



EDITORIAL

Excellence and Ethics

Most of us are aware of the disgraced Korean researcher, Hwang Noo-Suk, who falsified his stem-cell research last year and was being questioned by prosecutors in Seoul last month (Associated Press, March 2, 2006). Unfortunately, when one scientist (or engineer) commits fraud, the entire community or profession is blemished.

Tau Beta Pi co-founded the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) in 1925, formed for various reasons including the charge to develop and maintain higher standards in college honor societies. In 2004, ACHS announced a three-year national ethics project “A Matter of Ethics,” featured in detail at www.achsnatl.org. The project is being spearheaded to help honor societies encourage younger members to develop themselves to their limits under the rationale that “a person’s full potential can be reached only by building upon the core of one’s character and by encouraging honesty, trustworthiness, integrity ... ethics.” This multi-society project dovetails nicely with the engineering profession’s continued vital emphasis on the promotion of the fundamental principles and canons of ethics for engineers. In February, excellence and ethics provided the joint focus of the 2006 ACHS annual meeting in Portland, OR.

In his book, *Making Ethical Decisions*, Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, wrote, “Ethics refers to principles that define behavior as right, good, and proper. Such principles do not always dictate a single moral course of action, but provide a means of evaluating and deciding among competing options. The terms *ethics* and *values* are not interchangeable. Ethics is concerned with how a moral person should behave, whereas values are the inner judgments that determine how a person actually behaves. Values concern ethics when they pertain to beliefs about what is right and wrong. Most values, however, have nothing to do with ethics” (www.josephsoninstitute.org).

Tau Beta Pi has always emphasized the importance of ethical behavior among its members by electing only those scholastically eligible candidates whose character has been evaluated and determined to be exemplary. In addition, to emphasize the Association’s 121-year focus upon character, after our initiation ceremonies we now hand each initiate a symbolic, yet tangible Creed Card bearing the words *Integrity and Excellence in Engineering* to remind the new members of our principles. We also print the “Code of Ethics of Engineers” inside the cover of every Information Book given to each new member (search “code of ethics” at www.tbp.org).

Because of evidence indicating extensive cheating in elementary and high schools in the 1980s, the Character Counts! Coalition was formed in 1992 to share ideas about character development and to achieve agreement on ethical values that can be taught without offending special-interest sensibilities (www.charactercounts.org). It promotes “Six Pillars of Character” (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) that are being used in 40 states by 640 organizations in an effort to influence adolescents and strengthen our nation.

At the 2006 ACHS meeting, Dr. Donald L. McCabe, professor at Rutgers University and founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity, presented “Academic Integrity: A Matter of Ethics.” The center is a resource of vast information, and it promotes and communicates the values of academic integrity among the university population. Having completed numerous surveys, Dr. McCabe reported that his data gives disturbing evidence of extensive plagiarism and other unethical behavior by undergraduate students. He also provided insight into the motivations and attitudes of cheaters; the effectiveness of honor codes in reducing cheating; faculty roles in modeling integrity; and suggestions to reduce plagiarism and cheating. Dr. McCabe believes that “increased student involvement is the best first step to minimizing cheating” and that “peer culture on campus seems to be a key to restoring integrity.” Faculty must be involved and be supported by their chairs and deans if their reluctance to take action to discipline cheating students is to be overcome.

Most of the spotlight on cheating involves undergrads, but the problem seems to be advancing through the graduate ranks and into the professional fields. Ohio University has been embarrassed by and is investigating charges of alleged plagiarism by engineering graduate students from recent classes to as long ago as 1989 (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 28, 2006). Ten percent of departmental chairs responding to a recent American Physical Society survey reported violations of ethics within the last 10 years by faculty or students in their departments. Young faculty (39%) had more observations and knowledge of violations (*The Chronicle*, Jan. 13, 2006).

As Tau Bates, we are all mindful of the importance of ethical behavior in our personal and professional lives and are, in fact, reminded that ethics matter every day when we face that person in the mirror. We all must stay involved with the youth in our communities to ensure that ethics will matter to them and that ethics will continue to be the foundation of our society in the future.

J.D.F.