Public Criticism – Parody

I’ll be presenting on Case 19-8 from 2019 about a parody issue between two engineers. Here are the facts.

Engineer A is an engineering student within an engineering program at a major university. In an online student blog not directly associated with the university, Engineer A parodied one of his engineering professors, Engineer B. The parodied characterization could be viewed by some as humorous and not malicious. It could also be viewed by others as disparaging. The blog was viewed by many engineering students at the university as well as by engineering faculty.

The question is: Was it ethical for Engineer A to satirize one of this engineering professors, Engineer B? To begin this discussion, it would be necessary to first consult what closest references this type of situation in the code of ethics.

At III.7., it states “Engineers shall not attempt to injure, maliciously or falsely, directly or indirectly, the professional reputation, prospects, practice, or employment of other engineers. Engineers who believe others are guilty of unethical or illegal practice shall present such information to the proper authority for action.” This section addresses the situation very clearly, and answers the question of if it was ethical for Engineer A to satirize his professor, Engineer B. And that answer is that it is not ethical.

Now if we move a bit beyond the discussion done within this case, one could make an argument in the opposite direction that it WAS ethical, because it was a parody with no intention of harming Engineer B or their career, and that a simple parody could even lift the spirits of everyone involved. The unfortunate rebuttal to that argument, is that not everyone will take jokes as lightly, so there is always the potential for someone important to see it in a negative light, and the joke ends up permanently damaging Engineer B’s reputation, or even worse, damage the reputation of their peers as well.

On top of this, we can see in III.1.f., it reads “Engineers shall treat all persons with dignity, respect, fairness, and without discrimination”. To apply this to the question at hand would also result in the same answer as from before, with the supporting factor instead being that Engineer B is being treated disrespectfully, rather than Engineer A attempting to injure the professional reputation of engineers, the former argument more accurately representing this particular case.

In the end, the review board came to the conclusion that Engineer A’s actions were not ethical, and that Engineer A should issue not only a public statement apologizing to Engineer B, but an in person apology as well. This seems to be a good action in order to make up for some of what happened, but to make up for the damage already done, a minor punishment such as a few hours of community service should be put in place as well.