



PolyColumbus Community Conduct Policy

last updated July 6, 2015

Background

PolyColumbus empowers a thriving community of people exploring and practicing ethical non-monogamy. When intimate relationships go well, they are wonderful and bring joy into our lives. When they do not go well, a person's well-being can be significantly affected.

This policy explains under what situations the PolyColumbus board of directors may become involved in how individuals in our community are publicly, semi-publicly, or privately interacting. This policy also covers potential actions we may take regarding those who act in ways that compromise the safety, comfort, or welcoming nature of our community.

At its simplest, the policy of PolyColumbus is to provide and maintain a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment for as many of our current or potential Members as possible.¹ This policy is in force at all digital or in-person spaces / events that bear the PolyColumbus name ("PolyColumbus spaces"). When people take actions that make our community feel less safe, comfortable, and welcoming, we will take the least-intrusive action necessary to restore a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment, which may require removing people from PolyColumbus spaces. The full policy begins on Page 3, following an explanation of the principles we seek to follow in implementing the policy.

The First Principle: Consent

"Consent is the beginning, the middle, and the end of sexual ethics."² PolyColumbus endorses the concept that individuals should seek out enthusiastic affirmative consent in their intimate relationships (regardless of whether those relationships also contain a sexual, BDSM, or power exchange component).³ We advocate "Yes means Yes!" over "No means No."⁴ We are

¹ The requirements for Membership in PolyColumbus are: 1) attending at least one of our events, 2) endorsing our Mission, and 3) providing an email address through which we can communicate with you. Our Mission is quoted in full later in this document, and is available at www.policolumbus.org.

² Dan Savage, "Savage Humanist", *The Humanist*, November / December 2013, *available at* <http://thehumanist.com/magazine/november-december-2013/features/savage-humanist-2>.

³ Throughout this document, we use the word "intimate" to indicate, non-exclusively, the nature of relationships such as those that contain a sexual, BDSM, and/or power exchange component.

sex-positive, and encourage consenting adults to determine for themselves what it is they wish to experience with other consenting adults. We strive to provide opportunities for people to find these connections and explore those possibilities so they can decide what works best for them. We also strive to provide spaces where those who are not seeking new connections can be confident they will be free of unwanted attention.

Consent may be withdrawn at any time, for any reason or no reason at all. Consent applies not only to acts of an intimate nature, but also to access to someone's personal spaces (e.g. their Facebook Messenger). If someone has made clear that they do not consent to contact via particular mediums (or to any contact through any mediums!), then continued contact in those mediums is a violation of their consent.

We also recognize that consent does not have to be expressly verbalized in all situations. There are times when it is common to rely upon implied consent based upon a history of conduct between partners and actions taken in the moment that are strongly indicative of enthusiastic consent (regardless whether the words "yes, we should absolutely have sex right now!" are spoken). However, those who rely upon implied consent do so at their own potential risk; "reasonable" reliance on implied consent that did not actually exist still harms the victim.

The Second Principle: Building an Inclusive Community

PolyColumbus is an inclusive community comprised of Members of all different backgrounds. Through law, social assumptions, and the distribution of financial and other resources, our society has long made it easier to thrive if you possess certain statuses, such as white-looking skin, engaging in monogamous relationships of a heterosexual manner, presenting as male, being born into higher socioeconomic classes, etc.⁵ We seek to serve all who endorse our Mission, regardless of how society-at-large historically or presently treats them.

We recognize that victims of harassment and consent violations are disproportionately women, people of color, those who identify as GLBTQ, etc. PolyColumbus seeks to treat everyone fairly. In so doing, we must recognize that our society, in crafting the assumptions we may have about fairness, often does not treat everyone equally or provide equal opportunity. We seek to recognize these realities in crafting and implementing our policy.

The Third Principle: A Commitment to Reasonable Process

⁴ E.g., Harris O'Malley, "Getting A Yes (Instead of Avoiding A No) – The Standard of Enthusiastic Consent", *Paging Dr. Nerdlove* (Mar. 29, 2013), <http://www.doctornerdlove.com/2013/03/enthusiastic-consent/>, and Emmaline May, "Consent: Not Actually That Complicated", *Rockstar-Dinosaur-Pirate-Princess* (Mar. 2, 2015), <http://rockstardinosaurpirateprincess.com/2015/03/02/consent-not-actually-that-complicated>.

