

## The Ethics of Teaching

**Note:** This document comprises materials from various (indicated) sources.

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### What Do We Teach When We Teach? Ethical Values in the Classroom

A speech at the Graduate Teacher Certificate ceremony  
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Although I am the Associate Dean of the Graduate College, I have been a professor of electrical and computer engineering for over sixteen years, and I have had taught a variety of courses. Teaching is THE central activity of this university, for the university exists in order to provide degree programs. And graduate teaching assistants such as you play an important role in delivering our educational programs.

This evening is a time to celebrate your progress in improving your skills as teachers, by assembling teaching portfolios and by undergoing training. There is an old saying, that there are two activities for which training is considered neither necessary nor even desirable. One is raising children. The other is college level teaching.

Unlike you, most older professors have had no training in teaching. They conduct classes in the old-fashioned way, only by lecturing. You know that lecturing is not inherently bad, but there are many alternatives that promote students' learning. As an older professor, however, I want to lecture. But only for a few minutes.

Let me share an excerpt from Oscar Wilde's short story, "The Remarkable Rocket": "Well, that is his loss, not mine," answered the Rocket. "I am not going to stop talking to him merely because he pays no attention. I like hearing myself talk. It is one of my greatest pleasures. I often have long conversations all by myself, and I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying." "Then you should certainly lecture on Philosophy," said the Dragon-fly.

I want to lecture on educational philosophy here. I want to ask, what do we accomplish when we teach? Usually, we write course objectives in terms of the knowledge and abilities that we want students to gain. Basic facts, such as force equals mass times acceleration. Basic concepts, such as liberation theology. Basic laboratory skills, such as measuring the power produced by an electric motor, without electrocuting oneself or blowing up the lab. Basic analytical skills, such as critical examination of social policies from a feminist perspective. I submit that while knowledge and skills are important, what we are really doing is shaping the student's character.

David Smith of Indiana University, more eloquently than I, says that education has a profound influence on a student's character, and therefore, effective education is fundamentally moral education. Let me repeat. Effective education is moral education. In the classroom, we teachers are role models, and through our assignments and grading criteria, we state implicitly what is important, what ought to be valued. For example, if we encourage collaborative learning, then we say that cooperation and teamwork are important. If we base half of the grade on a paper on content and half on presentation, then we say that content and presentation are equally important. If we adhere to the syllabus and give exams on the dates previously announced, then we say that consistency is important. If we base part of the letter grade on classroom participation, then we say that each student's contribution to the discussion is important.

The classroom is a microcosm of the external community, and how we conduct our classes says something about how we conceive of proper human relationships. In the classroom, students learn how to treat each other, in preparation for a life in a community of educated people. Is your classroom a repressive police-state, where the rule of the teacher is absolute and students live in abject terror--fear of failing? Is your classroom a chaotic anarchy, where students come and go as they please and listen only to their friends?

When we say what is important, we enter the realm of values. A few years ago, while riding a bus, I had an epiphany: I realized that teaching is teaching values. Not indoctrination in private or religious values, but inculcation of the public values of fairness, honesty, respect, and trust. Let me elaborate on these fundamental ethical values in the context of teaching.

First, fairness. We must treat all students fairly. Nothing causes more dissatisfaction and anger than students' perceptions that the teacher is unfair. We must observe stated deadlines for assignments uniformly, applying them to everyone equally. Any policy on accepting late submissions must state explicitly what conditions are allowed, such as an excuse letter from an omnipotent dean. Out of fairness, students must be evaluated on their performance, not on extraneous factors such as race or gender. Examinations must be based on the content and skills covered in the course. A failing student must not be given special opportunities for "extra credit" that are not available to all other students. To do otherwise would be unfair.

Second, honesty. As teachers, we have a professional responsibility to appraise the quality of students' work. Our appraisals must be honest and candid, because students' own appraisals may not be complete, reliable, or well grounded. Honesty requires us to point out not only what is wrong about an answer, but also what is right. Honesty requires us to admit we don't know the correct answer to a student's question rather than guessing. Honesty requires us to write accurate reference letters.

