

Memorable Moments and Reflections on Ethics

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the ACS Committee on Ethics

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This compilation is the latest in a series of articles describing the origin and milestones of the ACS Committee on Ethics (ETHX) for its 20th anniversary commemoration in 2026.¹ For this feature, the ETHX history subcommittee invited former committee chairs and members to share their memorable moments of significant events or experiences from their time as ETHX members and to offer their thoughts on how the ethical landscape has evolved since their membership term. We are very grateful to all the contributors for their reflections on the role of ethics in the scientific community, past and at present. The specific contributors are Neil Jespersen, Susan Schelble, Gregory Ferrence, Keith Vitense, Kelly Elkins, Judith Currano, Ronald D'Amelia, Fran Kravitz, and John D'Angelo. The following entries are arranged in chronological sequence, starting with the early discussions about ethics within ACS in 2002 and concluding with recent references to the Chemist's Code of Conduct in 2022. The history subcommittee hopes that the observations presented by these experienced members will inspire young chemists to join the Committee on Ethics and continue illuminating its path for the many years ahead.

NEIL JESPERSEN

Professor Emeritus, Chemistry Department, St. John's University, New York, NY



Memorable Moment

Ethics was brought up in ca 2002 when I was Chairman of the Chemistry Department and Chair of the Committee on Committees, and Halley Merrell was the Secretary of the American Chemical Society. He called me on a Sunday afternoon and asked why I was in the office, then quickly asked if I had considered ethics. I said no, thinking that problems are self-fixing in science. He gave me information where *scientific ethics* was being discussed by several ACS committees and some of the major scientific organizations had programs to bring their scientists up to ethics principals. I was amazed and joined those who thought that an ACS Ethics Committee was needed.

Reflection on Ethics

In the beginning the Committee on Ethics had some hurdles to get over. The main problem was ensuring the Ethics Committee functioned as an educational group. Several groups were meeting and came to the same conclusion. One thing I see is that *ethics* is everywhere in the scientific endeavor. Like law, it is omnipresent. In time, an ethics library will grow to the size of law libraries.



SUSAN M. SCHELBLE

Faculty, University of Colorado-Denver, Denver, CO

Memorable Moment

I served on the ACS Ethics Committee from 2005 (at its conception) until 2014. This was a great experience for me and my fellow members. Working on this committee (later named ETHX) brought many opportunities to interact with professional scientists, ethicists, and attorneys on a global level. Our nascent entry into designing the standards for all of chemical professionals took place at the 56th SERMACS regional meeting of ACS in Augusta, GA in 2006. This began a routine set of workshops at multiple regional meetings, national meetings, and three symposia at Pacificchem Conferences. The Pacificchem 2021 program led to an ACS book about the work stemming from this committee, ACS Symposium Series: International Ethics in Chemistry: Developing Common Values across Cultures. Susan M. Schelble and Kelly M. Elkins, eds. #1401, ACS Books, Washington, DC, November 29, 2021.²

GREGORY FERRENCE

Professor, Chemistry Department, Illinois State University, Normal, IL



Memorable Moment

ACS approval of ETHX as the official acronym for the Committee on Ethics was a small but lasting action stemming from my time as Chair. During this time, ETHX expanding its networking to well aligned bodies external to ACS, such as the National Center for Principled Leadership & Research Ethics (NCPRE), the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE), the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and Sigma Xi (The Scientific Research Honor Society), was particularly significant. My singular most memorable moment was the 2012 face-to-face dialog ETHX had with a State Department hosted delegation of Iraqi chemical professionals working to reestablish an association of chemists after the political changes that had swept their country.

Reflection on Ethics

A 2012 strategic planning retreat led to the updated ETHX vision: “Ethics will permeate the culture of chemistry” which has evolved into today’s vision: “Enabling Trust, Honesty, and Integrity for Chemistry and Society (ETHICS).” I was approached by the ACS President-Elect in 2005 to serve on the newly formed ACS Committee on Ethics. My professional ethics leadership journey taught me that while chemical professionals tend to gravitate towards outcomes driven actions, where process is documented, but success tends to be measured by the outcomes, subjects such as professional ethics are fundamentally process driven. The only measurable outcomes are negative (a case of fraud, fallout from failure to navigate Conflicts of Interest, a preventable accident, etc). It’s impossible to measure how many times you were honest today. When it comes to ethics, it is processes of constant discussion, best practice documentation, education, and awareness that are essential to success. Like vision statements, the processes of getting to the final outcomes (the words of the vision statements) are dramatically more important.



KEITH VITENSE

Professor Emeritus, Chemistry, Physics and Engineering Department, Cameron University, Lawton, OK

Memorable Moment

I believe the two most significant actions to come from my tenure as the Chair of the Ethics Committee was the establishment of ChemLuminary Awards for ACS units to recognize Ethics Programming at the Local Section level, and to strengthen the link between ETHX and the Committee on Chemical Safety. The ChemLuminary Awards came after a modification of our committee charge to include the wording “...serve as an advocate for the promotion of ethical activities.” Finally, my tenure as chair was a turning point when it ended, as I was the last in a line of chairs that had been with the committee since it was established!

Reflection on Ethics

My personal view regarding challenges to ethics is the recognition that “ethics” is, by many, considered to be treated as an on/off switch – either ethical or unethical. Although there are actions that I believe the vast majority of people would label as falling into one or the other of these categories, there are so many more that the assignment of a singular label - “ethical” or “unethical” - is at best murky, with this determination by any individual based on a multitude of factors: culture, education, and religion just to name a few.