⁵ See, e.g., Toby Morris, "On a Plate: A Short Story About Privilege", *The Pencilsword* (May 22, 2015), <http://thewireless.co.nz/articles/the-pencilsword-on-a-plate> (comic).

PolyColumbus is not law enforcement, the courts, or any other government entity. We are not obligated to follow the standards of proof, investigative procedures, or other protections that are applicable in those contexts. We also lack the investigatory tools (e.g. subpoenas) that those entities possess.

We are an independent community, serving as many people as possible consistent with our Mission,⁶ while operating under the governance of our board of directors. We often must make difficult decisions based upon incomplete information. With that background in mind, we are committed to as consistent and fair of a process as is reasonably possible, including continuing improvements to that process in light of experience.

The Community Conduct Policy

To repeat the earlier summary, we seek to provide and maintain a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment for as many current and potential PolyColumbus Members as possible. This policy is in force at all digital or in-person spaces / events that bear the PolyColumbus name. When people take actions that make our community feel less safe, comfortable, and welcoming, we will take the least-intrusive action necessary to restore a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment, which may require removing people from PolyColumbus spaces.

We create and maintain a safe, comfortable, welcoming environment based upon the following:

- 1. We will inform individuals (generally privately) when we become aware of unintentional conduct that makes PolyColumbus spaces feel less safe, comfortable, and welcoming.⁷**

We are a diverse and inclusive community. We do not accept conduct (including speech) that is based in homophobia, transphobia, or prejudice against other traditionally marginalized groups. We recognize that it is often unintentional behavior that causes harm; however, lack of intent does not lessen the actual harm done.

We will respectfully pull folks aside for a conversation when we become aware of unintentional harmful conduct. Our goals in such conversations are to share our concerns, gather other relevant information, and reach agreement on how we can all

⁶ Our Mission is: PolyColumbus empowers individuals that either self-identify as polyamorous, open, or ethically non-monogamous, or are exploring such possibilities. We build community to provide a safe and inclusive place to not only be ourselves, but also meet like-minded individuals from all backgrounds. We advocate for the equal treatment of the ethically non-monogamous under law, and for broader societal acceptance of the same. We serve organizations with similar goals by documenting best practices and creating other resources for successfully running such an organization. Finally, we educate each other, allied organizations, and the broader community on what it means to be ethically non-monogamous.

⁷ This section contains significant (public domain) text originating from work undertaken by the Geek Feminism community, available at http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Community_anti-harassment/Policy.

make our community feel safe, comfortable, and welcoming. Notably, we generally do not intend to “punish” for an unintentional first offense when such agreement is reached. Our strong preference is for collaborative education over sanctions or shaming.

The following is a non-comprehensive list of unacceptable conduct:

- Offensive comments related to gender, gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, sexual orientation, consensual relationship style, disability, concern regarding mental health or capabilities, physical appearance, body size, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, or worldview
- Unwelcome comments regarding a person’s lifestyle choices and practices, including those related to food, health, parenting, drugs, relationships, religion, worldview, or employment
- Misgendering or use of “dead” or rejected names
- Gratuitous or off-topic sexual images or behaviour in spaces where they are not appropriate, unwelcome sexual attention, or physical / simulated physical contact (e.g., textual descriptions like *hug* or *backrub*) without consent or after a request to stop
- Threats of violence, or incitement of violence towards any individual, including encouraging a person to commit suicide or to engage in self-harm
- Deliberate intimidation, stalking, or following
- Harassing photography or recording, including logging online activity for harassment purposes
- Sustained disruption of discussion, or any pattern of inappropriate social contact, such as requesting / assuming inappropriate levels of intimacy with others
- Deliberate “outing” of any aspect of a person’s identity without their consent, except as necessary to protect vulnerable people from intentional abuse

The inappropriateness of conduct is judged by the standard of a person that the PolyColumbus board of directors would give serious consideration to for membership onto our board of directors.

