

Arrogance

How ironic that the article about applied physics at Columbia University (Industry/Academia) appeared in the same issue of *The Industrial Physicist* (June 1999) as the discussion on arrogance (Hidden Physicists). The problem is the perception that a hard line exists between science and engineering.

The industrial R&D lab from which I recently retired was aware of how fuzzy the area is between the two disciplines. A new employee was always given a two-word job title. The first was an adjective that reflected grade level, and the second was either “scientist” or “engineer,” at the choice of the employee. One recent project I was involved in concerned trying to find a reliable, practical method to measure soot in the exhaust of a diesel engine. Much of the work, including all testing, was done at a university. So we had academics, grad students, physicists, and engineers all working on the same project, toward the same (applied) ends.

I am concerned that the general public is even losing track of what the two classic jobs entail (pure scientist and design engineer), let alone what people do in this gray area in the middle—that of applied science and R&D.

Don Stauffer
Minneapolis, MN
stauffer@gte.net

I sympathize with the B.S.E.E. who was denied a physics minor even though he had done the work (*The Industrial Physicist*, June 1999, p. 41). Early in my career, I was placed as a “technical writer” (a.k.a. engineering writer, or electronics writer). The job title placed the emphasis on writing, and although knowledge of publications was important, it was also necessary to understand circuit analysis and electronic systems. There was a second title, Member of Technical Staff, Electronics. Unfortunately, this was denigrated by supervisors (who were E.E.’s) as meaningless. The impact was that I connected with a professional society for technical writers but failed to recognize the need for the support of a physics professional society.

It would be helpful to physics baccalaureates if their associates recognized titles such as Member of Technical Staff as meaningful. These titles indicate that physics baccalaureates are working as professionals and are no longer “physics majors” any more than engineers are “engineering majors.” As a further measure, physics baccalaureates should connect with appropriate societies that support physics professionals.

Robert McGuane
Wellesley, MA
rjm4help@yahoo.com 