Developing a Code of Ethics for Academics
Commentary on ‘Ethics for All: Differences Across Scientific Society Codes’ (Bullock and Panicker)

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the possibilities and pitfalls of constructing a code of ethics for university professors. Professional, educational, legal, and policy questions regarding the goals, format, and content of an academic ethics code are raised and a series of aspirational principles and enforceable standards that might be included in such a document are presented for discussion and debate.

Merry Bullock and Sangeeta Panicker have provided a useful review of the ways in which different professional organizations have approached the challenging task of constructing an ethics code for the science and practice activities of a discipline. This commentary, draws upon the experiences of other organizations to explore the question of whether there should be a local or national effort to develop an ethics code for university and college professors.

As the demands of academia become increasingly complex, university professors are confronting situations for which traditional mechanisms for identifying and resolving ethical problems may provide neither adequate guidance nor protection. Criticism of academic standards and professors has intensified in recent years accompanied by increased public emphasis on education as a commodity and the university as accountable to its consumers. Equally compelling for those concerned with ethics in higher education are internal pressures arising from tenure and promotion decisions, course requirements and grading policies, employment of students as teaching and research assistants, outside faculty employment obligations.

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competing with academic responsibilities, and the increasing ethnic, cultural, and economic diversity of students and faculty. These factors, viewed within the context of the escalating use of litigation to resolve such conflicts, have led some to ask whether there should be a code of ethics for members of the academy.5,6

This question is not new. It emerged in modern form in 1966 when the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) developed its first formal statement on professional ethics.7 In the last 20 years fundamental issues regarding the construction of such a code remain unchanged. For example, given the diversity of specializations and training characterizing members of the academy, an ethics code would need to define who is an academic. In 1966, the AAUP addressed this issue by defining the professional academic as an individual from any number of different disciplines, who was employed by an institution of higher learning.7 However, since that time diversification of teaching, administrative, financial, and technical services to the university make it unlikely that all university employees would be involved in what is considered the fundamental activities of the faculty role: teaching, university service, and scholarship. Thus a code of ethics for academics would be written for faculty members directly involved in recruiting, admitting, teaching, and evaluating students and in hiring, supervising, and evaluating other faculty.8, 9

As Bullock and Panicker point out, disciplinary and professional ethics codes differ in the priority placed on specific ethical norms guiding the construction of organizational ethics codes.1 In the latter part of the twentieth century, norms for academia emerged from a single principle, freedom of inquiry. Ethical professors were those who were devoted to seeking and stating the truth as they saw it and to encouraging the pursuit of learning in their students. Pursuit and transmission of knowledge continues to be the guiding norm in the most recent AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics.10 However, as Callahan11 observed two decades ago, the existence of the AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics, does not by itself imply consensus about the ethical norms underlying university teaching nor about the need for or desirability of a code that reflects such norms. The proposal of a code for the academy remains controversial.

Starting Points: Function and Format

What Purpose Will a Code Serve?
University professors contemplating adopting a code of ethics need to consider the purpose of the code in terms of outcomes that are sought. Such consideration will determine the content and format of any prospective code, and ultimately whether academicians will support it.

Establishing a profession. One purpose of an ethics code is to help establish a profession. Adoption of a set of core values that reflect consensus among academics can distinguish university professors as members of a community of common purpose.12 Acceptance of an identified set of core values by individual professors across the broad spectrum of university settings, in turn, helps to protect the integrity of