

What We Learned from Developing our In-Class Code of Ethics and from Studying Ethical Codes from Professional Organizations

Again we have seen that development of and adherence to a professional code of ethics is necessary for many reasons. First, the technical complexity of issues within our profession, coupled with rapid changes in technology, mean that the public cannot be properly protected through explicit laws alone, since the laws cannot always be current enough or provide sufficient detail to handle all relevant situations and still encourage responsible innovation. Second, we have seen that in addition to responsibilities to society, an engineer also has responsibilities to her/his employer, to fellow employees (and professional peers), and to himself/herself. Ethical problems arise when situations produce conflicts between two or more of the above responsibilities. In addition to protecting the public, a code of ethics provides the engineer with guidance concerning resolution of such conflicts.

Often times the first step to avoiding (or, later resolving) an ethical problem is to determine which of the above responsibilities are in conflict (responsibilities to society, employer, fellow employees, and self) and to then determine ways to try to avoid (or at least minimize) the conflicts.

It is difficult to write a code that provides sufficient flexibility to adapt to technological changes and a wide variety of professional situations, and yet which provides enough detailed guidance for practical situations. ABET's approach – establishing fundamental principles, then fundamental canons, then suggested guidelines for use with the canons, may be the best approach.

If a situation arises where the code of ethics does not provide sufficient guidance, the engineer is encouraged to discuss the issue with peers, to consult appropriate resources within her/his professional organization, and to seek resources within other relevant organizations. A list of resources within IEEE (including an ethics hotline) and other relevant organizations is attached and is also posted on the class web page.