- Such a person would be committed to the principles underlying this Community Conduct Policy, as well as the principles of civil discussion articulated by philosophy professor Dan Fincke⁸
- Note that while consent to a discussion is implied by visiting a website focused on such discussions, such consent is not implied merely by being in a physical space with others who wish to engage in such a discussion; just because they're in the bar with you, doesn't mean they owe you a conversation

To the extent a choice must be made, PolyColumbus prioritizes marginalized people's safety over the comfort of those who are generally welcomed by society-at-large. PolyColumbus will not act on complaints regarding:

- "Reverse" -isms, including "reverse racism," "reverse sexism," and "cisphobia"⁹
- Reasonable communication of boundaries, such as "leave me alone," "go away," or "I'm not discussing this with you"
- Criticizing racist, sexist, cissexist, or otherwise oppressive behavior or assumptions
- Communicating in a "tone" you don't find congenial

These last several points are consistent with Dan Fincke's Civility Pledge. While PolyColumbus strongly encourages civility (and requires it from our board members), we do not accept a claim of "incivility" as an excuse to shut down preventative and / or boundary-enforcing behavior from those who have been marginalized.¹⁰

2. We take steps to ensure that our Monthly Gathering and other spaces are places where everyone can feel safe, comfortable, and welcome without receiving unwanted attention.

Flirting with people and seeking new connections is welcome in many, but not all, of PolyColumbus spaces. If we announce that flirting or seeking new connections is inappropriate in a particular PolyColumbus space (as we do at every Monthly Gathering), we expect that all participants will comply. This prohibition does not extend to pre-existing relationships you may have where flirting is welcome.

⁸ Dan Fincke, "The Camels with Hammers Civility Pledge", *Camels with Hammers* (Feb. 13, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/camelswithhammers/2013/02/the-camels-with-hammers-civility-pledge/>.

⁹ For those unfamiliar with the term, "cis" is the opposite of "trans," denoting someone whose gender identity aligns with the gender assigned to them at birth.

¹⁰ See, e.g., David Malki, "The Terrible Sealion", *Wondermark* (Sep. 19, 2014), <http://wondermark.com/1k62/> (comic).

We provide a wide variety of spaces (generally of a social nature) where flirting or seeking new connections is not only appropriate but is encouraged! Indeed, we have a social event immediately following each Monthly Gathering specifically to provide space for those who are interested in flirting or seeking new connections.

3. In those PolyColumbus spaces where we encourage flirting or seeking new connections, harassing conduct and / or failure to abide by clear directives on a person's preferences is still a consent violation.

We recognize the complexities of potential human interaction, and we cannot exhaustively list acceptable and unacceptable conduct here. We expect that attendees will have a baseline familiarity with social norms, and will actively work to educate themselves if they find themselves having difficulty in that regard. Members of the PolyColumbus board of directors are happy to provide suggested resources (e.g. books or blogs) to those who want support in understanding social interactions.¹¹

All attendees are welcome to talk with a staff or board member if they have concerns about someone who is providing them with unwanted attention, with the staff or board member resolving the matter in the moment. All attendees are also empowered to tell others "*I'd prefer not to interact.*"¹²

PolyColumbus presumes that any invitations of an intimate nature are harassment if the invitation is both a) made in a PolyColumbus space and, b) occurs on the same day that the maker has first interacted with the recipient of the invitation. Note that invitations made under other circumstances may still be harassment.¹³

4. Attendees in our spaces are expected to follow the law.

In PolyColumbus spaces, participants have a right to expect that other participants will follow the law. This is especially the case when PolyColumbus holds an event in a shared public space (e.g. at a bar). This expectation includes prohibitions against sexual acts in public, as passerby have not necessarily consented to being forced to view the

¹¹ E.g., Miri Mogilevsky, "Flirting and Sexual Harassment: Not Actually the Same Thing", *Brute Reason* (Aug. 21, 2013), <http://freethoughtblogs.com/brutereason/2013/08/21/flirting-and-sexual-harassment-not-actually-the-same-thing/>.

¹² PolyColumbus endorses the view that "'No.' is a complete sentence," as is "Go away."