Third, respect. Do we treat each other with respect? Do we listen attentively to what each student says during a discussion period? Do we correct students' mistakes honestly in a way that does not disparage their ideas, but that preserves their dignity and self-esteem? "Yes, that's basically right," you may say. "To win the Revolutionary War, the American colonists relied on foreign mercenaries, but the mercenaries were European, not Japanese." (I learn SO many new facts from my students.)

Fourth, trust. For courses to succeed, students must trust teachers. We teachers must demonstrate trustworthy behavior by keeping promises. We must adhere to our grading standards and course policies. We must keep our office hours with zealous regularity. We must return conscientiously graded assignments promptly.

Let me summarize. As teachers, we have the awesome privilege to influence the character of our students, by inculcating fundamental ethical values. These values include fairness, honesty, respect, and trust. Because of our positions of power, we have a concomitantly great responsibility for the moral development of our students. As you plan your courses and individual class sessions, think not only about the knowledge and skills that you want your students to acquire, but also the values that you want them to develop, for your course policies and classroom conduct will convey values implicitly whether or not you are aware of them. Students will act in ways they have been shown to act. Students will treat others in ways they have been treated. I hope that in your classrooms you comport yourselves and treat your students with fairness, honesty, respect, and trust. Thank you.

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American Association of University Professors

## Professional Ethics, Day By Day

The chair of the AAUP's Committee on Professional Ethics discusses our obligations—to our students, our institutions, and our colleagues.

By Wendy Wassyng Roworth

Last June the *Boston Globe* published a story that caught many in the academic community by surprise. Joseph J. Ellis, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, author of the best-seller *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, and a respected member of the Mount Holyoke College faculty, was exposed as a liar. *The Globe* revealed that Ellis had fabricated stories about his military service during the Vietnam War and greatly exaggerated his role as an anti-war activist and participant in the civil rights movement. More disturbing than his distortion of the truth was the further revelation that for many years Ellis had recounted these imaginary exploits to students in his courses on Vietnam and American culture.

On campuses around the country, faculty expressed astonishment at Ellis's reckless deception, and for several weeks the Ellis affair was a hot topic of discussion in editorials, op-ed pieces, and talk shows. Journalists and professional historians debated Ellis's motives, the reactions of former students and colleagues, the anger of genuine Vietnam veterans, whether or not his research on Thomas Jefferson and the early Republic might now be called into question, how Mount Holyoke was handling the investigation, and whether or not Ellis deserved to be dismissed from his tenured position.

Ellis's prominence as a celebrity author and television pundit made this story newsworthy, but even after media attention waned, nagging questions remained. Why would such an acclaimed historian embellish his personal history with self-aggrandizing falsehoods that could so easily be unmasked? This popular professor whose achievements had drawn attention to the important role faculty can play in public life and the relevance of historical research had not only tarnished his own reputation; his actions also called into question the integrity of his profession and left many faculty feeling vaguely embarrassed. One commentator in the *Los Angeles Times* asked: "If students cannot believe

in their professors, why believe in anyone?"

Were Ellis's tales of Vietnam really harmful if they helped to make a pedagogical point? How many of us might be similarly guilty of distorting the truth? In an article entitled "Why Are Academics Ducking the Ellis Case?" Elliot J. Gorn of Purdue University declared, "To lie to our students about ourselves, regardless of motive, is to patronize them, to not trust them, to fail them utterly by putting our own needs—for approval, for popularity, for control over the classroom—over their rightful claim to honesty." Quite simply, Ellis violated the ethics of his profession.

Most of us don't give much thought to professional ethics as we carry out our day to day duties as teachers, researchers, committee members, and advisers. We may read about a case of plagiarism or hear about scientific fraud at another university, but such serious violations seem to be rare or distant from our daily routines. Faculty who have no problem expressing views on teaching strategies, research methods, or university politics hesitate to question a colleague's conduct in the classroom, the space in which each professor reigns supreme.

## Guiding Principles

Soon after the Ellis story broke, I was asked by a National Public Radio interviewer to describe faculty reactions to the Ellis affair. Feeling keenly the need to defend the integrity of our profession, I assured him that members of the profession certainly condemned lying to students, although, like Gorn, I sensed that some faculty were avoiding or skirting the issue. But there really shouldn't have been any ambiguity, because Ellis surely violated the most basic principles of the AAUP [\*Statement on Professional Ethics\*](#). This important document states that faculty should practice intellectual honesty and "accept the obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge."

