

Responsible Conduct of Community-Engaged Engineering Research: A Call for Community Rights

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1. RCR Initiative

The [Engineering Ethics & Community Rights Collaborative](#) is a transdisciplinary initiative of frontline community members, engineers, scientists, social scientists, humanities scholars, and NGOs to help address an ethics gap in community-engaged engineering research (CEER): the absence of laws, ethics codes, and institutional mechanisms that a) recognize and protect community rights in CEER, and b) promote projects that abide by principles of distributional, recognitional, and participatory justice. In light of the fact that CEER can bring to communities not only benefits but also various types of harms—including perpetuation of the very injustices at the root of the problems it aims to address—the Collaborative was born out of concern that CEER's current ethics gap exhibits troubling parallels with the ethics gap in human subjects research prior to the [Belmont Report](#) of 1979.

The Collaborative's goals are to bring national attention to community vulnerabilities inherent in CEER and to design a conceptual framework for the institutionalization of rights- and justice-centered approaches to this type of research. Central to the Collaborative's vision is the development of federally mandated training requirements, oversight and accountability mechanisms, processes that enable communities to report problems without risking marginalization, stigmatization, and retaliation, and community-led award structures. Foundational to the Collaborative's work is the premise that although knowledge in CEER is coproduced, CEER is imbued with [power imbalances](#) that privilege engineers' priorities, interests, and perspectives over those of communities. For this reason, the Collaborative is rooted in the imperative of [epistemic listening](#)—that is, listening to community questions, experiences, and knowledges *with the intent to learn* technically, socially, and morally relevant information in order to expand, adjust, or correct one's research, actions, and conduct. To date, the Collaborative has built:

- A first-of-its-kind [frontline community member panel](#), designated as a Distinguished Lecture by the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE), highlighting resident experiences with engineering interventions and types of engagement communities view as 'desirable' and 'just,' and
- A working [resource list](#) about community rights in community-engaged research and critical perspectives on engineering's relationship with marginalized communities and communities in crisis.

2. Institutional goals

Like, I believe, most academic institutions, the university with which I am affiliated (Virginia Tech) does not seem to include community rights- or justice-centered CEER in its RCR program goals. When, in 2018, it received a historic [letter of complaint](#) from 62 Flint, MI residents asking for an "immediate investigation" into a CEER intervention that the STEM establishment is celebrating as 'exemplary,' Virginia Tech declined to honor the request. It is my hope that the NAE recognizes the seriousness of this type of ethics gap and commits to supporting efforts like the Collaborative's for institutional change.

3. Evidence of success

Although the Collaborative's goals will take time to realize, its website is currently being used for teaching and research at several universities. In addition, multiple institutions in the US, UK, and Canada have expressed interest in Collaborative members' critiques of current CEER practices, through invitations for presentations, keynotes, and workshops as well as participation on panels and related ethics initiatives.