

An interview with Neil Jespersen about the formation of the Committee on Ethics

This interview is complimentary recollection by Professor Neil Jespersen about the institution of the Committee on Ethics at the dawn of the 21st century. In recognizing the upcoming 20th anniversary of the committee, Svetlana Korolev and Pei Meng Woi took advantage of such a remarkable coincidence that Neil Jespersen joined the Committee on Ethics this year and, in fact, he served on three task forces over four years that led to the establishment of the proposed committee in 2005 and then wrote “Voting for an Ethics Committee” report in *Chemical and Engineering News* (C&EN)¹.

Neil Jespersen is Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at St. John’s University where he has worked from 1977 to 2020. He has been a member of ACS including the divisions of Analytical Chemistry and Chemical Education since 1969, councilor of the New York section, as well as numerous governance committees since 1991. He served on the Committee on Committees (ConC) from 1999 to 2009 (chair 2005-2007). Neil was Director for District I on the Board of Directors for a term from 2010 to 2012.



[Greetings Neil! Let us start an interview by expressing gratitude for this fortunate occasion of your perfect timing to join the Committee on Ethics this year! The committee will be celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2026. How did you get interested in the Task Force on a Proposed Committee on Ethics back in 2000?](#)

Neil Jespersen:

First, it has been almost a quarter of a century since the start of discussing a Committee on Ethics. Naturally, some things are dulled, and I am showing my age by forgetting some details or circumstances. However, I recall some of my events prior to 2000 were interesting. For completeness, I asked the current ACS staff liaison LaToya Rembert-Lang for historical reports, and with thanks, then adopted excerpts with precise details from those documents in my answers.

“The origins of ethics discussions stem from two letters written by George Wyman to Ed Wassermann, ACS President in 1999, and to Richard Demming, Committee on Committees Chair in 2000.”

My first recollection of getting involved is when Halley Merrell, who was the ACS Secretary at that time, called me at my St. John’s University office one Sunday morning and after some small talk he asked: “*What do you think of a Committee on Ethics?*” That call made me seek to learn more about scientific ethics inside the ACS (committees and divisions) and outside the ACS (other scientific organizations). My initial impression was that science was based on facts, measurements, and observations that led to understanding how things work. The ACS also had “The Chemist’s Code of Conduct” which gave an outline how to work with others. Promptly, I found out that there was a whole lot more to thinking ethically than just that simple verifying data. Such a realization made a big beginning for me.

Could you describe the atmosphere surrounding ethical discussions within the ACS during the early 2000s?

NJ:

Interestingly, I recall a unified feeling that the ACS needed a Committee on Ethics. ConC was in good agreement with the concept that the Committee on Ethics should be an educational group that works with all committees and divisions that already have ethics subcommittees. However, I understand that a few members thought that some people might be frightened that such a committee could be used as a weapon. On the other hand, it was possible that others were concerned that the new committee might get the ACS into costly lawsuits. These possibilities were discussed and assurances of the concept that the new committee would be an *educational* committee and *not a judicial* committee were agreed upon. The twenty years of the Committee on Ethics seems to suggest that the concerns did not manifest themselves.

How come there were three, not one, task forces on the proposed committee from 2000 to 2005? What were their accomplishments?

NJ:

The multiple groups investigating the creation of the Committee on Ethics were thorough. Reaching as many people as possible, with what some might think was overkill, to discuss the plans apparently worked. The only issue was the almost universal agreement that the Committee on Ethics had to be an *educational* committee and absolutely have *no judicial abilities*. I recall that the ACS Board of Directors, Council Policy Committee, Committee on Economic and Professional Affairs, and other committees had discussions that fed into the task forces. It took a while to assure the majority of our ACS colleagues saw that the concept of an *educational* committee would work.

“First, a ConC task force was appointed to evaluate the possibility of forming a Committee on Ethics. The task force consisted of Clara Craver, chair, and Isiah Warner. The initial meeting was on July 18, 2000. Neil Jespersen joined the task force after the first meeting. Further meetings were held on August 21 and November 29, 2000. The first task force surveyed ACS committees, other scientific and engineering societies as to their ethics-related activities; catalogued the range of ethics activities that could potentially be undertaken by an organization such as ACS; surveyed ethics resources available online; and received presentations from the Committee on Economic and Professional Affairs Subcommittee on Professional Standards and Ethics, the Younger Chemists Committee, the ACS General Counsel, the AAAS Scientific Freedom, Responsibility and Law Program, and the American Institute of Chemists. Their major action was the recommendation for the formation of a special short-term ad hoc Task Force on Ethics by the Council Policy Committee (CPC).

