



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

R. Hollander Opening Remarks, APPE 2010

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Year

2010

Description

Opening remarks from the 2010 workshop, on “Engineering, Social Justice, and Sustainable Community Development.”

Body

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Engineering towards a More Just and Sustainable World

Background

In fall 2008, the Center for Engineering Ethics and Society (CEES) of the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) sponsored a workshop on “Engineering, Social Justice, and Sustainable Community Development.” The focus for the meeting

began with the recognition that engineers operating in contexts of upheaval and crisis may face conflicts between various positive goals – particularly, between humanitarian welfare and social and environmental justice. For instance, humanitarian efforts may continue or augment status inequalities or environmental degradation.

The lively meeting brought together scholars in ethics, and science and technology studies (STS), and engineers to consider how engineering ethics and science and technology studies might address these possible conflicts and how to improve engineering practice in these situations, as well as engineering education about them. Another goal of the meeting was to engage professional societies in these efforts.

The workshop was organized around a number of panels and small group sessions directed at assessing the panels and suggesting further actions. It drew together humanities scholars and social scientists with engineers from a wide range of specialties and governmental, non-profit and university affiliations, at different career stages. It turned out that the question of engineering and social justice was a hotly contested topic at the meeting, while humanitarianism and engineering or engineering and social responsibility was not. Some engineers did not think social justice (whatever it was) was an appropriate issue for engineering practice or for consideration in their societies; others disagreed. The topic of environmental justice was barely touched on.

When the planning group met after the meeting, APPE Executive Secretary Brian Schrag suggested that the APPE Annual Meeting would be an appropriate venue to carry the discussion further. APPE hosts a mini-conference at the end of the meeting, and could devote it to this topic in 2010. This would continue and deepen the conversation between engineering and the social sciences and humanities, on aspects of the topic that need further attention, particularly social and environmental justice. At the mini-conference, we expect participants to present well-formulated but contestable views about social and environmental justice in relationship to engineering education, practice, or research, with an eye to engineering towards a more just and sustainable world. We also want to have better representation at this mini-conference from practicing engineers and the institutions – including for-profit organizations – in which they work.

Preliminary Definitions: Social and Environmental Justice

Discussion of social justice has stressed both the need for political liberty and for fair distribution of societal benefits and burdens. Recent work adds the element of social responsibility for enabling human beings to exercise meaningful choices for a satisfying life. As yet, there has been little attention to how engineering might define an appropriate role in working towards social justice or how it might realize this role in engineering classes or programs.

Environmental justice would require a similarly fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. It would be achieved when everyone enjoys fair protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to decision-making processes that promote a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. Examining issues of engineering, sustainability, and environmental justice can provide an important gateway into more general considerations of engineering and social justice.

Resource Type

Essay

Topics

Environmental Justice

Ethics and Society

Social Justice

Sustainability

Discipline(s)

Engineering