

WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 35

OCTOBER 2003

NUMBER 4

THE FUTURE OF WOOD SCIENCE AND FOREST PRODUCTS— IN OUR HANDS OR THEIRS?

Depending on whom you talk with or listen to—you might hear that our academic programs in wood science and forest products are in continual decline. Certainly, we were all surprised by the recent actions to close the California Forest Products Laboratory. Most academic programs in North America have experienced significant declines in state or federal government support due to the depressed economy since 9/11. Many colleagues worldwide share similar tales of budget woe. We continually struggle with student recognition of our profession and constantly talk about student recruitment. The recent SWST member survey reports the mean age of members at 51 years—an aging society with declining membership. We are experiencing many retirements of baby boomers—who were part of a bigger movement in our profession when all programs and the industry were experiencing tremendous postwar expansion. The timing today could not be worse—bad budgets, retirements, low student numbers, a maturing industry, and overwhelming offshore competition for North American producers. Don't forget that there is actually a glut of wood and fiber on the world market, and prices for some products/supplies are depressed. All of this is wrapped up in the context of a fast-paced, changing, and technological global society. The latter may be our biggest hurdle in changing our academic programs to be vibrant educational and challenging environments that can produce students who will lead the industry and do societal good. Why do the best young student minds go to the sciences, engineering, or medical professions? We simply haven't demanded them in our programs or in the industry at large.

Our academic programs are slow to change, and we will continue to erode unless we change. Without naming names, those of us in North America know where the bright spots are among our academic programs—even while other programs are declining, these programs continue to prosper. There have been real growth and prosperity at several institutions in the past five years. If you were to examine their academic, research, and outreach programs, you would find innovation, pushing the frontier on instrumentation, materials science, use of technology, and unconventional approaches to nearly everything they do. Recent faculty hires in these programs are coming from other

disciplines and backgrounds because traditional knowledge of wood is not enough anymore.

We need more rigor in our academic programs. We need to be competitive in attracting students who are interested in science and technology, information technology and let's not forget business and marketing. We need curriculum revision for the profession at large. We need professional recognition by the general public. Maybe all of our academic programs should carry the same name, simple brand recognition of sorts. SWST needs to figure out how it is going to survive as the leading voice of the profession when our membership demographics are stacked against us and we number only in the hundreds. We need more cooperation—not competition—among our academic programs. We need a stronger voice with the same message that can reach decision-makers within our universities and governments and with the general public.

We need to change if we are going to be here in another decade. SWST needs to change, and our academic programs need to change. I challenge you to name a company that is not doing global business, or has not merged with a competitor. Or an association that has not merged with a competing association. Or a manufacturer or service provider who has not formed a 'strategic alliance' to be stronger, more competitive, and more focused on value and quality for the customer. The private sector lives and dies by change. We academics seem to fear it and cling to the status quo.

Is the future of wood science and forest products in our hands or theirs? I've looked in the mirror and the enemy is us—to paraphrase a famous quote. We usually blame our descent on 'them' and gladly accept all the credit when we are ascending. The future is clearly in our hands. Unless you physically have your hands tied. And you don't. And we don't. And SWST doesn't. I challenge you to forecast the future ten years from now and then think about the changes necessary to get us there successfully. Will our programs and the profession be flourishing—not waning or simply gone without a trace? We can't get there without significant change.

PAUL M. WINISTORFER

*Professor and Department Head
Wood Science and Forest Products,
Virginia Tech, and
President, Forest Products Society*