Furthermore, professors have a special responsibility to hold before students the best scholarly and ethical standards of their disciplines and to demonstrate respect for students as individuals by adhering to their "proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors." The emphatic language of the AAUP statement provides a reassuring basis for condemning what Ellis did; however, this document can serve only as a reminder of the professional obligations that derive from common membership in the community of scholars. Unlike the professions of law and medicine that have associations to enforce their standards, responsibility for enforcing ethical standards in the academic profession lies with individual colleges and universities. In other words, it's up to each of us to ensure the integrity of our professional conduct.<sup>1</sup>

The AAUP has always maintained that the privileges associated with faculty status demand a corresponding obligation to abide by professional and ethical standards. As early as 1916, just a year after its founding, the AAUP established a standing committee on university ethics and appointed the esteemed John Dewey as its first chair. Since then, except for a period from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, an Association committee dedicated to professional ethics and standards has continued to inform the higher education community about the principles of professional ethics and to encourage their observance.

But even though the Association's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure and its Committee on College and University Government are authorized to investigate complaints of possible violations of recommended standards at particular colleges or universities, the Committee on Professional Ethics is available only to offer advice or mediation. In reality, the Association receives far fewer requests for advice on ethical infractions than it does complaints about alleged violations of academic freedom, governance, tenure, or other conditions of academic employment, so the Committee on Professional Ethics is only very occasionally called upon for help by individual members. The committee does not meet regularly, as do the committees devoted to academic freedom and governance, but it convenes as needed to examine ethical issues in response to requests or inquiries from, among others, the Association's president, national Council, and other committees.

Several years ago, the committee grappled with a controversial statement, *On the Obligation of Faculty Members to Respond to Misconduct*, which was published in draft form in the November–December 1998 issue of *Academe* with an invitation for comment. The statement provoked both strongly positive and critically negative responses from members of the profession. Some believed that individual faculty members should be responsible for speaking out and reporting misconduct to authorities when they have knowledge of violations and that, furthermore, guidelines should be developed to handle ethical breaches by faculty colleagues. On the other hand, several faculty members expressed grave concerns about what such a policy might unleash. How could an individual be absolutely sure that he or she was right about a perceived wrongdoing? How could one assess the seriousness of an infraction? What would be the consequences of a false or mistaken accusation?

The divided reaction to the committee's statement highlighted the troublesome and perplexing question whether faculty can respond appropriately to misconduct by colleagues without trampling on individual rights or endangering other professional standards. It also revealed the need for broader understanding of ethical issues and individual responsibility for adherence to ethical standards.

The current edition of the AAUP's *Policy Documents and Reports* contains, in addition to the *Statement on Professional Ethics*, seven documents devoted specifically to issues of professional ethics. These include *A Statement of the Association's Council: Freedom and Responsibility*, which addresses the obligation to respect the dignity of others and differing opinions and "to foster and defend intellectual honesty, freedom of inquiry and instruction, and free expression on campus." There is a strongly worded Statement on Plagiarism, two documents related to the recruitment and resignation of faculty members, two that apply to conflicts of interest, especially in government-sponsored or privately funded research, and one on multiple authorship. Other AAUP documents address directly or indirectly matters related to the ethical

conduct and responsibilities of faculty, including the rights and freedom of students, assignment of grades, sexual harassment, consensual relations between faculty and students, the role of athletics in colleges and universities, collegiality as a criterion for faculty evaluation, and intellectual property and copyright.

## New Areas of Concern

The sensationalism of the Ellis story prompted me to consider the many ways in which professional ethics influences our work, whether we recognize it or not. In addition, I wondered how ethical concerns may have changed or expanded in the years since the *Statement on Professional Ethics* was first adopted by the Association in 1966.<sup>2</sup> For example, ethical controversies in recent years have involved research on cloning and genetic engineering, informed consent of human subjects in social science research, potential conflicts of interest due to the greater role corporations now play in university research, the use of the Internet for research and distance education, procedures for reviewing and mediating ethics complaints by disciplinary associations, sexual harassment and racial discrimination, and the necessity of training graduate students in research ethics.

