

# Special Session: Fostering Well-Being amid Cycles of Professional Shame in Faculty-Student Interactions

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**Abstract**—In this special session, we seek to cultivate an understanding of the phenomenon of professional shame, a painful emotional state that occurs when we fail to meet perceived identity-relevant expectations in our professional domains. We particularly work with attendees to examine instances of professional shame that arise in the context of teacher-student relationships within engineering programs. How might our interactions with students facilitate professional shame experiences, both for our students and ourselves? How can we advance well-being when we inevitably encounter these emotional experiences, both for our students and ourselves? By the end of this special session, attendees will have a nascent understanding of the concept of professional shame and be able to apply strategies to advance well-being when they experience this painful emotion.

**Keywords**—emotion, shame, teacher-student relationships, well-being

## I. OVERALL DESCRIPTION

We stand at a watershed moment in engineering education research and practice, characterized by a growing recognition of mental health in engineering programs [1-5] and a nascent sense of attention to the emotional capacity that students need to face the complexities of engineering practice [4-8]. We must now recognize that the mission of engineering education is to not only develop professional competence but also intentional care of students and faculty.

Aligned with these aims to promote well-being within engineering education, in the proposed special session, facilitators will draw on our empirically and theoretically informed perspectives of shame in engineering [4, 5] and other academic settings [9, 10] to provide participants with a guiding framework for navigating moments of professional shame—as experienced by faculty or students—in engineering courses. The anticipated audience for this special session is faculty of engineering courses who desire to improve the climate of healthy emotion regulation within their courses.

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Central to this special session is the theoretical construct of professional shame. Based on how shame is characterized in psychological and sociological literature [11-16], we define professional shame as having four essential features:

- (1) Individuals perceive themselves to have failed to meet socially constructed expectations that are relevant to their identities in a professional domain;
- (2) individuals experience a painful emotional state amid such perceived failure;
- (3) individuals attribute the failure to meet expectations to an inadequate whole, or global, self rather than a domain - specific feature of a certain identity; and
- (4) individuals within professional domains not only experience the emotional state of shame but also contribute to expectations that establish the conditions for professional shame to occur (p. 2 in [4]).

Against the backdrop of professional socialization in engineering education, where students learn from faculty messages of what it means to be an engineer [17-19], we recognize the potency for professional shame to occur when students (or faculty) perceive that they have failed to meet sociocultural expectations that are relevant to their identities. In this special session, we do not seek to eradicate these negative emotional experiences. Rather, we seek to advance interventional strategies for advancing well-being amid teacher-student relationships in our collective, inevitable experiences with professional shame.

## II. JUSTIFICATION FOR NOVELTY OF SPECIAL SESSION

This special session will advance well-being within engineering courses through insight from recent engineering education research on professional shame [4, 5]. We are aware of few interventions that have so explicitly been designed to improve the climate of emotion regulation within engineering courses or even to regard faculty as complex individuals themselves (rather than mere supporters of the student experience). We note that this special session is adapted from a workshop offered at the ASEE Conference in July 2021.

## III. FORMAT OF THE SPECIAL SESSION

The special session will be highly interactive but also provide participants with opportunities to learn new content. The content of the workshop will be organized in two ways. First,

facilitators will draw on their own investigations to introduce the nuanced constructs of professional shame (associated with becoming a professional) [4, 5] and academic shame (associated with academic performance) [9, 10]. More significantly, the facilitators will guide the workshop so that participants may internalize and contextualize the content to their specific engineering courses.

#### IV. ITINERARY

The first portion of the special session will begin by facilitators providing brief overviews of their perspectives of shame in engineering as informed by their prior work (20 minutes). These presentations will lead into semi-structured activities that enable workshop participants to practice recognizing moments of professional shame in students through a role-play scenario that are informed by findings of a related investigation (20 minutes). Finally, the special session will move toward reflective activities, which will enable workshop participants to reflect on their own moments of professional shame when interacting with engineering students (20 minutes). We will conclude the special session by identifying healthy individual patterns of coping with shame and connecting such patterns to our capacity to create equitable environments that facilitate care for engineering students (20 minutes).

Specifically, the itinerary for this special session is as follows:

0 – 3 min: Welcome and brief overview of the workshop purpose and itinerary.

3 – 20 min: Interactive panel with facilitators. The following perspectives will be represented:

*What is professional shame? Examining shame as a phenomenon of being* (Dr. James Huff)

*What is academic shame? Examining shame as a phenomenon of learning* (Dr. Jeannine Turner)

20 – 23 min: Explanation of role-play activity. Participants will work in roundtables to complete a role-playing exercise based on data from a related study on professional shame.

23 – 35 min: Role-play activity that creates a moment of a defensive exchange between a faculty member and a student. Participants complete the activity with prompting provided in a handout that is provided by the facilitators.

35 – 45 min: Report out from various groups. How did they experience the moment? Did they connect the role-play scenario to a real moment within their lived experiences?

45 – 55 min: Think-pair-share. Participants reflect upon moments that they have seen professional shame at work in their classes. Have their students felt threats to their identities? Were they experiencing a threat to their own identities as educators? Were they experiencing professional shame?

55 – 65 min: Participants report out moments of times that they have experienced professional shame. What standards did they feel beholden to? Facilitators will

adaptively unpack healthy strategies to cope with professional shame, such as disconnecting the self from the actions, reducing the level of expectations, and seeking social connection.

65 – 80 min Group discussion. How does attending to our own care allow us to cultivate welcoming and caring spaces within engineering education programs?

#### V. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will recognize professional shame as a potentially salient phenomenon within their engineering courses—as experienced by both their students and themselves. Additionally, by the end of the workshop participants will be able to identify coping mechanisms that both facilitate individually healthy outcomes and cultivate equitable and inclusive environments in engineering education.

#### VI. ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

**Dr. James L. Huff** is an Associate Professor of Engineering Education and an Honors College Faculty Fellow at Harding University. He leads the research group Beyond Professional Identity (BPI), which broadly investigates lived experience of identity within individuals in the interest of advancing holistic identity development and psychological health in engineering domains. Dr. Huff is currently the lead investigator on an NSF-funded project to investigate shame in the context of engineering education (NSF EEC 1752897).

**Dr. Jeannine Turner** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Learning Systems in the College of Education at Florida State University. Her current research interests include motivation, learning, and engineering students' motivation and knowledge transfer. Dr. Turner is most known for her research on students' experiences of academic shame. She has authored several articles for academic journals such as *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Educational Psychology*, *Educational Psychology Review*, and *Journal of Advanced Academics*.

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