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March 24, 2013

Developing the Revised ASPA Code of Ethics

Prior to his induction as President of ASPA, Erik Bergrud asked Jim Nordin and Jim Svava to co-chair a working group to review the ASPA Code of Ethics. The code had not been officially reviewed in more than 10 years and had not been revised since 1994.

The charge given to the working group was to review the code. There was no presumption it would be revised in any way.

Process

The working group was formed and began its deliberations almost immediately after Erik's installation. The working group was composed of 31 people; academics, practitioners and students. The membership of the group is about 50% academics, 50% practitioners; about one-quarter of the group is made up of "pracademics." The process the group followed included reviewing the current ASPA code and brain-storming what each member thought would be a "best" code. The group "met" via email, conference call, wiki and bulletin board. The working group tried to work as consensually as possible. The co-chairs acted as "secretaries" and clearing houses for the ideas that were racing across the country and sometimes around the world.

The working group shared reports on its progress and invited input through ASPA publications and presentations at ASPA meetings and conferences in 2011 and 2012. In addition, the co-chairs briefed ASPA leadership on numerous occasions. They presented the working group's proposed code of ethics and discussed the content with the National Council of ASPA at the mid-year meeting on September, 2012 and at the ASPA Leadership Retreat in January, 2013.

Considerations

Almost from the beginning, members of the working group consistently raised three aspects of the code for consideration: the core principles in the code; the structure of the code; and the "style" of the code. The current (1994) code was a major move forward for ASPA and elevated the ethical standards for the field. The content was organized around five major canons or principles derived from what the committee saw as the five major sources of ethics in the public sector: notions of the public interest, law and formal ethics codes, personal integrity, organizational dynamics, and professionalism.¹ The code uses these sources in the five major headings and has 32 sub-points or specific tenets. After almost two decades of use, there were gaps identified that are not covered in the current five principles. Some have the view that it is too long and detailed. The principles can easily be lost in the specific tenets. In addition, there was a widespread view that the language should now be more aspirational.

Recommendations

Through extensive and intensive deliberations and many, many exchanges of draft versions, the working group concluded that the code could be improved with changes in these three areas.

- Several sub-points in the current code that should be elevated to major headings to join the five in the 1994 code as the major ethical principles guiding public administration. The three principles that were elevated deal with social equity, democratic participation in governance, and the obligation to provide full information and advice.

- The group also concluded that the code would have more power and be used more if it were shorter – if the principles were emphasized and the sub-points (what the working group calls “practices”) were listed separately. This is similar to the approach of the International City/County Management Association, American Institute of Certified Planners, and the American Psychological Association.²
- Finally, the group felt that the code should call for the highest level of ethical conduct and express the social responsibilities of public administrators. The language was changed in tone to be more aspirational and identify ideal behaviors.

Overview of the revised code

In a revised preamble, the code addresses the intended audience for the code. It is written for the members of ASPA, and it asserts our hope that all those who serve the public will be aware of and influenced by the standards that ASPA has established. The revised ASPA Code of Ethics contains eight principles. The principles are written to be aspirational in tone. In presenting the code to members and the public, the preamble and principles will be used alone as a statement of the values and standards of ASPA.

In addition, 38 practices have been developed. The practices are a corollary document that is intended to illustrate and offer guidance in meeting the aspirational goals of the principles. The practices may be changed as new circumstances arise, but the principles would be changed only as part of a major and comprehensive review.

It is the considered opinion of the working group that by implementing these changes in style, structure and content, the ASPA code of ethics will be more powerful, more memorable, and more useful to all who labor in public administration. It is our hope that the code will be useful to other associations of public professionals and that the overarching standards and values in the ASPA Code will usefully complement the more specific and targeted provisions in other codes.

Strengthening Implementation of the Code

The working group was also unanimous in its belief that the Code of Ethics is of limited lasting value if there is no commitment to its implementation and regular review. Clear responsibility must be assigned for activities to advance awareness and commitment to ethical principles and practices in ASPA and to promote the importance of ethics in public service generally. As a result, the working group has proposed the establishment of a Professional Standards and Ethics Committee in ASPA. Its key functions would include--

- Recommend ongoing activities to raise awareness of the code of ethics and activities to promote its use and to monitor ethical issues in public affairs.
- Work with the ASPA Section on Ethics which will continue to take the lead role in ethics research and teaching.
- Work with other associations of public officials to develop complementary approaches to codes of ethics that allows the ASPA code to serve in combination with other specialized professional codes.
- Recommend procedures and processes to address alleged ethical breaches by ASPA members.
- Recommend a process for periodic review of the ASPA Code of Ethics.

An interim committee on implementation appointed by ASPA officers will initiate activities to implement the Code and will develop the recommendations for a standing committee in more depth for submission to the National Council.

Approval of changes

The working group submitted its final recommendations for revisions in the Code of Ethics to the National Council in February. The National Council reviewed the revised Code at its meeting in New Orleans and approved the revisions to the Code of Ethics on March 16, 2013.

Future Steps

With a revised Code of Ethics, the Implementation Committee will guide the initial implementation of the code and develop activities to expand awareness of and commitment to the Code. The committee will prepare recommendations to be presented to the ASPA National Council at the mid-year meeting in September, 2013, to create a standing Committee on Professional Standards and Ethics in ASPA, and it will plan programs for the 75th annual conference in 2014. The chair of the committee is Jim Svava who can be reached at james.svava@asu.edu. The other members are J. Paul Blake, Jim Nordin, Patria Julnes, Jonathan West, and Suzanne Piotrovski who is chairperson of the ASPA Ethics Section.

The proposal for a standing committee developed by the Working Group is posted on the ASPA website.

Endnotes

¹ Montgomery Van Wart, "The Sources of Ethical Decision Making for Individuals in the Public Sector." *Public Administration Review* 56, 1996 (6), 525-533.

²ICMA has tenets and guidelines—sometimes presented separately and sometimes as a combined document. AICP has principles and 25 enforceable "Rules of Conduct." APA has principles presented separately from 89 standards. In addition, the National Association of Social Workers has values and principles followed by 16 pages of standards.

ASPA Code of Ethics Review Working Group

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