

## EDITORIAL

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# Equity, Excellence, and Editorial Ethics: You're an Editor, Now What?

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All the parties involved in the publishing process, that is, the author, the editorial board, reviewers, the editors, and Aggie STEM, the organization responsible for publishing the contents, must function under the same umbrella of ethical behavior. Our editorial ethics statement is based on the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Guidelines of Good Publication Practices (<https://publicationethics.org/files/u7141/1999pdf13.pdf>). However, these guidelines do not go as far as we would at the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education*.

The editorial team of the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education* is responsible for deciding which manuscripts will be published, with guidance from the editorial board and external reviewers. In the sections that follow, we provide readers, authors, and other editors an overview of the key elements of editorial ethics that guide the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education*: (1) Publication Decisions, (2) Peer review, (3) Equal Opportunity, (4) Neutrality, (5) Journal Metrics, (6) Confidentiality, and (7) Editorial Independence. Using these elements as our foundation, we hope to become the standard for equity and excellence in editorial ethics. In this editorial, we unpack these key elements and how each is handled by the journal, and we conclude with ten considerations for newly appointed editors.

### Publication Decisions

The publication decision refers to the process by which editors decide whether to accept or reject a manuscript for publication. The importance of ethical considerations in publication decisions is highlighted in the literature (Avanzas et al., 2011; Carver et al., 2011). However, documented advice for journal editors in the social and behavioral sciences remains elusive. The COPE best practice guidelines for journal editors emphasized the need for fairness, impartiality, and transparency in decision-making processes (COPE, 2017). Additionally, Graf et al. (2007) stressed the significance of maintaining integrity and avoiding biases in publication decisions. They stated, “Editors should base their decisions solely on the merits of the manuscripts and their relevance to the journal’s content” (p. 2). This implies that editors should prioritize the quality and scientific rigor of the work, rather than

personal or subjective preferences. The *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education* was founded on the ideals of independence of thought and action. Yet, much of what we have learned has been handed down in conversations and informal discussions. So, the ideas of independence must be unpacked to be understood. They are complex because they deal with a human endeavor that is both messy and dynamic. To help us to explicate independence, we have divided it into two categories: independence of thought and independence of action.

1. Independence of thought deals with three aspects. First, it protects the author from undue influence from perversion of their work at the whim of reviewers or from heavy-handed editors. Second, it also deals with protecting our dedicated readership from bias and slanted or stilted presentations. When possible, all sides of issues are given equal weight in the journal, free of censorship. Finally, independence of thought protects the editors and editorial board from undue thought constraints that might sway the mission of the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education*. From the start through the finished product, every outcome is the work of a dedicated group of people who have a stake in the outcome, who work diligently to ensure that independence of thought is preserved.
2. Independence of action is about two primary goals. First, independence of action ensures that authors are not coerced to follow a trend, pursue a framework that is gaining prominence, or shun work in a declining frame. In no way should editors, editorial board members, or reviewers in any way use their positions of power to promote or demote an author's and researcher's choice of what they research or how they research. Second, independence of action ensures that the editorial team is free of external pressures to make decisions about a work based on an external entity's perspectives or expectations.

### Peer review

Peer review is a critical component of the publication process, involving the evaluation of manuscripts by experts in the field. The importance of peer review in ensuring the quality and validity of published research is emphasized across the literature. Specifically, the peer review process is paramount to making a decision. It is fraught with the potential for misuse and abuse. Therefore, we use a process that attempts to mitigate the negatives. Our assistant editors work independently to assign at least two reviewers and one editorial board member based on reviewers' selected interests in the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* database. This

process ensures that no editor can manipulate who is assigned to review any manuscript. In an ideal world, each of the solicited reviewers would complete the review; however, the solicited reviewers who subsequently complete the review is always surprising.