¹³ Should you believe you have found a mutual connection with someone you have just met and wish to solicit them for intimate activities, consider respectfully inviting that person to a separate, neutral location (e.g. a coffee shop) to discuss possibilities further, rather than soliciting them at the PolyColumbus event. This last sentence is not a safe harbor; while such an invitation is less likely to be harassment than a direct solicitation, the circumstances may result in it still being harassment (and therefore a violation of this policy).

act.¹⁴ There are rare exceptions (e.g. an event where we have purchased exclusive access to a hotel, thereby allowing a broader spectrum of conduct that all attendees have consented to in areas that are no longer accessible to the public), but as noted, these are very much exceptions.

Those who own firearms or knives are expected to serve as a positive example of safe and responsible gun or knife ownership, maintaining any relevant permits or licenses and following any venue-specific rules or prohibitions regarding the carrying of firearms or knives. As with any implement, otherwise-legal possession of a firearm or knife that interferes with a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment is a violation of our Community Conduct Policy. The board of directors is happy to talk privately with firearm or knife owners so we can collaboratively educate ourselves.

5. **If private conduct leaves someone feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, or unwelcome in our spaces, we have the right to investigate that conduct so we may keep PolyColumbus spaces feeling safe, comfortable, and welcoming.**

We generally do not police private conduct. However, we work to provide and maintain a safe, comfortable, and welcome environment in PolyColumbus spaces, and the presence of those who have engaged in consent-violative private conduct may leave others feeling unsafe.

We have little interest in the details of people's private lives, and any participant has the absolute right to refuse to discuss such details with us. As noted above, we are not a governmental institution and lack freestanding subpoena power. However, PolyColumbus has the corresponding absolute right to ban someone from our spaces in the light of a credible complaint and a refusal to cooperate.

We have made the following choices to foster an inclusive community:

1. **We do not penalize someone for choosing to delay in reporting conduct.**

The decision to report or not report conduct is often a difficult one. Although a delay in reporting may make it more difficult to obtain facts regarding the incident, we do not use the delay itself as a reason to conclude the report is not credible. The difficulty of obtaining facts may result in the board taking no action beyond noting the concern.

2. **We do not penalize someone for choosing to stay in a relationship with someone who has violated their consent.**

The decision to end a relationship is often a difficult one. We do not view the presence of

¹⁴ Ohio Rev. Code § 2907.09 (Public Indecency), available at <http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/2907.09>.

a continuing relationship as a reason to conclude the report is not credible.

3. **We do not penalize someone for choosing not to report criminal conduct to law enforcement.**

The decision to report a crime is often a difficult one. We do not view the non-reporting of a crime as a reason to conclude the report is not credible.

4. **We seek to support those reporting policy violations by adopting a perspective of “let’s work to understand the full picture of what took place” rather than “let’s work to find information that disproves the report of a policy violation.”**

This distinction is subtle but important. Those closest to an issue often benefit from an outsider who can see the broader landscape. Doctors, lawyers, and therapists routinely obtain outside assistance for their own personal concerns that are within their professional specialty. In the course of investigation, our goal is to understand what has taken place, not to disprove the report.

5. **We respect the right of individuals to anonymously report violations, or to report a violation personally but insist that their name not be used.**

We take anonymous reports seriously, although such reports will necessarily hamper our ability to respond, as we will lack background information and the ability to refine understanding through in-person communication.

We take the following steps to promote consistency and fairness:

1. **All policy violations that are reported will be shared with the full board of directors.**

Although individual board members may act on behalf of the board in resolving reports, the entire board will be kept regularly updated. Keeping the entire board informed prevents the siloing of complaints, where a repeat offender might avoid heightened consequences because different board members are taking in what appear to be first-time reports.

2. **If a board member is the subject of the report, that board member will be kept segregated off of the matter.**

PolyColumbus utilizes a Multiple Interests in a Matter policy for handling conflicts of interest. This policy also applies to personal and financial interests of a board member (e.g. if someone close to a board member is reported).

3. **All staff members are to report to a board member any policy violations they become aware of.**

Mandatory reporting of policy violations is a condition of being staff. Staff members who fail to report such violations will be removed as staff.