Following are a few thoughts on several other issues of professional ethics, some more critical than others, that I believe deserve more attention than they have received. They may not be as newsworthy as scientific misconduct, sexual harassment, or lying to students, but they are issues of the type that concern almost every faculty member on a daily basis. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of issues within the profession, nor does it reflect the views of the Committee on Professional Ethics. I simply want to highlight some of the ethical considerations that underlie our daily interactions with students and colleagues.

The Internet and e-mail have created a host of ethical problems for faculty and students. Just coping with the disruptions of e-mail and overloaded Listservs is difficult enough without having to worry about violating standards of confidentiality and privacy when we forward messages to colleagues or students. Yet such forwarding of personal messages happens every day. New Web sites help faculty identify student plagiarism, while other sites provide students with canned research and term papers. Faculty have an obligation not only to identify and punish cheating, but also to make sure students understand why it is wrong. Similarly, it's a simple task these days to find databases, syllabuses, course descriptions, and pedagogical materials on Web sites developed by other faculty. These can be easy and tempting to appropriate, but we should be scrupulous about acknowledging sources or seeking permission to use materials, and we should make sure our students do the same. Ditto for photocopying publications.

Another aspect of professional ethics that challenges us on a daily basis is the fair and equitable treatment of others within the academic community. As full-time tenure-track jobs have become scarcer and standards for gaining tenure and promotions have grown more demanding, the pressure to produce research, win grants, and publish has increased accordingly. This puts tremendous strain on faculty, especially those just entering the profession. If we believe that faculty should set standards for tenure and promotion, then we must set realistic goals for our peers. It may not be unethical to have higher expectations for a new generation of scholars, but we shouldn't apply higher standards or a lengthened timetable just for their own sake or because administrations demand it. Similarly, when faculty review the work of other faculty for publication, promotion, merit pay, grants, fellowships, or post-tenure reviews, the highest standards of professional ethics and responsibility should prevail. As internal and external reviews multiply and accountability continues to be a requirement for much of what we do, the necessity for responsible and fair reviews by peers and department chairs assumes even more importance. The contentious subject of "collegiality" has become another minefield of potential abuse, yet we should remember that the word "collegial" literally means shared authority among equals, among colleagues. The real question is: who are our colleagues?

Almost all universities and colleges rely on part-time and non-tenure-track faculty to help "deliver the curriculum." As part-timers take up more and more of the teaching load, the gap between the "haves" (tenured faculty) and the "have-nots" grows wider. Tenured and tenure-track faculty, who enjoy higher salaries, health and retirement benefits, funding for research and travel, offices, staff, and job security, seem to exist in another realm from the adjunct faculty, who for the most part have little hope of advancing or improving their status. Unless the privileged faculty treat part-time faculty with respect and expect universities to provide them with benefits, suitable work space, performance reviews, and participation in governance, institutions will have little incentive to improve the situation or to establish more full-time positions. Strictly speaking, it may not be a breach of professional ethics to underpay part-timers or deny them health benefits, but simple decency and fairness suggest that faculty should strive to improve working conditions and professional expectations for all faculty.

Much the same can be said for graduate students, especially those who take on responsibilities as teachers and research assistants, trying to make a living while they prepare for future careers. Many disciplinary associations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, are grappling with the problems that confront graduate students. Is their training really preparing them for the reality of the jobs they seek? Is it ethical to allow students to believe there will be jobs for them when they complete their degrees? Should we provide counseling in alternative careers or reduce the number of graduate students in our institutions? Are faculty exploiting graduate student labor so that professors can devote themselves to research or travel to conferences instead of spending time in the lab or the classroom? We must be responsible mentors, supporting graduate students in their roles as apprentice scholars and employees and upholding their right to organize for purposes of collective bargaining. We could also ask the tough question of academic institutions: is it ethical to charge full tuition when students are actually taught by cut-rate teachers?

