Sessions on Faculty Ethics

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Rationale for sessions on faculty ethics

As engineering educators, we want our students to become ethical engineers when they graduate, and we devote time in the curriculum to preparing them. One aspect of being a professional in any field is having a shared set of guiding principles, and professional engineering societies all have codes of ethics. These codes, as well as many other resources about ethical frameworks and steps in decision making, are available for classroom discussions, and there are databases of case studies (e.g. https://onlineethics.org/). Faculty are members of engineering professions as well, and we believe that most faculty are aware of their responsibilities to behave ethically in the research that constitutes their work in engineering, regarding behaviors related to publications, confidentiality, data handling, animal welfare, and conflicts of interest. We try to ensure that graduate students and others engaged in research are aware of the ethical dimensions of their work by requiring Responsible Conduct of Research courses. However, engineering faculty not only belong to the engineering profession, but also to the profession of teaching and advising. We have ethical responsibilities there as well, but we rarely formally consider them, so we tried to address that.

Two sessions on faculty ethics were held in the 2022-23 academic year as part of a focus on ethics by our organization, Northwestern Center for Engineering Education Research (NCEER) in the McCormick School of Engineering at Northwestern University. Prior to discussing faculty ethics, we held a one-day workshop for engineering faculty on teaching professional ethics in December of 2022. This session was part of a series of annual workshops devoted to a topic related to undergraduate education that started about fifteen years ago. In the workshop on teaching professional ethics to engineering students, we discussed what it means to be a professional, covered some of the different philosophical frameworks for thinking about ethics, and had two breakout sessions in which faculty first discussed what they thought students should learn about professional ethics, and then ideas for how to teach ethics. Finally, we had a plenary speaker who connected teaching professional ethics to experiences in the workplace. In addition to the plenary speaker, we brought in two additional guests who focus on science and engineering ethics to help facilitate these conversations. A report of that one-day workshop can be found here www.mccormick.northwestern.edu/research/engineering-education-research-center/events/. We followed up with faculty later in the winter of 2023 with sessions on teaching ethics, and then in April and May of 2023, we held two one-hour sessions on faculty ethics. The first session on faculty ethics focused on literature and guidelines, and the second on a case study, as explained next. Our sessions were attended voluntarily by about 10 experienced (most with 5+ years of teaching) tenure-line and instructional faculty, all of whom were members of our usual audience of faculty who are interested in evidence-based teaching.

First session on faculty ethics: an exploration of ethical guidelines in higher education

In the first session we discussed briefly what it means to be a member of a profession, rather than being a practitioner of a craft or just having a job. A profession is a group that is "organized to earn a living by openly serving a certain moral ideal in a morally permissible way beyond what

law, market, and morality would otherwise require."[1] Some of the elements of a profession are that it:

- Has autonomy to determine how it acts without a lot of external oversight, and accepts that responsibility
- Makes decisions about credentials needed to join profession
- Respects others in the profession; is collegial with other members elsewhere
- Is governed by a set of shared standards, usually written
- Self-regulates to ensure adherence to standards, and
- Has responsibility to members of the community to maintain its integrity

We then asked whether faculty were familiar with standards set out in our university's Faculty Handbook and the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) Statement on Professional Ethics. The literature indicates that faculty are rarely acquainted with these [5] and our group was no different. Without showing these documents, we then asked faculty to work in groups of three or four to write down answers to the following prompt: "Without reference to those documents, what are the main things in your own professional code of conduct governing teaching and/advising?" We encouraged them to frame their own codes in positive terms, that is, what they would do, rather than what they would not do. They wrote these down on post-its for later reference, and we collected these at the end of the session.

Before reporting out on their own codes, we discussed faculty responsibilities as given in

- The AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics (www.aaup.org/report/statement-professional-ethics),
- Our own university's 53 page Faculty Handbook (www.northwestern.edu/provost/faculty-resources/governance-handbook/)
- A list from Lyken-Segosehe et al. [2] "Codes of Conduct for Undergraduate Teaching in Four Types of Universities," and
- An ethical framework called "ethics of care" [3].
  Briefly, "ethics of care" is a flexible moral philosophy centering attention on caring about and caring for the needs of others, and is in contrast to always following a rigid set of principles no matter what the outcome, or seeking the best outcome no matter what the method of arriving there.

