

# Intensifying Integrity: Prioritizing Values Within Tech and Academia

By Seth Hutchinson

In the past, I have used the “President’s Message” to advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion and to describe related efforts by the IEEE Robotics and Automation Society (RAS) and IEEE. In this column, I’ll turn to larger, systemic issues that arise in organizations, companies, and institutions.

Rather than deal in generalities and abstractions, I will focus on three illustrative examples from current events. I will give only abbreviated descriptions of the circumstances, but in each case, I provide references to publications that relay the details that are worth reading. While motivations and intentions can be debated, these articles paint a consistent picture of institutional actions that are incongruous with the values of our profession and that also have caused serious personal harm to individuals in our community. My hope is that calling attention to these examples will help raise awareness in our community and inspire creative action.

I’ll begin with Google’s treatment of the coleads of its Ethical Artificial Intelligence (AI) research team, Timnit Gebru and Margaret Mitchell. Gebru, coauthor of an article that raised ethical questions about the use of large language models, was abruptly fired when she refused to retract the already-submitted manuscript. Two months later, Google fired Mitchell. The details of these events have been widely reported [1], [2]. It is a story replete with instances of Google management acting

in bad faith and releasing disingenuous statements intended to discredit Gebru and Mitchell, along with reports of a workplace environment tolerant of racism and sexism. Condemnation of Google’s actions in this case has come from across the tech world. Multiple groups, including Black in AI, Queer in AI, and Widening Natural Language Processing, have ended their sponsorship agreements with Google, in part as a response to the treatment of Gebru and Mitchell [3], [4].

All of this raises the question: what role, if any, should we, individually or as a Society, play in such situations? At present, RAS does not have a policy for such things. I hope to change this and to formalize policy guidelines that will include specific criteria that reflect our Society’s values in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Companies whose actions are inconsistent with our values should not be eligible to sponsor our events, conduct on-site recruiting activities, or participate in our exhibitions. It is time for RAS to encode these values in policies.

My second example concerns University of Michigan (UM) Assistant Professor Walter Lasecki, who was accused of sexual harassment and assault by multiple women, has been sanctioned by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), and has since resigned from his position at UM [5], [6]. Lasecki’s actions, while reprehensible, are not my focus in this article. My concern today is the plodding, self-justifying, and ultimately inadequate



response of UM administrators when presented with multiple credible complaints of both harassment and assault.

The first responsibility of a university is to its students, and in this regard, the UM administration failed. ACM was able to sort through accusations, interview witnesses, consult legal counsel, and arrive at the decision that Lasecki be banned for at least five years from participating in ACM events, but UM was unable even to conclude that a significant wrong had been committed.

Many academic department heads, deans, and provosts have attained their positions without the benefit of formal training in ethics or management. Most began as professors and rose through the academic ranks to their administrative positions. This provides neither consolation to survivors nor absolution for UM’s administrative failures. Nor does the excuse that “my hands are tied by institutional and legal policy” legitimize lack of decisive action. If you are unwilling to risk your administrative position to protect your students, then you have no business in university administration, and, based on the extensive reporting on this case, resignations by multiple UM administrators would be appropriate.

ACM’s actions in this case exemplify how a professional society can respond in such situations, and I believe that RAS is now equipped with appropriate policies and infrastructure to provide a comparable response if we face a comparable situation. On a personal level, I encourage each of you to take a strong

stand in the face of administrative failures of this kind, to forgo decorum and quiet lobbying in favor of vocal and organized action. Votes of no confidence, public petitions, and letters to editors are all preferable to private complaints lodged behind closed doors or in faculty meetings.

My final example is the University of North Carolina's (UNC's) handling of the tenure decision for Nikole Hannah-Jones [7]. Hannah-Jones was recruited for a chaired professorship in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at UNC. Her tenure case moved smoothly through the system, ultimately reaching the board of trustees, whose final approval is required for all tenure cases. At two successive meetings, in November 2020 and January 2021, the board declined to vote on the case, provoking widespread outrage and leading Hannah-Jones to threaten

legal action. Behind the scenes, Walter E. Hussman, Jr., publisher of the conservative *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, and whose donation of US\$25 million to UNC bought the naming rights to its School of Journalism, had directly lobbied the university in opposition to Hannah-Jones [8]. His objections, shared by many on the political right, stem from the portrayal of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States as described in the Pulitzer Prize-winning "1619 Project" [9]. The faculty of the Hussman School has denounced UNC's treatment of Hannah-Jones as racist [10], and there is little to rebut this charge.

As a roboticist, I am manifestly unqualified to evaluate the tenure case of Hannah-Jones; however, as a member of the professoriate, I am eminently qualified to judge academic process. At UNC, the process failed. Why does this

matter to a roboticist? Why should a professor in a college of engineering or computing be concerned with tenure decisions in a school of journalism? The obvious answers are grounded in the integrity and independence of our academic institutions. If donors can influence tenure decisions for a school of journalism, and if the integrity of our institutions is so easily compromised by external forces, engineering disciplines will not long enjoy immunity from similar intrusions. At moments like these, we in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields must stand visibly and forcefully with our colleagues across the university in opposition to those who would compromise our academic integrity in service to political agendas, especially so when those agendas are rooted in racism and intolerance.

The common element in these stories is that of individuals in large organizations making decisions perceived to be in the organizations' interests, even when they violate the basic ethical values of our profession. Corporate executives, department heads and deans, and members of boards of trustees should all be held accountable for such actions. Our technical community, collectively and as individuals, should take an active role both in realizing accountability and in advocating for policies that will prevent these problems in the future.

## References

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The last suggestion was for conference overseers to make some sort of recommendation that a certain percentage of the organizing team be brand new to a conference, perhaps 10–20%. It would be “a model where you first help organize some symposia or workshops then work up from there to organize in some larger conferences and finally the massive conferences,” and it would help bring in “new blood” for both women and men. However, there was some disagreement with this quota system, and the idea of extensive statistics reporting for conference organizers was also brought up. The rationale for the statistics was that understanding opportunities organizers are offering will make organizers think about ways they can “make measurable improvement” in diversity without top-down recommendations, such as by simply increasing the number of positions and awards available. “By just having more opportunities, they don’t have to leave

out the people they wanted to include, but they can think about adding more.”

The interviewees admitted that seeing the impact of their efforts from 2015 and before is “really gratifying.” However, the work to improve the representation of women in robotics is ongoing. An eventual goal of one interviewee is to be gender-blind in conference organization. This can be accomplished by building a community where everybody is equally engaged, leading to natural diversity. “Then we wouldn’t need to be quite so intentional about who does what.” The RAS Conference Advisory board is doing its part by tracking the gender diversity of proposed and completed conferences, in both leadership positions and in keynote speaking roles. This, and other efforts promoted by WIE within the RAS, should help continue to encourage gender diversity.

Since ICRA is the largest robotics conference, the differences from the

norm in 2015 were more visible. The conference acted as a kick starter to change, putting the problem in the minds of thousands of community members and getting them thinking about how to continue making positive differences. The revolutionary idea and excellent execution of the 2015 women-led ICRA propelled robotics to a point where we can freely have these conversations with our colleagues and continue to make meaningful change.

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## PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE *(continued from page 10)*

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