One sentence in the *Statement on Professional Ethics* warrants special attention: "Professors accept their share of faculty responsibilities for the governance of their institutions." This critically important responsibility is too often dismissed as taking time away from important research or classroom duties. But if professors want to safeguard academic freedom and tenure and maintain faculty authority for setting academic standards, then they have an obligation to participate actively in shared governance. Service on a faculty senate or committee should never be dismissed as a waste of time; responsible professional service is crucial to the functioning of our institutions and to upholding the

highest standards of our profession.

Finally, returning to the issues raised by the Ellis case, there is our profound responsibility to students. Especially now in times of such uncertainty, we must be unwaveringly honest and uphold the highest ethical standards of our disciplines, free inquiry, academic freedom, equity, and fairness. We must avoid exploitation, harassment, and conflicts of interest where students are concerned, while striving to ensure that our students also treat each other with equal respect. The theory of ethics presents us with lofty ideals; the practice of ethics provides a foundation for the freedom we enjoy as faculty.

## End Notes

1. After an investigation by a faculty committee, the Mount Holyoke College administration suspended Ellis for a year and stripped him, at least temporarily, of his endowed chair with a strongly worded statement that he had violated the ethics of his profession. [Back to text.](#)
2. The current *Statement on Professional Ethics*, which was approved in 1987 by the Association's Committee on Professional Ethics, adopted by the Association's Council, and endorsed by the Seventy-third Annual Meeting, is a revised version of the statement originally adopted in 1966. [Back to text.](#)

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## American Association of University Professors

### Statement on Professional Ethics

The statement that follows was originally adopted in 1966. Revisions were made and approved by the Association's Council in 1987 and 2009.

#### Introduction

From its inception, the American Association of University Professors has recognized that membership in the academic profession carries with it special responsibilities. The Association has consistently affirmed these responsibilities in major policy statements, providing guidance to professors in such matters as their utterances as citizens, the exercise of their responsibilities to students and colleagues, and their conduct when resigning from an institution or when undertaking sponsored research. The *Statement on Professional Ethics* that follows sets forth those general standards that serve as a reminder of the variety of responsibilities assumed by all members of the profession.

In the enforcement of ethical standards, the academic profession differs from those of law and medicine, whose associations act to ensure the integrity of members engaged in private practice. In the academic profession the individual institution of higher learning provides this assurance and so should normally handle questions concerning propriety of conduct within its own framework by reference to a faculty group. The Association supports such local action and stands ready, through the general secretary and the Committee on Professional Ethics, to counsel with members of the academic community concerning questions of professional ethics and to inquire into complaints when local consideration is impossible or inappropriate. If the alleged offense is deemed sufficiently serious to raise the possibility of adverse action, the procedures should be in accordance with the [1940 \*Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure\*](#), the 1958 [Statement on Procedural Standards in Faculty Dismissal Proceedings](#), or the applicable provisions of the Association's [Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#).

#### The Statement

1. Professors, guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge, recognize the special responsibilities placed upon them. Their primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. To this end professors devote their energies to developing and improving their scholarly competence. They accept the obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge. They practice intellectual honesty. Although professors may follow subsidiary interests, these interests must never seriously hamper or compromise their freedom of inquiry.

2. As teachers, professors encourage the free pursuit of learning in their students. They hold before them the best scholarly and ethical standards of their discipline. Professors demonstrate respect for students as individuals and adhere to their proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors. Professors make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit. They respect the confidential nature of the relationship between professor and student. They avoid any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students. They acknowledge significant academic or scholarly assistance from them. They protect their academic freedom.
3. As colleagues, professors have obligations that derive from common membership in the community of scholars. Professors do not discriminate against or harass colleagues. They respect and defend the free inquiry of associates, even when it leads to findings and conclusions that differ from their own. Professors acknowledge academic debt and strive to be objective in their professional judgment of colleagues. Professors accept their share of faculty responsibilities for the governance of their institution.
4. As members of an academic institution, professors seek above all to be effective teachers and scholars. Although professors observe the stated regulations of the institution, provided the regulations do not contravene academic freedom, they maintain their right to criticize and seek revision. Professors give due regard to their paramount responsibilities within their institution in determining the amount and character of work done outside it. When considering the interruption or termination of their service, professors recognize the effect of their decision upon the program of the institution and give due notice of their intentions.
5. As members of their community, professors have the rights and obligations of other citizens. Professors measure the urgency of these obligations in the light of their responsibilities to their subject, to their students, to their profession, and to their institution. When they speak or act as private persons, they avoid creating the impression of speaking or acting for their college or university. As citizens engaged in a profession that depends upon freedom for its health and integrity, professors have a particular obligation to promote conditions of free inquiry and to further public understanding of academic freedom.

