community-based knowledge. Intellectually honest and scholarly rigorous interpretation reflects the cultural and temporal context and recognizes the potential for multiple perspectives.
- B. History organizations should demonstrate respect for all cultures and peoples, and they should strive to be socially responsible and inclusive in their programming and interpretation.
- C. Interpretation must use a method of delivery (historic marker, exhibit, book, program, etc.) appropriate for the intended audience.

Governance

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

- A. The governing authority has the responsibility to safeguard the organization's assets, including, but not limited to: the good name of the organization, its mission, its human and financial resources, collections, facilities, property, members and donors.
- B. The governing authority should insure that the institution maintains accurate financial records and is managed in a fiscally sound manner.
- C. The governing authority should insure that its organization has the financial and human resources necessary to fulfill the organization's mission.
- D. The governing authority should ensure proper delegation of responsibility.
- E. The governing authority should establish policies that reflect current legal, ethical, and professional practices.
- F. The governing authority should regularly review the organization's policies and ensure their application.

Human Resources

Responsibility for the operation of a history organization rests with the staff, whether they are paid or volunteer.

- A. All individuals in the service of history—employees, volunteers, or interns—deserve the respect and support of their peers, superiors, and institutions.

- B. Individuals employed in the practice of history deserve pay and benefits commensurate with their training, performance, and contribution to the institution.
- C. Volunteers should be held to clearly articulated performance objectives and offered the same respect as their paid colleagues.
- D. While internships provide important training experience for students and new professionals, history organizations should strive to pay interns at a fair level reflecting the value of history work. The practice of unpaid internships disadvantages individuals who do not have access to familial or other resources that would allow them to work for little or no compensation.
- E. Institutions should maintain personnel policies, adopted by the governing authority and distributed to all staff, documenting the terms of employment.
- F. 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.
- G. 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.
- H. 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.
- I. Institutions have the responsibility to respect the privacy of their members, volunteers, and employees and act in their best interests.
- J. Institutions should not discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, color, creed, age, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, or gender identity.
- K. Employers, staff, and volunteers shall not engage in or condone any type of harassment or discrimination.
- L. Institutions and individuals working and volunteering in the history field should 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 revenue and increase public awareness of, and participation in, historical activities.

- A. No revenue producing activities should violate or compromise the integrity of an institution's mission. These activities should not hamper the ability of an institution or individual to meet professional standards or endanger an institution's nonprofit status.

- B. Control of the intellectual content of products (e.g., exhibitions, publications, collections, programs) should not be delegated to outside parties for the purpose of obtaining financial support.

Confidence and Trust

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

- A. No governing authority member, employee, and/or volunteer should use their position, or the information and access acquired as a result of their position, for personal gain or for the benefit of other organizations. All proprietary information should remain confidential.
- B. Board members, volunteers, and employees shall refrain from personal collecting when it conflicts with the collecting interests of their institution. Statements of personal collecting interests should be obtained prior to an individual joining an organization and updated on a regular basis. Collections should not be made available to any individual for personal use, either on or off the premises of the organization that owns the collections, or for any other purpose contrary to the adopted collections policies.

About the American Association for State and Local History

The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) is a national association that provides leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful. Visit www.AASLH.org for more information about membership, continuing education, the association's resource center, and other programs and services.

Endnotes

¹ For the purposes of this statement, the word *object* is used broadly to refer to all items in an organization's accessioned or permanent collections.

² *Direct care* is an investment that enhances the life, usefulness or quality of a museum's collection. This definition was first introduced in the American Alliance of Museums' publication, *Direct Care of Collections: Ethics, Guidelines and Recommendations* (April 2016).