ASSOCIATION OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH
Code of Ethics

PREAMBLE

The Code of Ethics of the Association for Institutional Research was developed to provide members of the Association with some broad ethical statements with which to guide their professional lives and to identify relevant considerations when ethical uncertainties arise. It also provides a means for individuals new to the profession to learn about the ethical principles and standards that should guide the work of institutional researchers.

Although the Association also serves those institutions that employ our members, our primary service to those institutions is achieved through our individual members. Hence this Code is directed to individuals and not institutions, although basic tenets contained within the Code are also applicable to our colleges and universities and should be compatible with institutional codes and values.

The persons who practice institutional research (IR) are a diverse group from many different academic backgrounds and from many different professional experiences. Add to this diversity among IR practitioners the tremendous variation in the practice of IR as defined at individual colleges and universities, and IR professionals would seem to have little common ground. It is precisely for these reasons that this Code of Ethics is important.

Many of the professions from which IR practitioners come have their own standards or codes for acceptable and even expected performance. This Code adds to those existing documents in recognition of the special and different demands inherent in the practice of institutional research. In many institutions the institutional researcher is viewed as the "guardian of truth" or the "conscience" of the institution. This is an extra burden for institutional researchers, and this Code provides some guidance to practitioners who bear that burden. Along with the other professional standards, this Code defines a normative expectation for institutional researchers in their work. At the same time, the Code provides the foundation for institutional research as a profession.

The application of this Code requires good judgment and common sense, and its use in any given case may depend upon the presence or absence of shared values, institutional politics, the individuals involved, and the level of the potential threat posed by a specific ethical lapse. There is no licensure process within institutional research, there is no court to determine guilt, and there are few absolutes. Thus the shades of gray highlighted in this Code need to be reviewed and applied carefully lest they be seen either as powerless or as all-powerful, neither of which is appropriate.

Although it provides standards, the Code does not provide a set of rules. Reasonable differences of opinion can and do exist with respect to interpretation, and specific application must take into account the context of a given behavior. A code of ethics cannot guarantee ethical behavior or resolve all disputes. Rather it merely sets forth standards to which professionals aspire and

against which their actions can be judged (both by themselves and others). Ethical behavior should result from a personal commitment to engage in ethical practice and an attempt to act always in a manner that assures integrity. All members of AIR should pledge to maintain their own competence by continually evaluating their research for scientific accuracy, by conducting themselves in accord with the ethical standards expressed in this Code, and by remembering that their ultimate goal is to contribute positively to the field of postsecondary education.

Finally, this Code is a living document that must change and be shaped as the practice of institutional research continues to evolve and develop.

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SECTION I - COMPETENCE

I (a) **Claims of Competence.** The institutional researcher shall not, in job application, resume, or the ordinary conduct of affairs, claim or imply a degree of competency he/she does not possess.

I (b) **Acceptance of Assignments.** The institutional researcher shall not accept assignments requiring competencies he/she does not have and for which he/she cannot effectively rely upon the assistance of colleagues, unless the supervisor has been adequately apprised or unless he/she would acquire the necessary competence prior to doing the research. Institutional researchers should use methodologies or techniques that are new to them only after appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in those methodologies or techniques.

I (c) **Training of Subordinates.** The institutional researcher shall provide subordinates with opportunities for professional growth and development.

I (d) **Professional Continuing Education.** The institutional researcher has the responsibility to develop his/her own professional skills, knowledge, and performance and to keep abreast of changes in the field.

SECTION II - PRACTICE

II (a) Objectivity.

> i) Unbiased Attitude. The institutional researcher shall approach all assignments with an unbiased attitude and strive to gather evidence fairly and accurately.
> ii) Conflicts of Interest. The institutional researcher should be particularly sensitive to avoid personal conflicts of interest when performing services.

II (b) **Use of Accepted Technical Standards.** The institutional researcher shall conduct all tasks in accordance with accepted technical standards.

II (c) **Initial Discussions.** Before an assignment is begun, the institutional researcher shall clarify with the sponsor and/or major users the purposes, expectations, strategies, and limitations of the research.

> i) Special care shall be taken to recommend research techniques and designs that are appropriate to the purposes of the project.
> ii) Special care shall be taken to advise the sponsor and/or major users, both at the design phase and, should the occasion arise, at any time during the execution of the project, if there is reason to believe that the strategy under consideration is likely to fail or to yield substantially unreliable results.

II (d) **Identification of Responsibility.** The institutional researcher shall accept responsibility for the competent execution of all assignments which he/she, or a subordinate, undertakes, and shall display individual and/or office authorship, as appropriate, on all such reports.

II (e) **Quality of Secondary Data.** The institutional researcher shall exercise reasonable care to ensure the accuracy of data gathered by other individuals, groups, offices, or agencies on which he/she relies, and shall document the sources and quality of such data.

II (f) **Reports.** The institutional researcher shall ensure that all reports or projects are complete; are clearly written in language understandable to decision-makers; fully distinguish among assumptions, speculations, findings, and judgments; employ appropriate statistics and graphics; adequately describe the limitations of the project, of the analytical method, and of the findings; and follow scholarly norms in the attribution of ideas, methods, and expression and in the sources of data.

II (g) **Documentation.** The institutional researcher shall document the sources of information and the process of analysis in each task in sufficient detail to enable a technically qualified colleague to understand what was done and to verify that the work meets all appropriate standards and expectations.