Though who completes the review is always unpredictable, the most problematic issue of the editorial process is dissonance between the review comments and the recommendations. First, reviewers have a pattern that we believe is completely unacknowledged by the reviewers themselves. Some reviewers almost always recommend to reject, whereas others almost always recommend to revise and resubmit or accept. The pattern holds even when the comments they make do not support the decision, with often a chasm between the comments provided by any one reviewer and their recommendation. Therefore, as an editorial team, we focus more on the substance of the comments and rely less on the recommendation. For example, we recently received a very detailed review, probably a best-case review. The reviewer pointed out issues of conflict between the theoretical framework and conduct of the study, misalignment between the data collected and how it was analyzed, and that the findings had little to do with the data that were collected. The reviewer made many helpful suggestions on how to revise the work and to make it more rigorous and publishable. The recommendation was to accept with minor revisions. From the editor's perspective, this study would almost have to be completely reconstructed. Moreover, many scholars who identify issues between the data collected and the research would determine that the study as reported was fatally flawed and could not be revised. Thus, many reviewers would recommend rejecting the manuscript.

It is important to note that fatal flaws are highly contextualized. Though one use of the data creates a problem, applying another lens and taking a second look might result in an exemplary study guided by different questions and possibly different analyses. Another issue that arises is reviewers recommending rejection but providing little evidence on what led to the decision. For example, identifying minor issues with language or formatting, minor alignment issues, or a lack of detail in a particular section. This review and recommendation alignment issue creates an additional level of concern for editors because peer review serves as a critical filter to assess the validity, reliability, and relevance of scientific work before it reaches publication (Benatar, 1998, p. 155). However, when reviews do not provide substantive feedback with explicit examples, it creates a conundrum for editors who have the final say in publication. These are just a few examples of the challenges that arise during the peer review process. In subsequent sections below, we explicate how these and similar challenges are addressed by the editorial team.

## Equal Opportunity

Equal opportunity is a fundamental principle that should guide editorial practices, ensuring fairness and inclusivity in the selection and publication of research (Reich, 2013). A journal editor evaluates manuscripts solely based on their intellectual content, irrespective of the author's race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, nationality, political philosophy, or geographic location. Thus, editors should actively promote inclusivity and diversity in their authorship and editorial boards (Islam & Greenwood, 2022, p. 1). This is a major objective at the journal that we remain dedicated to as an editorial team. We also work to ensure that all reviews are not only objective but educative as well.

During the beginning of the process, once the initial review is complete, articles unlikely to receive a constructive external review are returned to the author with a clear explanation about the fit issues of the article. This process is often defined as a desk review. However, articles judged likely to receive a constructive external review are sent out for full review. The *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* takes this responsibility so intensely that we even have section editors whose responsibility is to ensure that articles have a fair opportunity for evaluation. Our sections are carefully crafted to reflect the key lines of inquiry related to urban mathematics education. Additionally, some of these sections are research strands historically underrepresented in urban mathematics education; thus, we created specific sections to help increase the visibility and expertise in these strands (i.e., Early College and Community College Experiences).

However, equal opportunity not only pertains to authors and reviewers but also data. Good data are the foundation of “good” science. Data are hard-won and often come at great expense, both personal and financial. Those data can result from hard-won and highly competitive grants. The editorial team believes that the field must make the most of these precious resources. Data should be conserved and preserved, it should be shared and compared, reused, and reproduced. This broad acceptance of reanalysis facilitates scrutiny of previously published findings by those who might be diligently pursuing related questions. Thus, to support equal opportunity, the data from published work should be easy to find, comprehensively described, and accessibly stored. To accelerate data publication and sharing, the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* will pursue and eventually offer its authors secure and permanent storage. We are committed to equal opportunity in all aspects of the term.

## Neutrality

Neutrality in the context of editorial ethics refers to maintaining an impartial stance and avoiding conflicts of interest that could compromise the integrity of the

publication. Stichler (2018) highlighted the ethical responsibility of editors to remain neutral and unbiased in their decision-making. Moreover, ethics in the editorial process are essential to the integrity of the peer-review process, to the credibility of the journal and its content, and to ensuring that authors and readers can trust the fairness and objectivity of the review process (Mack, 2017, p. 030101-1). This includes disclosing any potential conflicts of interest and ensuring that reviewers are also free from conflicts that could influence their evaluations. All of the members of the editorial team and board for *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* are required to disclose conflicts of interest that may influence their evaluations. Common conflicts occur when current and former students of a colleague choose to submit manuscripts. When these conflicts arise, an external review panel is convened to help maintain objectivity and rigor through neutrality of the peer-review process and decision-making. In summary, neutrality is independence from external forces, conferences, donors, researchers, and national and private funding agencies. The *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* is dedicated to publishing high-quality research in urban mathematics education based on objective decisions that place the quality of the scientific product at the forefront by reducing the effects of nepotism within our publication decision process.