Lyken-Segosehe et al [2] state that codes are important for at least four reasons, with the first and third tying directly to the sense of professionalism:

1. "The autonomy of the professoriate in teaching
2. The remit [responsibility] of universities to protect the welfare of their students
3. The need for professional self-regulation
4. Research evidence that links teacher behaviors with student learning, persistence and other markers of student success."

Lyken-Segosehe [2] then identified eleven desirable tenets of ethics, particularly related to undergraduate teaching, collated by studying the faculty codes from 400 universities, ranging from community colleges to universities with high research activity.

We showed the list from [2], as well as the five-point AAUP statement with some key words highlighted, and a list collated from our own university's statements about teaching from the

Faculty Handbook. Then we asked our participants to look at their own responses to see what they had highlighted, and what they missed. As we went through that exercise, they essentially graded themselves, and participated in a discussion of the different elements. Our later analysis of their performance is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Lyken-Segosehe et al. 2018	AAUP 2009	Our university 2021	Our workshop participants
2. Important course details should be conveyed to students		Faculty members should make available to students a written description of each course before student registration	1. Transparency of expectations 2. Having a syllabus, contract 3. Clarity/transparency in policies
3. New and revised lectures and readings should reflect advancement of knowledge in a field	Professors... primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. Professors seek above all to be effective teachers and scholars	It is essential to the university's mission to discover, produce, and communicate knowledge to students, colleagues and the community at large. This mission depends upon the free search for truth and its free expression.	1. Obligation to promote student learning/ engagement/curiosity 2. Limits of our knowledge 3. Stay up-to-date
4. Grading should be based on merit and not the characteristics of students	Professors ... ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit	Faculty members are responsible for informing students in their classes of the criteria and methods to be employed in determining final course grades.	1. Fairness/consistency in course policies 2. Assessments to identify misconceptions 3. Objectivity in grading 4. Equitable evaluation and assessment 5. Objective impersonal evidence of student performance
5. Various perspectives should be presented, exams should cover the breadth of the course, and perspectives at variance with the instructor's point of view should be acknowledged	Professors seek above all to be effective teachers and scholars AND professors have a particular obligation to promote conditions of free inquiry and to further public understanding of academic freedom.	Faculty encourage the free pursuit of learning in their students	Space for diverse perspectives
6. Students should be treated with respect as individuals	Professors demonstrate respect for students as individuals	Professors demonstrate respect for students as individuals	1. Active concern for student well-being 2. Fairness; unbiased interactions with students 3. Accessibility/inclusion in course structure/environment
7. Faculty members must respect confidentiality of their relationships with students and the students' academic achievements	Professors...respect the confidential nature of the relationship between professor and student	Nothing in faculty handbook. Separate policy: Education records can be released to third parties (i.e. anyone not a university official) only with the written consent of the student.	FERPA/privacy
8. Faculty members must make themselves available in office hours		Faculty members should hold regular office hours…For students whose schedules conflict, opportunity for con-sultation by appointment should be provided	
9. Faculty members must not have sexual relationships with students enrolled in their classes		Falls under harassment in handbook. Separate policy: University prohibits all forms of sexual misconduct (Faculty are required to report cases of sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator)	Avoid harassing peers, staff, students
11. Faculty members must not harass students enrolled in their classes	[Professors] avoid any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students. Professors do not discriminate against or harass colleagues	The University does not discriminate or permit discrimination by any member of its community against any individual on the basis of [long list]…Harassment…that is based on any of these characteristics is a form of discrimination. This includes harassing conduct... interfering unreasonably with an individual's academic performance	Avoid harassing peers, staff, students

Lyken-Segosehe et al. 2018	AAUP 2009	Our university 2021	Our workshop participants
	Professors make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct.		1. Honesty 2. What to do when you see students making ethically dubious decisions
		Faculty are responsible for ordering … teaching materials, meeting classes at scheduled times, honoring reading and examination periods, and evaluating students' work, including providing adequate and timely feedback…	1. Timely feedback 2. Timeliness of feedback
		When reproducing materials for class, faculty should..secure the author or copyright owner's permission in cases where reproduction may exceed "fair use."	Proper acknowledgement of sources
		In response to a request made by a qualified student with a disability, the university will arrange for the provision of educational auxiliary aids.	Accessibility/inclusion in course structure/environment
		Our university subscribes to the statement on Professional Ethics adopted by the AAUP in 2009	