4. **Whenever possible, we seek to provide the person being reported the opportunity to present their perspective and other information prior to PolyColumbus taking action adverse to them.**

The gravity of reported conduct and the credibility of the person reporting the conduct may necessitate swifter action in certain circumstances.

We take the following into consideration when determining the consequences, if any, of a reported policy violation:

1. **We take the least-intrusive action necessary to restore a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment.**

When someone is sincerely apologetic for unintentional but harm-causing behavior, we can generally resolve the violation through a private conversation with a board or staff member. The appropriateness of a private apology in addition to the private conversation will depend upon the relationship between the involved people.

2. **Sometimes the least-intrusive action necessary to restore a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment is to remove someone from PolyColumbus spaces.**

Only the board of directors may permanently remove someone from any and all PolyColumbus spaces (i.e. a permanent ban). However, in the absence of a contrary board resolution, the Executive Director — and in their absence, the Deputy Executive Director — has the authority to remove someone from any and all PolyColumbus spaces pending board resolution (i.e. a temporary ban pending resolution).

Any board member may remove someone from a particular PolyColumbus space (e.g. a particular Monthly Gathering or a particular webforum). Any staff member whose staff role is relevant to a particular space has similar authority. Any board or staff member who is considering taking a removal action is encouraged (but not required) to consult with another board or staff member first if feasible.

3. **Consequences are otherwise determined on a case-by-case basis, consistent with the principles noted elsewhere in this policy.**

Classifying the broad area of potential social interactions is a very difficult task, and we

will not undertake such a task here. Most concerns can be handled in the moment or through private conversation. For all other concerns, the board of directors will take action appropriate to the circumstances. We will reach out to the person reporting the policy violation and give great weight to their articulated preferences (but not a veto right) as we investigate and resolve the matter.

Here are options for how to report a potential violation of our Community Conduct Policy:

1. You may talk in-person with any board or staff member at a PolyColumbus event.
2. You may email any board member at their PolyColumbus email address, which are published at www.policolumbus.org/board.
3. You may email the entire board of directors simultaneously at board@policolumbus.org.
4. You may contact us with a private Facebook message via the PolyColumbus Facebook page (www.facebook.com/PolyColumbus). Note that multiple board and staff members may have access to the PolyColumbus Facebook page message inbox.
5. You may call or text Executive Director Karen Hill at (614) 580-4218, call or text Board Chair Neil Wehneman at (614) 302-6588, or call or text Treasurer Susan Porter at (614) 783-4184 or call (no text) Board Member John Tucker at (614) 832-4692.
6. You may contact any board or staff member that you are Facebook friends with via Facebook Messenger. Note that Facebook messages to those you are not Facebook friends with may end up routed without notification to the "Other" mailbox (resulting in the message not being seen).

As noted above, in order to prevent the siloing of complaints, PolyColumbus has a mandatory reporting policy for board and staff members. The entire board of directors (but not staff) will be informed of any reports. The exception, of course, is if a particular board member or someone closely connected to them is the subject of the report, in which case they will be segregated off of the matter.

We cannot accept or discuss reports that are intended as confidential to the board or staff member with whom the report is being shared. We maintain a list of suggested poly-friendly therapists and other professionals on our website if members of our community desire a stronger level of confidentiality.



PolyColumbus Policy License

for Community Conduct Policy

The core of the PolyColumbus Mission is empowering individuals that either self-identify as polyamorous, open, or ethically non-monogamous, or are exploring such possibilities. Part of this empowerment comes from serving organizations with similar goals by documenting best practices and creating other resources for successfully running such an organization.

Good policies facilitate the orderly and sustainable growth of communities and events that advance the PolyColumbus Mission, whether in the Columbus, Ohio area or elsewhere.

PolyColumbus does not claim a monopoly on wisdom. What we do claim is fifteen years (and counting) as an organization, and leadership with relevant and valuable education, experience, and training. We have confidence in the policies we draft, as well as the humility to revise them when necessary in light of experience.

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Please contact our board of directors at board@polycolumbus.org with any questions or comments on using our policies.

