



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# **Joint Authorship Of Paper -- NSPE Case No. 85-1**

## **Year**

1985

## **Description**

This case addresses issues of fair authorship credit in research practice. This is a historical case reviewed by the NSPE Board of Ethical Review in 1985.

## **Body**

## **Facts**

Engineer A and Engineer B are faculty members at a major university. As part of the requirement for obtaining tenure at the university, both Engineer A and Engineer B are required to author articles for publication in scholarly and technical journals. During Engineer A's years as a graduate student he had developed a paper which was never published and which forms the basis of what he thinks would be an excellent article for publication in a journal. Engineer A discusses his idea with Engineer B and they agree to collaborate in developing the article. Engineer A, the principal author, rewrites the article, bringing it up to date. Engineer B's contributions are minimal. Engineer A agrees to include Engineer B's name as coauthor of the article as a favor in order to enhance Engineer B's chances of obtaining tenure. The article is ultimately accepted and published in a refereed journal.

## Questions

1. Was it ethical for Engineer A to use a paper he developed at an earlier time as the basis for an updated article?
2. Was it ethical for Engineer B to accept credit for development of the article?
3. Was it ethical for Engineer A to include Engineer B as coauthor of the article?

## References

- *Code of Ethics* - Section III.1. - "Engineers shall be guided in all their professional relations by the highest standards of integrity."
- Section III.3.c. - "Consistent with the foregoing, Engineers may prepare articles for the lay or technical press, but such articles shall not imply credit to the author for work performed by others."

## Discussion

This case presents three distinct issues which, although not directly addressed by the Code of Ethics nor earlier BER decisions, are extremely important in regard to the integrity and honesty of intellectual work performed by university engineering

faculty.

The first issue relates to that of engineering faculty using material from previous work performed and modifying that material in order to satisfy a requirement to publish. This development has occurred in recent years as a result of the emphasis placed by various universities and colleges upon the importance of publication. With pressures being exerted upon faculty to write articles acceptable for publication, some faculty, as a result of time pressures and other factors, have sometimes "cut corners" in order to satisfy the requirement to publish.

While we stress the importance of performing new and innovative engineering research, we are not convinced that previous work of a high quality could not form the basis of updated research by engineering faculty. Quite often engineering students and faculty embark upon areas of research, and owing to a variety of factors, many beyond their control (time constraints, priorities, funding, etc.), make the decision to postpone the research being conducted. Later, for a number of reasons, they may decide to resume the research. Flowing out of the concluded research may be articles or reports suitable for publication in technical journals. As long as an article is properly updated and the data verified and scrutinized in view of the time lapse, we are of the view that such publication would be entirely proper and ethical.

It may be suggested that because the earlier research was performed not as a faculty member but as an engineering student, the research was performed outside of the scope of the faculty member's current employment and therefore should not be credited as research performed as faculty for the purpose of tenure. We have trouble accepting such an inflexible view, particularly in view of the aforementioned variables that may impact upon the ability to perform research. We think the better course to take is to examine the relative quality of the individual's research rather than to question the chronology of the research. As long as the research is of a high-quality nature, we are satisfied that no ethical violation exists. In view of the fact that the article was brought up to date and was ultimately published in a refereed journal, we are convinced that no ethical problem has emerged.

Turning to a second issue in this case, as noted earlier, we are sensitive to the extremely difficult position in which many faculty members have been placed with regard to the so-called rule of "publish or perish." This Board finds it extremely difficult to sanction a situation whereby Engineer A permits Engineer B, for

whatever reason, to share joint authorship on an article when it is clear that Engineer B's contributions to the article are minimal. We think that Section III.3.c. speaks to this point. This Board cannot excuse the conduct of a faculty member who "takes the easy way out" and seeks credit for an article that he did not author. The only way a faculty tenure committee can effectively evaluate tenure candidates is to examine the candidates' qualifications and not the qualifications of someone else. For this Board to decide otherwise would be to sanction a practice entirely at odds with academic honesty and professional integrity. (See Section III.1.)

Finally, the facts of the case raise the question of Engineer A's ethical conduct in agreeing to include Engineer B as coauthor of the article as a favor in order to enhance Engineer B's chances of obtaining tenure. However genuine Engineer A's motives may have been under the circumstances, we unqualifiedly reject the action of Engineer A. By permitting Engineer B to misrepresent his achievements in this way, Engineer A has compromised his honesty and forfeited his integrity. Engineer A is unquestionably diminished by this action.

While this Board is fervent in its view and wishes to stress the importance of those three points, we also feel compelled to acknowledge that certain "gray areas" do exist. Frequently, technical articles are written that contain the names of many authors or contributors. Often it is difficult to identify in an objective manner the qualitative contributions of the various authors identified. While we recognize that this practice is a proper means of accurately identifying actual authors contributing to an article, we tend to be somewhat skeptical in general of this practice. We recognize the importance of collaboration in academic endeavors; however, we think that the collaborative effort should produce and reflect a high-quality product worthy of joint authorship, and should not merely be a means by which engineering faculty expand their list of achievements.

## **Conclusions**

Q1. It was ethical for Engineer A to use a paper he developed at an earlier time as the basis for an updated article.

Q2. It was unethical for Engineer B to accept credit for development of the article.

Q3. It was unethical for Engineer A to include Engineer B as coauthor of the article.

### **Board of Ethical Review:**

- F. Wendell Beard, P.E.
- Robert J. Haefeli, P.E.
- Ernest C. James, P.E.
- Robert W. Jarvis, P.E.
- James L. Polk, P.E.
- Everett S. Thompson, P.E.
- J. Kent Roberts, P.E., chairman

[NSPE Code of Ethics](#) An earlier version may have been used in this case.

### **Notes**

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For a version of this case adapted for classroom use, see: [Joint Authorship of a Paper \(adapted from NSPE Case No. 85-1\)](#).

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### **Topics**

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**Discipline(s)**

Engineering

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Authoring Institution

National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE)