



EDITORIAL

A Matter of Ethics

“We consider that true integrity is the sine qua non for membership in Tau Beta Pi, that it transcends in importance scholarship, activity, and every other qualification. Without private and public integrity, we believe that no organization is worthy of existence. Under integrity, we include honor and high standards of truth and justice.”

The paragraph above is from “The Eligibility Code of Tau Beta Pi,” adopted by the 1926 Convention. We care more about integrity than any other issue affecting the engineering honor society. The Association has been a driving force and example for integrity, honor, exemplary character, and impeccable ethics in engineering ever since Founder Williams initiated Irving A. Heikes in 1885. For decades, the Society has attempted to deliver a statement on “Engineering Ethics” and the Code of Ethics of Engineers (Fundamental Principles and Fundamental Cannons) into the hands of each electee. This information has also appeared on the inside cover of every copy (162,000) of the “Tau Beta Pi Information Book” printed since 1989 (www.tbp.org/pages/publications). The Tau Beta Pi Creed, created by the 1990 Convention and adopted in 1991, is “Integrity and Excellence in Engineering.”

Does Tau Beta Pi make a difference? We’d better make a difference, although we admit failure with an occasional chapter officer who twists the truth. Our senior leaders are educators and professionals and spend much time with students, whose development we can certainly impact.

Is there a need for promoting honor and ethics? The February 2004 annual meeting of the Association of College Honor Societies included a special session on academic integrity presented by the executive director of the Center for Academic Integrity. The reality is that the amount of cheating by about 80% of high-achieving, college-bound high-school students is staggering. At the college level, she suggested that on most campuses more than 75% of students admit to cheating and that business and engineering majors are at the top of the list. Could this be one of the reasons that only half of the elected students actually are initiated into Tau Beta Pi?

What is ethics? [*Ethics*]“... is the discipline which involves deciding what is right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust” — Thilly, 1912

Most truly successful engineers care a great deal about ethics, and most members of every major technical society adhere to a similar code. The National Institute for Engineering Ethics was formed by and as part of the National Society of Professional Engineers in 1988, becoming an independent institute in July 1995. Its stated mission is to “provide opportunities for education in the field of engineering ethics and to promote the understanding and application of ethical processes within the engineering profession and with the public.” NIEE moved to Lubbock, TX, in 2001. Its website (www.niee.org) contains much interesting information on the subject of engineering ethics—



including a new CD with the ethics story “Incident at Morales” that is available to any chapter to use for non-profit educational purposes. The Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science at Case Western Reserve University (onlineethics.org) provides

excellent resources for engineers and students.

At the national level involving all academic fields, the Center for Academic Integrity was incorporated in Maryland in 1992 and is now housed at Duke University. This consortium of colleges, universities, and a few independent organizations now comprises more than 320 institutions working together to “provide a forum to identify and affirm the values of academic integrity and to promote their achievement in practice.” For additional information, check the center’s website at www.academicintegrity.org. Unfortunately, there is a need for this group.

At the ACHS meeting in Seattle, the honor societies voted to participate in a new ACHS national project on “A Matter of Ethics” in order to promote, encourage, and strengthen commitment to ethical behaviors at all levels, individually and collectively within the academic community. This project will continue for three years. What should we as engineers do, what should the chapters do, and what should the Association do? Simply assuming that ethics need not be emphasized is not working. We welcome your feedback.

J.D.F.

“To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” —Theodore Roosevelt