### Journal Metrics

Journal metrics, such as impact factor, citation counts, and Altmetrics, are quantitative measures used to assess the influence and reach of a journal's publications. While these metrics have gained importance in academia, ethical concerns have emerged regarding their use. Huggett (2013) discussed the potential pitfalls and ethical issues associated with the use of journal metrics. The author argued that metrics should not be the sole determinant of a publication's value and that they should be used cautiously to avoid distorting incentives or creating biases in publication decisions. Moreover, metrics should be used in a responsible and ethical manner, with a focus on transparency, fairness, and accuracy in evaluating research and scholarly publishing (Islam & Greenwood, 2022). As an editorial team, we recognize that given the positionality of *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* in the field of mathematics education "journal metrics matter." The editorial team has focused on three major aspects to highlight both immediacy and transparency to improve journal metrics. First, we decided to implement digital object identifiers. As the world becomes more digital, internet crawlers are being utilized more frequently to gather information to direct searchers to resources. We believe that prioritizing digital object identifiers (DOI) is in the best interest of our authors and readers.

Open access and DOIs are just one part of ensuring equitable access to the contents of *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*. The other consideration, and arguably the most important, is ensuring that the average person can find the articles without needing a privileged level of access. The DOI ensures that all crawlers can index the articles and ensures maximizing accessibility. Second, we sought SCOPUS indexing. With the transition to open access and the sheer number of open-access options being able to distinguish between excellent open-access journals and others was a foundational concern. Our authors need the confidence to submit their work to the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*. Thus, our readers need to know we have received the green check (i.e., Scopus indexing), the highest level of quality for the Director of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). SCOPUS indexing provides another measure of quality assurance and provides a set of standards for our journal editors, editorial board, and reviewers. Finally, equitable access is essential but wholly insufficient if our authors are not receiving maximum exposure of their work. Now authors will be able to link their Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID) to their article, allowing a reader to immediately access more articles by that researcher, to see other projects, and to facilitate connections between the researcher and the reader achieving the ultimate connectivity. Researchers often move affiliations but listed contacts in an article is static. Linking the ORCID allows up-to-date information and an easy way to help find authors regardless of where their career may take them. We are working to improve our metrics because as every journal grows, nurturing the metrics nurtures the authors and feeds the readers. These pathways ensure that the entire editorial team meets the demands for immediacy and transparency.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a crucial aspect of editorial ethics, ensuring the protection of authors' rights and the integrity of the peer-review process. Editors are expected to maintain the confidentiality of submitted manuscripts and the identities of reviewers. The COPE best practice guidelines explicitly state that editors should "keep all information about a submitted manuscript confidential" (COPE, 2017). This principle fosters trust between authors, reviewers, and editors and safeguards the integrity of the publication process. The editorial team works diligently to protect confidentiality. The *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* uses a double-blind review process, which means that the author and reviewer information is "blinded" on both ends (i.e., for the author and the reviewer). This process extends beyond the initial decision. Editors must prioritize the confidentiality of authors and peer reviewers, ensuring that all information related to manuscripts remains confidential and is not disclosed without proper authorization (Stichler, 2018, p. 6).

Hence, the editor and the editorial staff must not reveal any information about any manuscript that has been submitted to the journal for revision. The authors, proofreaders, editorial advisors, and members of the editorial and scientific committees are the only people allowed to exchange information, and then only when appropriate. Any manuscripts received for revision shall be treated with the utmost confidentiality. They must not be shown, nor must their contents be disclosed to anyone who has not been authorized by the editor. This is one of the simplest yet most important ways that the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* strives to maintain rigor and intellectual freedom as an academic outlet.

### **Editorial Independence**

The editorial team is completely independent. Editorial independence refers to the freedom of editors to make decisions based on their judgment and expertise, free from external influence or pressure. Benatar (1998) emphasized the significance of editorial independence in upholding the integrity and credibility of a journal. Editors should be able to make decisions based on the scientific merit of the work, without interference from funding sources, institutions, or other external factors. While each editorial member has autonomy over the manuscripts they handle, weight is given to the reviews and perspectives of the reviewers and editorial panel. These reviews can drive the review, but they do not outweigh the expertise of the editorial team member who ultimately makes the final publication decision.