What is evident from the first three columns of the table is that there is a great deal of agreement among the analysis of Lyken-Segosehe et al [2], the AAUP statement, and our university guidelines, although the language is somewhat different. In the last column of the table are the statements of our group of faculty on their written post-its. They were able to identify most of these elements as well. Numbered items in the last column mean that two or more groups of faculty identified that item, and a group sometimes used two phrases that we have put in the same cell of the table. The most prevalent ideas among our faculty concerned fair grading, but respect for individual students, transparency about course expectations, and the necessity of encouraging student learning and staying current themselves were identified by multiple groups. Only one group mentioned not to harass students, although perhaps respect for students covers this. At least in the few minutes we allotted to this activity, one item that did not register at all was the necessity of providing office hours, and they did not call out sexual misconduct explicitly. Since we did ask participants to frame their responses positively, it is perhaps not surprising that this item did not appear in their lists. Both of these are specified at length in our Faculty Handbook and appear specifically in the list from [2].

There are a few other points of interest. Table 1 lists only 9 of the 11 points of Lyken-Segosehe et al. Their other two points were omitted from Table 1. The first was "Courses should be carefully planned," and in their paper, this included subcategories of preparation of the syllabus, ordering textbooks, and communicating dates for exams. These items could be included in point 2, about communications, and that is where we have aligned our faculty's comments. In a broader sense, careful planning would also involve deciding on learning objectives, the depth in which to cover topics, deciding on the sequencing, determining effective pedagogy for each class and so on, but these probably are beyond ethical requirements. The other point not included in Table 1 was "Faculty members must not come to class intoxicated with alcohol or drugs." We are sure that this is so obvious to our faculty that it went without saying, and it is interesting that for some schools this evidently needs to be stated.

Our faculty also identified behaviors that did not appear in Lyken-Segosehe et al. (seen in the first column of Table 1), but do appear in our faculty handbook or in the AAUP code. These are given in the last five rows of Table 1. The faculty considered honesty, timely feedback, acknowledgement of their sources, and accessibility and inclusion to be important. Our university has a separate statement about academic integrity that engineering faculty are encouraged to refer to in their syllabi, but it does not appear in the Faculty Handbook. (We are not sure if the note "honesty" from our participants means promoting student honesty, or being honest with students.) Inclusion is incorporated to some extent in point 5 of Table 1, but we believe that our faculty, especially sensitized by discussions on campus in the last few years, feel the need to not only respect accommodations for differently abled students, but to behave as much as possible in ways that are welcoming to all students.

Of course, what we are presenting here are rules, which are not very detailed, and also have to be used in context. Reybold [4] says that: "As broad ethical goals, they [the AAUP Principles] are not intended to determine specific behaviors; rather, they are meant to guide academic reasoning." So these guidelines are just the starting point for dealing with ethical issues in which there might be a conflict between two rules, or where there is no applicable rule. As David French of the New York Times said about a different context, "The law can stave off disaster, but only moral norms truly preserve the Republic," and while the Republic is rarely at stake in our classrooms, what goes on there can have a lasting influence on students. The literature on faculty ethics, which we quoted after our discussion of codes, indicates how important the culture of a department and the university are to the faculty's behavior in more complicated teaching situations or where there is conflict with forces outside the university, and this is why we included a brief discussion about the Ethics of Care [3]. The literature has comments on this:

"…research specific to faculty identity also acknowledges the influence of personal and local cultures on professional reasoning." (particularly in relation to tenure and promotion experiences) [5]

"Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) [6] situate ethicality in the culture of higher education and the organizational structure of institutions. …Faculty ethicality…is an outcome of socialization into an institutional ethos." [5]

Ethical decisions "…require evaluation and choice, often between competing options, and always are situated in complex social and institutional contexts." [4]

To move beyond rules, we were prepared to discuss how people might handle a few real situations, and this would be a worthwhile addition to the session, but we ran out of time. One situation that might come up in a class is "Using intellectual conflict as a teaching method to encourage cognitive development and critical thinking." [5] It is an engaging and important method, and does meet the need for diverse perspectives, but it can make students uncomfortable, especially if they have personal experiences that relate to the topic, or if some students propose ideas that others reject, so to some extent this method may be in conflict with respect for students as individuals, and faculty need to think through this. Another issue might be writing recommendation letters for a student who you feel is less than stellar. You can reject the request, but if you take it, honesty suggests that you should say what you know about the student. But there are also reasons not to say everything. Maybe you don't want to hurt this student's

chances because they may be better than everyone else who is applying for the position (and you don't know the other applicants), or maybe the student did not perform well in your class because they were less interested in the material than in the area where they are seeking the job, or maybe you think they have the capability to grow into it. An interesting discussion of this is found in Sher [7].

