

American Economic Association
Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct

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Final Report

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Charge and Process

In October 2017, the Executive Committee of the American Economic Association (AEA) appointed the Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct to advise on whether the AEA should adopt a code, and to prepare a report and recommendation. The Committee interpreted its charge to include proposing a code and making suggestions about how the AEA's principles might be advanced.

The Committee presented materials to the American Economic Association executive committee on January 4, 2018. After some discussion the Committee prepared an interim report and a draft AEA Code of Professional Conduct on January 5. The interim report and draft code were circulated to the AEA membership on January 16, with an invitation to submit comments by March 15.

In late March the Committee discussed the comments received from the AEA membership. The overwhelming majority of these were thoughtful and constructive. The Committee made several revisions to the draft Code of Professional Conduct to reflect these comments, and asks the AEA Executive Committee to consider adopting this revised Code of Professional Conduct.

Discussion of Revisions to the Code

Many AEA members supported the decision of the Committee to write a relatively brief code stating broad principles, rather than detailed legislation intended to cover the full range of ethical issues that economists may face. While some members criticized this decision, overall the members supported the Committee's approach.

We stress that member comments reflected a strong desire to see that the AEA ensure that the code brings about genuine improvements, and an expectation that the recommendations made in our interim report would receive appropriate action.

The main substantive revisions to the code are as follows:

1. Nonprofit organizations are explicitly mentioned as an employer of economists.
2. Several new demands of professional integrity are mentioned: care in conducting and presenting research; acknowledgement of limits of expertise; and disclosure of both real and perceived conflicts of interest.
3. The draft code listed several venues in which there is an obligation to conduct civil and respectful dialogue: specifically, seminars, conferences, and social media. AEA members suggested many other venues in which this obligation applies, including blogs, print and broadcast media, referee reports, recommendation letters, litigation, consulting assignments, and classrooms. Rather than attempt an exhaustive list, the Committee decided not to list any examples.
4. Instead, the revised code refers to “forums, including those that allow confidential or anonymous participation,” in an attempt to clarify the applicability to electronic in addition to physical interactions, and to social media, referee reports, and recommendation letters.
5. The revised code refers to “equal opportunity and fair treatment” rather than “equal opportunity and equal treatment.”
6. In the list of characteristics that particularly require equal opportunity and fair treatment, the revised code replaces “gender” with “sex, gender identity and expression.” Many AEA members requested this change.
7. The revised code adds “political affiliation” to the list of characteristics that particularly require equal opportunity and fair treatment.
8. The revised code replaces the phrase “diverse backgrounds” with “all backgrounds, including particularly those that have been historically underrepresented.” Several AEA members objected to the term “diverse.” The Committee feels that the new language reflects the ultimate goal of participation by all, and better links this goal to the principles stated earlier in the code.

Recommendations

1. The Committee recommends that the AEA adopt the Code of Professional Conduct with the revised wording as submitted on April 3, 2018.
2. The Committee made a number of recommendations in its interim report. The Committee does not wish to revise any of these recommendations, and as noted above, recommends that the AEA seriously consider them. The AEA has indeed already appointed two new ad hoc committees, one to consider professional climate, and the other to consider the career concerns of economists. The AEA Executive Committee has also decided to create a new website with information about the job market. The Committee supports these efforts, and recommends that they result in concrete steps by the AEA toward improving professional conduct.

3. The Committee received many comments on the draft code that are germane to the ongoing work of the ad hoc committees. The Committee recommends that these comments be shared with them.
4. The Committee recommends that the AEA create at least one standing committee to address issues related to professional conduct and to advance the AEA's efforts to improve the profession. This committee should periodically assess whether the Code of Professional Conduct is serving its purpose or needs to be revised.