

# Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG): Report to DCN Executive Board on ethics statement work to date, and recommendations

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Authors: Rachel Woodbrook, Scout Calvert, Kent Gerber, Wanda Marsolek, Mikala Narlock, Jennifer Patiño, Alexandra Provo, and Shawna Taylor

## Executive Summary

There were many priorities surfaced in 2021's [Centering Racial Equality in Data Curation: Report to the Data Curation Network by Dr. Fay Cobb Payton](#). In 2023, the Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG) agreed that an ethics statement was a high priority for the DCN based on member feedback as well as the use of "Ethical" in the DCN tagline.

The RJWG has been meeting for well over a year to begin developing an ethics statement for the DCN. The RJWG brought drafts of different statements to the All Hands Meeting in 2023 to gather feedback and discuss the possible content for the ethics statement with the larger membership of the DCN. However, it became clear that the RJWG was not the appropriate group to finalize this statement, and that it should instead come from the full DCN membership, or at minimum the DCN leadership. The RJWG has done a significant amount of background work on this initiative, but we are now challenged on the next steps forward. We share here our work thus far and propose a path forward with the support of the DCN Executive Committee, and Advisory and Governance Boards.

## RJWG Abbreviated Timeline of Work

- 02/2022 - Reviewed consultant report
- 07/2022 - Finalized the RJWG charge
- 11/2022 - Surveyed membership to identify top concerns and next action items from report ([survey results](#))
- 12/2022-02/2023 - Reviewed ethics statements and social impact statements from other similar or related organizations (see the [Statement Pre-work brainstorming document](#) for examples)
- 03/2023-05/2023 - Discussed what should be included or excluded from a DCN ethics statement and [drafted possible statements](#) (or small sections of larger statements)
- 06/2023 - [Gathered feedback](#) on work to date during the 2023 All Hands Meeting
- 07/2023 - 12/2023 - Spent time reflecting on feedback from All Hands Meeting, summarized below in challenges
- 02/2024-present - Articulated challenges, reimaged Ethics Statement to Ethics Commitment, sussed out our definition of "ethics", and consolidated work into a single

report.

## RJWG Detailed Timeline of Work

### **February 2022: RJWG starts in new form (following group hiatus), reviews consultant's report for action items.**

After review, the RJWG determined feasible actions listed in the consultant's report which included:

- Obtain more social science & humanities data sets
- Develop a DCN ethics statement
- Develop a DCN social impact statement
- Assess DCN language (language matters)
- Inventory DCN for People Competencies (Data/software, troubleshooting, cultural/social)
- Emphasize exemplar cases of social justice, fairness, equity, etc. on the DCN website
- Identify areas for harm mitigation

**July 2022: RJWG finalized its charge** to: "Help end racial injustice and create a more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive environment, both through our work as data curators and as individuals in academia." By reaffirming our commitment to center racial equity in data curation, we wanted to bring to the fore how race is a key axis of intersectionality within the ethics of research data and data curation work. [Our new charge](#), which we shared with DCN leadership, aimed to secure broad support for prioritizing racial equity across the network's activities. Aligning the DCN's leadership and membership around this intersectional framework is a crucial step in translating the RJWG's charge into meaningful action.

**November 2022: RJWG distributed a [short survey](#)** to membership, requesting members to rank action items from the report on their priority, feasibility, and anticipated impact.

We received 16 responses from this survey. Within these results, actions that scored highly on both priority and feasibility, and fairly high on possible impact, were **assessing language on the website** and **creating an ethics statement**. The RJWG decided that creating an ethics statement would require less infrastructure and working group member training, and seemed more feasible for a smaller group to start work on.

**December 2022 - February 2023: RJWG reviewed social impacts and ethics statements to determine which was more suitable for the DCN.** The RJWG first considered developing either a social impact statement or an ethics statement. In the course of our discussions and [review of both types of statements](#), we determined an ethics statement was better suited to the DCN, as the DCN was not yet mature enough to fully articulate its social impact.

**March 2023 - May 2023: RJWG discussed what an ethics statement might look like, and drafted possible statements.** However, we did wrestle with questions that will need to be resolved for an ethics statement to be successfully created. For example:

- How is an ethics statement different from existing mission/vision? What gap does it fill?

Is it the right solution?

- How can we articulate what 'ethical' means in the DCN tagline ("Ethical. Reusable. Better.") ?
- Should a statement focus on harm potential & reduction, or more positive impact potential (i.e., ensuring the power of science remains vested in the groups whose data was collected)?
- Who is the audience for the statement? At what level of administration? Are we making these statements for peer organizations, ourselves, or our institutions? Who is committing to the statement?
- How can we be held accountable? What is meaningful to help the organization stay aligned with our values?

**June 2023: RJWG solicited more DCN feedback during an activity at the 2023 All Hands Meeting**, hoping to collectively finalize a statement. However, the following high-level questions came back as feedback at All Hands:

- Do we need an ethics statement?
  - **Discussion:** Our existing mission and vision statements do not contain acknowledgements of power differentials or the need for accountability/what that might look like. We also lack a fully articulated understanding of "ethics" in the tagline "Ethical. Reusable. Better."
- How meaningful is it to have an ethics statement?
  - **Discussion:** We don't want to make a statement that isn't representative of what we actually embody. What impact does it actually have – should we be focusing our efforts on best practices rather than a more abstract statement?
- Why is RJWG doing this if it is a general ethics statement?
  - **Feedback from 2023 AHM:** An ethics statement should pertain more broadly to the DCN as a whole. If it originates from the RJWG, it may dilute its impact and make it difficult to represent the entire organization and align with leadership's vision for the network's direction.