Second session on faculty ethics: applications of ethical guidelines to a case study

In a second session we discussed a case study adapted from *Ethical Dilemmas in the College Classroom: a Casebook for Inclusive Teaching* (2022), produced for the Center for the Integration of Research Teaching and Learning by Cirillo and Silverman (available at cirtl.net/inclusive-teaching/). The adaptation of the case, called the Iris Case, was just to reframe the scenario so that it was a faculty member rather than a graduate teaching assistant that was in charge, and to make it more relevant to our engineering faculty. The case is about faulty team dynamics among a diverse group of students, and where the faculty member should step in. Should it be in class or in private with different students, and what should the faculty member say or do? We tried to follow the recommendations in the *Casebook* for facilitating a discussion of the case, a stepwise process that aligns well with the way we are teaching students to approach any professional ethical dilemma. The group was first asked to identify the specific ethical dilemma, then identify the stakeholders, then discuss what values are at stake, and then consider what possible steps the actors in the scenario could take and what the short and longer term implications of those actions would be. The case prompted good discussion, but our participants did not refer to the codes we had discussed in the earlier session. Also, our experienced faculty rapidly made decisions about how they would handle the scenario if it occurred in their class, and, since they have worked with teams in their classes, they have experience in dealing with teamwork problems. We know from conversations with one of the authors of the *Casebook* that this does not happen when the case is used with graduate students, and they take longer to come up with solutions, and we suspect that inexperienced faculty would also find it more challenging.

Overall assessment

Our audience was not familiar in advance with some of the places where they could look for codes that govern the teaching profession, which aligns with the literature. [5] Each small group came up with only a subset of the elements of published ethical codes governing teaching, although to some extent this may be due to the relatively short time they had for this task. However, in a larger group discussion, most of the elements of published codes were at least touched on. This indicates the value of discussions with colleagues on this topic. These rarely take place, so we believe that our work was useful and could be replicated elsewhere. Sometimes our group was ahead of the published recommendations, for instance in the need to offer timely feedback on student work. As noted above, they probably also had a more nuanced view of inclusion than the codes contain. While they may not have thought of inclusion as an ethical issue before, they could translate it into an ethical requirement in our session.

We spent a lot of time on codes, and Reybold [4] believes that this is justified. "Faculty awareness of ethics codes does contribute to more reasoned decision making, so we, the faculty, have the responsibility to familiarize ourselves with the many codes of ethics available to us. Ultimately, professional ethicality becomes a personal choice about how to interpret ethical

codes and put them into practice. Ethical decision making is a 'learned art and must be practiced.'" [4] Because of the role of socialization in the culture of faculty, and the general lack of knowledge about ethical dimensions of teaching, Reybold [5] argued that discussions of faculty ethics would be an important part of introducing graduate students and early career faculty into the profession.

We hoped to obtain information about how this less experienced group would respond, and scheduled online sessions in 2024 to which we invited graduate students participating in programs of Northwestern's teaching center and young faculty who had done teaching development programs as part of their graduate programs at universities that are part of the CIRTL (Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) Network. Thus, several hundred potential participants, largely but not exclusively from STEM fields, were aware of these sessions, but only a total of eight registered, and only one actually showed up. We had a good conversation with this one young faculty member, but we learned from this experience that the topic of faculty ethics is not recognized as important by the large group that we were trying to reach.

However, we believe that these discussions are valuable for experienced faculty as well, and ethical behavior is as important to the teaching profession as to the engineering profession, so we can recommend doing similar workshops at other institutions. For institutions looking to create their own sessions on faculty ethics, we recommend keeping these sessions active. Our participants generated their ideas of ethical guidelines and discussed their ideas with one another. They also had opportunities to reflect on how their responses compared to literature as well as their own institutional guidelines. The chance to discuss a case study took discussions from theoretical rules to practical aspects of evaluating alternatives and decision making. Our experience with young faculty and graduate students suggests that these sessions do not draw people in on their own, and would be better integrated as topics in a program or course on inclusive teaching, or a set of sessions that include teaching professional ethics to students. We are happy to share our powerpoint deck and further references for others to use, and recommend at least an hour for each session. In fact, there could easily be a third interactive session devoted to other common problems that faculty face in their teaching roles.

References

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