KELLY ELKINS

Professor, Chemistry Department, Towson University, Towson, MD

Memorable Moment

I have many memories of my time on the Ethics Committee including the establishment of ChemLuminary awards for Ethics Programming at the Local Section level and the ACS Undergraduate Awards for Excellence in Chemical Safety & Ethics, collating ethics resources for the website, co-organizing ethics symposia with the Divisions of Professional Relations and Chemical Information, co-editing a symposium series book volume published by ACS Books entitled “International Ethics in Chemistry: Developing Common Values across Cultures,”² co-presenting an ACS Webinar “Why you need to care about ethics,”³ and authoring the first-ever Ethics Committee Handbook!

Reflection on Ethics

My personal view is that professional ethics must be taught as much as stoichiometry or chemical reactivity. Morals may vary, but science is international, and we need an international code of ethics for the chemical sciences. I emphasize codes of conduct, standards, decision-making, role-playing, and case studies in my courses.

JUDITH CURRANO

Head, Chemistry Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA



Memorable Moment

The Committee on Ethics fully embraced hybrid meetings in 2018, at the beginning of my tenure as chair, enhancing all committee members' ability to participate fully in committee activities even if they lacked the funds or flexibility of schedule to travel. This also meant that, when the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns took effect in 2020, we were already practiced at meeting virtually and were able to continue our work uninterrupted. We awarded the first two ChemLuminary Awards for exceptional local section ethics programs, strengthened our national meeting programming ties with the Division of Chemical Information, and redesigned our website and improved our curated list of ethics resources. Through an interactive poster presentation,⁴ we explored ACS members' comfort with and access to resources in various ethics areas, and we used the data collected to inform our activities. Although the committee is not an adjudicatory body, we did our best to point members in the direction of individuals and resources who could help them resolve ethical dilemmas.

Reflection on Ethics

When most people think about “ethics” in science, they consider actions that impact the responsible conduct of research, including fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and treatment of research subjects. Those who perpetrate these unethical actions are practicing a profound disrespect for other people and a desire to further their own careers at the expense of others. If everyone's first priority was to treat others with kindness and respect, valuing their presence in and contributions to our workplaces, the vast majority of ethical breaches we see in the chemical enterprise would disappear, and it is our duty to practice and cultivate this level of respect. Another pervasive issue in recent years is society's desire to insulate itself from inconvenient truths by cherry-picking information from sources that are known to agree with one's desired outcome or belief. I believe that it is our ethical responsibility, as chemists and as citizens of the world, to avoid this form of “confirmation bias” and to seek, accept, and share information that makes us uncomfortable or contradicts long-held beliefs, in addition to the information that we find more comfortable to accept.



RONALD D'AMELIA

Adjunct Professor, Chemistry Department, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY

Memorable Moment

My tenure on the Ethics Committee from 2017 to 2022 was an extremely beneficial experience in that I developed close relationships with both Patrick Knerr (worked at Novo Nordisk research center) and Jim Tatera (worked as a Consultant for his own company) as well as with other members at that time such as Judith Currano and William Leong who were both Chairpersons during my time on the Ethics committee. I also remember working with the Staff Liaison Eric Slater who helped many of us with various administrative items. Pat and I collaborated on the Resources and Communication subcommittee involved with ethics ability to replicate and translate research findings. Specifically, both Pat and I developed a monograph on the “Introduction of the Ethics of Scientific Conflict of Interest (COI)”⁵ which highlighted what was scientific COI, Identified COI with various examples and what to do about COI, and finally included case studies as support examples to COI. Working with Pat was a great experience and produced, I think, an excellent ethics document. Jim and I both went to Catholic church together during the Sundays at the various Ethics Committee meeting locations, and we would speak on many topics of the day including politics, religion, and ethics issues. I hope this can provide some historical basis for you.



FRAN KRAVITZ

Career Consultant, American Chemical Society, Winfield, IL

Memorable Moment

I joined ETHX in 2017 and was involved in three projects. The first was designing a new website with Sheila Kanodia. The process involved choosing a server, determining the website management system, and designing the graphic background with the expertise of Milt Levenberg. Today, the ETHX website is in the excellent hands of Svetlana Korolev. My favorite project was writing a kid's article for "Celebrating Chemistry" on Alfred Nobel for the 2021 issue.⁶ My final project, designing a 2023 webinar, was interrupted when I was elected to the ACS Council Policy Committee in 2022. My best memory will always be the dedicated members of ETHX.

Reflection on Ethics

Today, I believe ethics is a strong and integral part of the American Chemical Society. Ethics is not just found in the Committee on Ethics but is actively part of all the other ACS committees and the governance. There will always be bumps and curves in the landscape, but I feel the scientific community makes sure that *ethics* is in the forefront of research, issues, and policies.



JOHN G. D'ANGELO

Professor and Chair, Chemistry Division, Alfred University, Alfred, NY

Memorable Moment

My memorable moment is when we were discussing changes to the Chemist's Code of Conduct⁷ as it relates to the death penalty and speaking out formally against it, and whether or not we should adopt such a stance as a society.

Reflection on Ethics

I am constantly thinking about scientific ethics and, mostly these days, I have moved into thinking about the interplay between society and science, and science and society. THIS landscape, I feel these days, is changing at a breakneck pace, not just because of the current political climate but because of the challenges brought about by AI.

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