**June 2023 - December 2023: RJWG engaged in discussions** to analyze and incorporate the feedback received from DCN members at the All Hands Meeting. This period of reflection allowed the group to reassess our approach and consider alternative strategies for addressing ethical considerations within the DCN.

- We reaffirmed, once again, the RJWG's commitment to centering our work on race and intersectionality and decided it would be disingenuous if an Ethics Commitment came out of the RJWG that did not focus on race.

**February 2024-present: RJWG articulated challenges and reached our discussion conclusions:**

- **Ethics Definition:** The DCN does need to be able to publicly and consistently define what we mean by "ethical" data, especially since it is in our tagline. An ethics statement needs to come from the same centralized part of the organization that decided on mission/vision and other top-level commitments. Organizational leadership needs to own

and understand the need for the ethics statement.

- The DCN ethics definition should reflect: **Accuracy/supporting reproducibility, privacy/security, compliance/legal issues, minimizing harm, context (including historical context), and power relations**
- **Consider Developing an Ethics Commitment instead of an Ethics Statement:** An Ethics Commitment would emphasize ongoing action and accountability, reflecting the dynamic nature of ethical considerations in data curation. A commitment over a statement would allow members of the DCN to actively engage with evolving ethical challenges and demonstrate a sustained dedication to ethical practices (action-driven) across the network's activities.
- **Implementation:** The entire DCN would have to be involved, committed, or agree to the Ethics Commitment for it to be meaningful. We need both top-down (e.g., ethics commitment) and bottom-up (e.g., individually-generated or emergent) commitments: see, for example, <https://nativeland.info/about/data-sovereignty/>

## Next Steps: Recommendations

The RJWG proposes the following, with additional information and details provided below. The RJWG is able to provide consultations and feedback as appropriate.

1. Ethics commitment: a top-down commitment drafted by DCN leadership, with clearly articulated ethical principles, including aspects of racial justice, that is also approved by all of the DCN;
2. Finalize definition of “Ethical data” and how the DCN promotes/requires ethical data; and
3. An opportunity facilitated by leadership for bottom-up effort focused on action, to propagate concrete understanding of how ethical principles come into play in data curation. (This may be different for various folks in their roles).
  - a. This may look like:
    - i. Workshops for curators to develop their own personal ethics commitment (what does ethical practice look like in their day-to-day?)
    - ii. An annual review of the commitment
    - iii. Best practices/good practices document
    - iv. Drawing from existing literature, such as “[A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity](#)” to integrate into our mission, vision, and strategic plan.
  - b. (Aspirational) Each individual DCN member should understand and be able to articulate their commitment to ethical practices in their work.

## Appendix

### All Hands Meeting ‘23 - Ethics Statement Discussion Highlights

In preparation of the DCN All Hands Meeting ‘23, each member of the RJWG [drafted their own provisional ethics statement](#), with the intention that All Hands attendees would dissect these

statements and pull out concepts, phrases, or sentences that spoke to them and also represented the DCN. From this All Hands activity, the below statements and ideas were generally well received at All Hands.

- *Please note that these ideas surfaced in context of the Ethics Statement idea, and may not be appropriate for an Ethics Commitment.*

Well received statements from the [RJWG provisional ethics statements](#)

1. "Data and data curation are never neutral, and the DCN commits to intentionally using its resources and presence in spaces of power to advocate for practices and decisions that support a more just world."\*
2. "The DCN works to challenge power and work toward mutual benefit."
3. "We strive to be inclusive and equitable in our efforts."\*
4. "We recognize that in all aspects of our work, such as education, curation, and research, we are biased and flawed individuals."
5. "Systems of power structure the research enterprise in fundamental ways, including ways that perpetuate bias in systems."

\* *These two statements were the most popular when presented at AHM '23.*

The following feedback was consistently provided during the AHM '23 activity sessions, indicating their importance to the DCN in developing an ethics statement or commitment.

1. **Conciseness and Clarity:** The feedback emphasized the need for a shorter, more impactful ethics statement that avoids jargon and is easy to understand. The goal is to create a clear and accessible document that effectively communicates the DCN's ethical principles.
2. **Specificity vs. Generality:** There is a balance to strike between being specific (e.g., focusing on racial inequities) and being more general (addressing a broader range of inequities). The groups struggled with finding the right level of inclusivity while maintaining the original racial justice focus.
3. **Actionable Guidance:** The preference was for the ethics statement to provide concrete guidance, rather than relying on abstract or philosophical statements alone. The goal is to make the principles tangible and applicable.
4. **Acknowledging Power Dynamics:** The concept of power was a consistent theme picked up by participants. There was a strong emphasis on acknowledging and addressing power imbalances within the DCN's work.
5. **Relationship to Existing DCN Statements and Scope:** Multiple groups questioned how the ethics statement would differ from or complement the DCN's existing mission and value statements, and some highlighted the importance of contextualizing the ethics statement within the DCN's specific role and scope of work.
6. **Transparency and Accountability:** These concepts were mentioned as important across multiple groups, and should be considered when drafting an ethics statement or commitment.
7. **Non-Neutrality:** The idea that the DCN's work is not neutral and that biases should be

acknowledged was a recurring theme.