



New Directions, New Ideas

We live in a time of risk for professional societies, but it's also a time of unprecedented opportunity. Scientific activity around the world is expanding dramatically. Research universities and laboratories of exceptional quality exist in many countries now. Development of and access to new technologies are widely viewed as the keys to a higher standard of living. This has led to an explosion in technical information that, simultaneously, is highly available but also overwhelming to those working in a particular field. Meanwhile, large-scale information consumers (primarily libraries, but also businesses) are under constant pressure to cut costs. The movement toward open access to scientific content, and tightening research budgets, are also placing serious constraints on the ability of professional societies to increase subscription prices to keep pace with the costs of online publishing (which, a point seldom addressed, are *not* less expensive than paper).

At the same time, the original reasons for the existence of scientific societies are evolving, due not only to these factors, but also to complex influences from society as a whole. For example, the model of the society that is part professional, part social seems no longer valid. If you've read the book *Bowling Alone*, you'll know this isn't confined to the scientific community. Few people seem to have the time for a weekly bowling night, much less an evening dinner and lecture with scientific colleagues. ECS leadership has struggled for several years with the issue of Sections, many of which are no longer meeting the needs of their members. This model seems additionally flawed when one considers that ECS membership is now at least 30% non-U.S. and a number of our Sections encompass entire countries (Canada) or even groups of countries (Europe).

Yet the need still exists for face-to-face contact in the transmission of information, the establishment of collaborations, and the generation of new ideas. It seems that as a species, humans must be able to read many

complex signs and internalize a great deal of subtly-communicated, but critical information to establish trust, build enthusiasm, and capture the imagination. Electronic communication as it exists today simply does not have the bandwidth to transmit this much information.

What does all this mean for ECS? It really boils down to one fundamental question: are we meeting the needs of our members? Sounds simple, but it's not. Our members are a highly varied lot: academicians, government researchers, students, corporations, and libraries, not to mention individuals from more than 65 countries. Needless to say, each group has its own priorities, some of which are mutually exclusive! It is thus no small challenge for ECS leadership to decide how to balance these while moving in new directions for the good of the organization.

I'm in the final four months of my tenure as president and it's abundantly clear how large the challenges are and how critical it is to maintain focus on a set of institutional goals. To do this, the ECS Executive Committee recently instituted a regular twice-yearly meeting devoted to strategic planning. This enables us to spend more time in detailed and thoughtful discussion of complex issues. These goals will address our most important functions: members and their benefits, publications, meetings, relationships with other professional societies, education, and outreach. To give you a sample of my own thinking, I believe that ECS can grow its membership substantially over the next decade; a target of 4% per year would result in a 50% increase over 10 years. I also think we can triple the number of active student members in an even shorter time frame (to nearly 2,500). Our publications, already of superb quality, must do more than evolve; some revolutionary thinking is required to meet member needs *and* address the pressures and complexities of the new information environment. Finally, our meeting structure must change to address the international realities of our membership. For example, I

would like to see all our international Sections hold vigorous annual meetings like those organized by the Canadian Section. These ideas will take resources, money, and considerable thought to execute well.

I've really enjoyed the privilege of serving as President of ECS. There are so many exciting things happening; it's been a great time to be involved. I want to thank our outstanding headquarters staff who worked closely with me during my four years on the Executive Committee. They are a tremendous asset to ECS and a vital part of its success. Finally, I want to thank all of you for your thoughtful comments throughout this time and for your hard work to advance the purposes and objectives of ECS. If you're not involved now, please consider doing so in the future—your ideas will be the catalyst that moves ECS forward in new directions. ■

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