Second, on July 15, 2001, ACS President Attila Pavlath appointed a task force from CPC to examine the need for a committee to deal with ethics issues and to develop advertising and other techniques to make ethics a significant part of the professional atmosphere of the chemist. The membership was made up of the following people: Allen Bard, David Chesney, Clara Craver, Lawrence Ebert, Neil Jespersen, Charles Rowell, Isiah Warner, and George Wyman. The membership came to the task force from several sources which should be detailed to provide the background of the members. David Chesney came to the task force from his work on the Subcommittee on Professional Standards and Ethics of the Committee on Economic and Professional Affairs and brought the immense literature survey they had made in the area. Clara Craver, Neil Jespersen, and Isiah Warner came to the task force from the subcommittee of ConC that had raised the need for CPC action. Allen Bard came because of his very successful period as Editor of *Journal of the American Chemical Society* (JACS). Lawrence Ebert was appointed due to his Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry and his being a lawyer in the Intellectual Property area. George Wyman was appointed to the task force as a member of a group that had addressed a committee of the Board about the need in the Society to have some formal structure aimed at ethics. Charles Rowell was appointed chair of the task force because he was vice-chair of CPC at the time. The task force was given an 18-month lifetime; it actually used 24 months due to the difficulty in getting the final details closed earlier. In March 2003, the task force presented its formal proposal to CPC, who voted to accept the description of an ethics committee as proposed, and to forward the description to the Committee on Committees (ConC) for consideration.

Third, the ConC Task Force on a Proposed Committee on Ethics was reconstituted for the fall 2003 national meeting with Neil Jespersen as chair and Peter K. Dorhout, Charles F. Rowell, and Eleanor D. Siebert completing the team. The task force reviewed the CPC proposal for the mission, type, and size of the proposed committee. At the spring 2004 national meeting in Anaheim, ConC accepted the recommendations of its task force, and held a discussion of the issue at its open meeting. Chair Carol Duane stated that ConC will propose to Council the establishment of an ACS Ethics Committee, as an Other Committee of Council, at the fall 2004 national meeting in Philadelphia.”

[What were some of the major challenges encountered during the four-year discussion period leading up the establishment of the committee in 2006?](#)

NJ:

Again, it seemed that the mission as to *coordinate and educate* was agreed to early on. We just had to find out if our constituents felt the same way. The many task forces and many meetings are typical of an organization that has over 200,000 members. Diligence was done to be sure that we had not left a major flaw behind. There were debates and revisions of the committee charter. The first effort did not go right, but the second charter was approved for the new committee:

To coordinate the ethics-related activities of the Society, serve as an educational resource and clearinghouse, but not as an adjudication body, for ACS members seeking guidance on ethics issues; raise awareness of ethics issues through meeting programming and columns/editorials;

review recognition opportunities for acknowledging ethical behavior; and to develop and oversee such other ethics-related activities as will serve ACS members and promote the Society's standards of ethical conduct within the profession of chemistry and its related disciplines.

Also, at the forming stage, we did not really know how to do the *education concerning ethics* part yet. To be precise, we did not have the skills to teach practicing chemists about ethics yet.

Please tell us a little bit more about the assessments that were conducted to make a meaningful proposal for a new committee to be instituted by ACS.

NJ:

Your question hits an important point. The ACS was not creating something. We were far behind many organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences and others listed in some of our reports. These organizations had sophisticated programs for informing their members about ethics. They had audio/visual training materials to help their members. The task forces surveyed many professional societies to determine the extent of their efforts.

“A survey by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2000 found 34 scientific societies and research agencies with ethics codes or policy statements, and 17 societies with ethics committees. Some examples were:

- American Institute of Chemists
- American Association of University Professors
- American Oil Chemists Society
- American Physical Society
- National Institute of Health
- National Science Foundation
- Royal Society of Chemistry

Inside the ACS, several committees gave significant thought to professional ethics. The Committee on Professional Training provided well-written guidance on how ethics should be included in the education of chemists holding bachelor's degrees approved by ACS. The Committee on Economic and Professional Affairs had an active sub-committee that gathered resources on professional ethics. It prepared Employment Guidelines and Academic Employment Guidelines providing guidance for relationships between employers and employees in industry and for relationships that should exist in the academic community between faculty and the various levels of students. The Chemist's Code of Conduct was approved by the Council and the Board of Directors.