SECTION III - CONFIDENTIALITY

III (a) **Atmosphere of Confidentiality.** The institutional researcher shall establish clear guidelines about confidentiality issues within the institutional research office.

III (b) **Storage and Security.** The institutional researcher shall organize, store, maintain, analyze, transfer and/or dispose of data under his/her control in such a manner as to reasonably prevent loss, unauthorized access, or divulgence of confidential information.

III (c) **Release of Confidential Information.** The institutional researcher shall permit no release of information about individual persons that has been guaranteed as confidential, to any person inside or outside the institution except in those circumstances in which not to do so would result in clear danger to the subject of the confidential material or to others; or unless directed by competent authority in conformity with a decree of a court of law.

III (d) **Special Standards for Data Collection.**

i) Balancing Privacy Risks Against Benefits. The institutional researcher shall, at the design stage of any project, thoroughly explore the degree of invasion of privacy and the risks of breach of confidentiality that are involved in the project, weigh them against potential benefits, and make there from a recommendation as to whether the project should be executed, and under what conditions.
ii) Developing Specific Guidelines. Where appropriate, the institutional researcher shall adopt a written description of any specific steps beyond the regular guidelines within the institutional research office that are necessary during a specific assignment to ensure the protection of aspects of privacy and confidentiality that may be at specific risk.
iii) Disclosure of Rights. The institutional researcher shall ensure that all subjects are informed of their right of refusal and of the degree of confidentiality with which the material that they provide will be handled, including where appropriate, the implications of any freedom of information statute. Any limits to confidentiality should be made clear.
iv) Apprisal of Implications. The institutional researcher shall apprise institutional authorities of the implications and potentially binding obligations of any promise to respondents regarding confidentiality and shall obtain consent from such authorities where necessary.

SECTION IV - RELATIONSHIPS TO THE COMMUNITY

IV (a) **Equal Treatment.** The institutional researcher shall promote equal access and opportunity regarding employment, services, and other activities of his/her office, without regard to race, creed, gender, national origin, disability or other accidental quality; and in analysis, demeanor, and expression shall be alert to the sensitivities of groups and individuals.

IV (b) **Development of Local Codes of Ethics.** The institutional researcher should develop and promulgate a code of ethics specific to the mission and tasks of the institutional research office and should strive to cooperate with fellow practitioners in the institution in developing an institution-wide code of ethics governing activities in common. The institutional researcher should take reasonable steps to ensure that his/her employers are aware of ethical obligations as set forth in the AIR Code of Ethics and of the implications of those obligations for work practice.

IV (c) **Custody and Archiving.** The institutional researcher shall apply all reasonable means to prevent irrevocable loss of data and documentation during its immediately useful life; and, being aware of the role of data as institutional historic resource, shall act as an advocate for its documentation and systematic permanent archiving.

IV (d) **Assessment of Institutional Research.** The institutional researcher shall develop and implement regular assessment tools for the evaluation of institutional research services.

IV (e) **Institutional Confidentiality.** The institutional researcher shall maintain in strict confidence and security all information in his/her possession about the institution or any of its constituent parts which by institutional policy is considered to be confidential, and shall pursue from Section III of this Code all processes for that purpose as are appropriate.

IV (f) **Integrity of Reports.** The institutional researcher shall make efforts to anticipate and prevent misunderstandings and misuse of reports within the institution by careful presentation and documentation in original reports, and by diligent follow-up contact with institutional users of those reports. If an institutional research report has been altered, intentionally or inadvertently, to the degree that its meaning has been substantially distorted, the institutional researcher shall make reasonable attempts to correct such distortions and/or to insist that institutional research authorship be removed from the product.

IV (g) **External Reporting.** The institutional researcher has an obligation to the broader community to submit and/or report accurate data and professionally responsible interpretive material when requested by legitimate authority, including federal, state, and other governmental agencies and accrediting bodies. With respect to private inquiries, such as those from guidebook editors, journalists, or private individuals, the institutional researcher, should he/she respond, is bound by the same standards of accuracy, confidentiality, and professionally responsible interpretation.

SECTION V - RELATIONSHIPS TO THE CRAFT

V (a) **Research Responsibilities.**

> i) The institutional researcher shall seek opportunities to contribute to and participate in research on issues directly related to the craft and in other professional activities, and shall encourage and support other colleagues in such endeavors.
> ii) Acknowledging Credit. Institutional researchers should take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed and to which they have contributed. They should honestly acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others.

V (b) **Integrity of the Profession.** The institutional researcher should work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice.

> i) Institutional researchers should uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession. They should protect, enhance, and improve the integrity of the profession through appropriate study and research, active discussion, and responsible criticism of the profession.
> ii) Institutional researchers should contribute to the knowledge base and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. They should seek to contribute to the profession's literature and to share their knowledge at professional meetings and conferences.

V (c) **False Accusations.** Institutional researchers shall take care not to falsely demean the reputation or unjustly or unfairly criticize the work of other institutional researchers.

V (d) **Incompetence of Colleagues.** Institutional researchers who have direct knowledge of a colleague's incompetence should consult with that colleague when feasible and assist the colleague in taking remedial action.

V (e) Unethical Conduct of Colleagues.

i) The institutional researcher shall take appropriate measures to discourage, prevent, identify, and correct unethical conduct of colleagues when their behavior is unwittingly or deliberately in violation of this code or of good general practice in institutional research.

ii) Institutional researchers who believe that a colleague has acted unethically should seek resolution by discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such a discussion is likely to be productive.

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