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<http://www.aup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/statementonprofessionalethics.htm>

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## Association of American Educators

### Code of Ethics for Educators

This Code of Ethics for Educators was developed by the distinguished AAE Advisory Board and by the Executive Committee of AAE. It contains four basic principles relating to the rights of students and educators.

#### OVERVIEW

The professional educator strives to create a learning environment that nurtures to fulfillment the potential of all students.

The professional educator acts with conscientious effort to exemplify the highest ethical standards.

The professional educator responsibly accepts that every child has a right to an uninterrupted education free from strikes or any other work stoppage tactics.

#### PRINCIPLE I: Ethical Conduct toward Students

The professional educator accepts personal responsibility for teaching students character qualities that will help them evaluate the consequences of and accept the responsibility for their actions and choices. We strongly affirm parents as the primary moral educators of their children. Nevertheless, we believe all educators are obligated to help foster civic virtues such as integrity, diligence, responsibility, cooperation, loyalty, fidelity, and respect—for the law, for human life, for others, and for self.

The professional educator, in accepting his or her position of public trust, measures success not only by the progress of each student toward realization of his or her personal potential, but also as a citizen of the greater community of the republic.

1. The professional educator deals considerately and justly with each student, and seeks to resolve problems, including discipline, according to law and school policy.

2. The professional educator does not intentionally expose the student to disparagement.
3. The professional educator does not reveal confidential information concerning students, unless required by law.
4. The professional educator makes a constructive effort to protect the student from conditions detrimental to learning, health, or safety.
5. The professional educator endeavors to present facts without distortion, bias, or personal prejudice.

#### **PRINCIPLE II: Ethical Conduct toward Practices and Performance**

The professional educator assumes responsibility and accountability for his or her performance and continually strives to demonstrate competence.

The professional educator endeavors to maintain the dignity of the profession by respecting and obeying the law, and by demonstrating personal integrity.

1. The professional educator applies for, accepts, or assigns a position or a responsibility on the basis of professional qualifications, and adheres to the terms of a contract or appointment.
2. The professional educator maintains sound mental health, physical stamina, and social prudence necessary to perform the duties of any professional assignment.
3. The professional educator continues professional growth.
4. The professional educator complies with written local school policies and applicable laws and regulations that are not in conflict with this code of ethics.
5. The professional educator does not intentionally misrepresent official policies of the school or educational organizations, and clearly distinguishes those views from his or her own personal opinions.
6. The professional educator honestly accounts for all funds committed to his or her charge.
7. The professional educator does not use institutional or professional privileges for personal or partisan advantage.

#### **PRINCIPLE III: Ethical Conduct toward Professional Colleagues**

The professional educator, in exemplifying ethical relations with colleagues, accords just and equitable treatment to all members of the profession.

1. The professional educator does not reveal confidential information concerning colleagues unless required by law.
2. The professional educator does not willfully make false statements about a colleague or the school system.
3. The professional educator does not interfere with a colleague's freedom of choice, and works to eliminate coercion that forces educators to support actions and ideologies that violate individual professional integrity.

#### **PRINCIPLE IV: Ethical Conduct toward Parents and Community**

The professional educator pledges to protect public sovereignty over public education and private control of private education.

The professional educator recognizes that quality education is the common goal of the public, boards of education, and educators, and that a cooperative effort is essential among these groups to attain that goal.

1. The professional educator makes concerted efforts to communicate to parents all information that should be revealed in the interest of the student.
2. The professional educator endeavors to understand and respect the values and traditions of the diverse cultures represented in the community and in his or her classroom.
3. The professional educator manifests a positive and active role in school/community relations.

Source:

<http://www.aeteachers.org/index.php/about-us/aae-code-of-ethics>