Also, the task forces found resources developed by professors, namely, Linda Sweeting at Towson University assembled course web sites with hundreds of references [[Professional Ethics for Scientists, syllabus, spring 2003](#)] and Rudolph Marcus at California Institute of Technology designed computer programs with real ethics learning experiences.”

How the constitution of the first committee membership was determined?

NJ:

As previously reported, for the task forces the members who had voiced a concern about a lack of ethics programs within ACS were chosen in the first place. In other cases, like mine, people in positions who should be considering the ethics issues for the ACS were asked (go back to Halley Merrell's call). One of my abilities was to be heard through an opinion letter to *C&EN* that would be read and considered.

ConC did not really indicate how the committee membership would be determined. Bill Carroll, ACS President in 2005, wrote invitation letters to the first members to join the newly established Committee on Ethics with various teams of one, two, or three years of service starting in August 2005. They were well-known within ACS, namely:

Margaret A. Cavanaugh 2008	James Visintainer 2007	Carlos Gutierrez 2006
Susan M. Schelble 2008	Alanah Fitch 2007	David J. Chesney 2006
Rich Lomneth 2008	Thomas R. LeBon 2007	Catherine E. Costello 2006
Paul H. L. Walter consultant	Ned D. Heindel consultant	

Looking back, what do you consider to be the most significant outcomes from the establishment of the Committee on Ethics within ACS?

NJ:

Up until today, the Committee on Ethics has managed to enhance the credibility and integrity of the ACS itself. I can share a personal anecdote about my former tennis partner (at the University of Texas at Austin) Professor Allen Bard (who was also a member of the CPC Task Force on Ethics). He was the Editor-in-Chief of JACS from 1982 to 2001 and told me of his long sleepless nights proofreading of manuscripts to ensure high quality publications by JACS. “A further issue that has come up regularly in discussions relates to the ethical control of the publishing portion of the Society. There was a feeling that we should act more vigorously on issues that relate to co-author responsibilities, editorial review, etc. It was the opinion of the chair of this [ethics] committee that such subjects are under the control of the Governing Board for Publishing. There was no reason that the committee might not wish to be involved in such a setting; but there was a body legally incorporated to deal with these issues.”

Neil, let us finish an interview by time traveling from the past to the future. How do you envision the Committee on Ethics to be evolving for the next five years? Please share your perspectives from the strategic planning retreat, May 10-12, 2024. What are the emerging ethics themes that students and scientists need to keep abreast of?

NJ:

This is a tough one. Our strategic planning retreat suggested we have grown enough to consider our outcomes and where we are going. The first-class ethics operation is going to take a significant amount of effort and organization. I think we can make connections and collaborations with other organizations, both inside and outside of ACS, to learn from their expertise and adopt their training materials. We can survey (again) the current offerings by ACS divisions such as the Division Chemistry and the Law, Industrial and Engineering Chemistry Division, and Division of Professional Relations, and then put it to work at national meetings.

A particularly hot topic that emerged is the ethics surrounding artificial intelligence (AI), especially after the launch of ChatGPT and similar technologies. This has sparked considerable debate about the ethical implications of AI in research and professional settings. One emerging theme is the dual role of AI as a potential tool for both ethical breaches and ethical reinforcement. AI can be misused, but it can also help detect dishonesty and ensure integrity, depending on how professionals conduct themselves. Leveraging AI responsibly rather than fearing it is crucial.

Ultimately, I think we cannot solve the ethics problem completely. We cannot clean up some issues because there may not be real, appropriate ways to view a situation. I do not know what we can do about that. What I can say is that all the ACS members I have worked with on numerous committees, local sections, regional and national meetings, and the Board of Directors, were exceptionally good individuals. They had high moral and social norms. I cherished a supportive culture in ACS and, moreover, I really appreciated hearing “Thank you” for what I was doing.

Neil, thank you very much for sharing your historical insights into the committee inception. Clearly, the hard work by the task forces has built a solid foundation for the start of a wonderful intellectual journey by the proposed committee. For a sequential reading we recommend the 2009 interview with Margaret Cavanaugh, the first Chair of the Committee on Ethics².

References:

1. Voting on an Ethics Committee. Neil Jespersen. *C&EN*, March 7, 2005. <https://cen.acs.org/articles/83/i10/VOTING-ETHICS-COMMITTEE.html>
2. Research Ethics 101: Interview with Margaret Cavanaugh, Chair of the American Chemical Society’s Committee on Ethics. Christen Brownley. *ChemMatters*, February 2009. <https://teachchemistry.org/chemmatters/february-2009/research-ethics-101-interview-with-margaret-cavanaugh-chair-of-the-american-chemical-society-s-committee-on-ethics>