

## **Public Criticism—Parody**

### **Case No. 19-8**

#### **Facts:**

Engineer A is an engineering student within an engineering program at a major university. In an online student blog not directly associated with the university, Engineer A parodied one of his engineering professors, Engineer B. The parodied characterization could be viewed by some as humorous and not malicious. It could also be viewed by others as disparaging. The blog was viewed by many engineering students at the university as well as by engineering faculty.

#### **Question:**

Was it ethical for Engineer A to satirize one of his engineering professors, Engineer B?

#### **NSPE Code of Ethics References:**

*Section III.7. - Engineers shall not attempt to injure, maliciously or falsely, directly or indirectly, the professional reputation, prospects, practice, or employment of other engineers. Engineers who believe others are guilty of unethical or illegal practice shall present such information to the proper authority for action.*

**NSPE BER Case References:** [04-6](#), [07-2](#)

#### **Discussion:**

Engineers have an ethical obligation to act in a manner that reflects positively upon the engineering profession and to treat professional colleagues with appropriate respect and dignity. Issues relating to the manner in which engineers conduct themselves in relation to other engineers have been subjects of NSPE Board of Ethical Review opinions in the past.

In [BER Case 04-6](#), Engineer A, the president of a national technical society, was invited to address a gathering of engineers and engineering students at a college of engineering in Engineer A's technical discipline. Toward the end of Engineer A's remarks, Engineer A noted that engineers in his discipline of practice, as well as in certain other disciplines of engineering practice, are "paid to think" while engineers in a newer discipline of engineering practice are "paid not to think." After seeing that his comments were not well received by some members of the audience, including some guests who were members of the newer discipline, Engineer A said, "I should have asked if there were any engineers in this newer discipline in the audience before making remarks concerning their discipline." Engineer B, who practiced in the newer discipline, raised his hand and tried to take the "edge" off of Engineer A's comments in comments to the other members of the audience. Immediately following the presentation, Engineer B sent a letter to Engineer A, criticizing him for his comments, copying many leaders within the engineering profession, and requesting that Engineer A apologize for his comments. In finding Engineer A's actions unethical, the Board of Ethical Review determined that Engineer A's comments were "beneath the

dignity of the engineering profession and should not be deemed acceptable under the NSPE Code of Ethics or other professional standards.”

More recently in [BER Case 07-2](#), Engineer A, the president of a professional engineering society, was invited to address a gathering of engineers and engineering students at a college of engineering where engineering students, engineering faculty, and university administration were present. During Engineer A’s presentation, he made some general comments that could be interpreted as critical of certain research, instructional, and educational methods employed by some college engineering programs, including the program at the university hosting the event. Following his remarks, Engineer A was criticized by some of the engineering faculty and university officials for what were perceived as critical remarks. Some of the engineering faculty contacted Engineer A and requested an apology or a retraction of his remarks. Engineer A refused to issue an apology.

In finding Engineer A’s comments consistent with the NSPE Code of Ethics, the Board noted that the facts in [BER Case 07-2](#) related not to an “ad hominem” attack, but to a legitimate issue of public policy and professional concern relating to educational policy and process. There was nothing in the facts to suggest that Engineer A was expressing anything other than an appropriate and reasonable opinion on matters affecting educational institutions and those who work or attend those institutions. Nor was there anything in the facts to suggest that Engineer A made the comments in an offensive or otherwise objectionable manner. The Board noted that the presentation was made at an institution of higher learning, where academic freedom and the right to challenge conventional wisdom should be celebrated. Said the Board, “If following a consideration of those remarks, individuals within the college or university have concerns about Engineer A’s critical comments, those individuals should seek a forum to offer contrary viewpoints and, if appropriate, debate Engineer A regarding the merits of his views. The role of the university is to encourage legitimate debate—not stifle or inhibit dissent.”

Turning to the facts in the present case, it is the Board’s view that Engineer A’s actions are more in the nature of an “ad hominem” attack than a legitimate expression of academic freedom. While the Board cannot know the exact nature of the parody, it was clearly of a personal nature—as opposed to a broader non-personalized, issue-based discussion—and had the potential to subject Engineer B to ridicule and derision. Such conduct is not befitting of engineering students. While engineers and engineering students are clearly permitted to engage in fair criticism and comment both in academic settings and in professional practice, all engineers and engineering students should also show fellow practitioners, academic colleagues, and fellow students the respect and honor they themselves expect. For these reasons, Engineer A’s actions were inconsistent with the NSPE Code of Ethics.

### **Conclusion:**

Engineer A’s actions were inconsistent with the NSPE Code of Ethics. Engineer A should issue an apology to Engineer B in Engineer A’s blog and personally.

**Board of Ethical Review:**

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