A reviewer assists the editorial team when the time comes to make any editorial decisions and via the editorial communications with the author based on the details provided in the submitted review. He/she will be able to help the author improve the content of the paper. However, reviewer recommendations are recommendations, and the action editor is solely responsible for the publication decision of the manuscript. This is an important consideration, as it can create situations where there is disagreement between the reviewer comments, editorial panel expert, and the associate editor. Although the associate editor has the final say, the team meets regularly to discuss the manuscripts in the pipeline and any possible concerns or editorial challenges. This process helps to provide a sounding board for editors who may be struggling to reach a decision on a manuscript due to divergence in reviewer comments, intellectual merit, or a number of other related challenges.

### **Ten Tips for New Editors**

In the preceding sections, we argue that publication decisions should be based on the quality and scientific rigor of the work, prioritizing fairness, impartiality, and transparency. Independence of thought and action are crucial in protecting authors, readers, and editors from undue influence and biases. Furthermore,

peer review plays a critical role in ensuring the quality and validity of published research. The editorial team strives to maintain a fair and unbiased review process, assigning reviewers based on their expertise and focusing on the substance of their comments rather than solely relying on recommendations. Equal opportunity is fundamental in editorial practices, ensuring inclusivity and fairness irrespective of authors' backgrounds. The journal actively promotes diversity and inclusivity in its authorship and editorial boards. Neutrality is essential in maintaining an impartial stance and avoiding conflicts of interest that could compromise the integrity of the publication. The editorial team discloses and manages conflicts of interest and seeks external review panels when needed. Journal metrics should be used responsibly, with a focus on transparency, fairness, and accuracy. The *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education* prioritizes digital object identifiers, SCOPUS indexing, and linking an author's ORCID to improve accessibility, visibility, and connectivity. Confidentiality is crucial to protect authors' rights and maintain trust in the peer-review process. The editorial team follows a double-blind review process and ensures that all information related to manuscripts remains confidential. Finally, editorial independence is upheld to make decisions based on scientific merit without external influence. When considering reviewer recommendations, the editorial team has the final say in publication decisions. Based on these considerations, we present the following ten tips for newly appointed editors.

1. ***Prioritize independence of thought.*** Protect authors from undue influence and ensure a balanced presentation of all sides of issues without censorship. Preserve the mission and integrity of the publication.
2. ***Maintain independence of action.*** Avoid pressuring authors to follow trends or frameworks and make decisions based on external perspectives. Uphold the editorial team's freedom from external pressures.
3. ***Understand the importance of peer review.*** Recognize the critical role of peer review in the publication process and its potential for misuse and abuse. Strive to mitigate negative aspects in the process.
4. ***Focus on the substance of reviewer comments.*** Pay more attention to the content of reviewers' comments rather than relying solely on their recommendations. Consider the quality and rigor of the work when making publication decisions.
5. ***Ensure equal opportunity.*** Evaluate manuscripts solely based on their intellectual content, disregarding factors such as author demographics. Promote inclusivity and diversity in authorship and editorial boards.
6. ***Preserve and share data.*** Recognize the value of data and promote responsible data publication and sharing. Make data easy to find, well-described, and accessible to facilitate scrutiny and reproducibility.



7. **Maintain neutrality.** Remain impartial and unbiased in decision-making processes. Disclose and manage conflicts of interest for both editors and reviewers. Seek external perspectives when conflicts arise.
8. **Use journal metrics responsibly.** Be cautious with the use of journal metrics and avoid overreliance on them. Consider metrics as one aspect of evaluation, ensuring transparency, fairness, and accuracy.
9. **Safeguard confidentiality.** Respect the confidentiality of submitted manuscripts and reviewers' identities. Only exchange information with authorized individuals. Protect the integrity of the peer-review process.
10. **Uphold editorial independence.** Make decisions based on scientific merit, free from external influence or pressure. Consider input from reviewers and panel experts but maintain autonomy over the final publication decision.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this editorial emphasizes the importance of ethical behavior in the publishing process and outlines the key elements of editorial ethics that guide the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education*. These elements include publication decisions, peer review, equal opportunity, neutrality, journal metrics, confidentiality, and editorial independence. In sum, the *Journal for Urban Mathematics Education* strives to be a standard-bearer for equity and excellence in editorial ethics, fostering a publication process that upholds integrity, fairness, and inclusivity.

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