

WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 36

OCTOBER 2004

NUMBER 4

WOOD TECHNOLOGY/FOREST PRODUCTS A PROFESSION?

*Comments accompanying receipt of one of the
2004 SWST Distinguished Service Awards*

Wood Science and Technology in North America had its origin in forestry departments, schools and colleges, or in the early years in departments of biology. In fact, forestry, or natural resources as many of the programs are called today, is still the usual home for wood science and technology at many institutions of higher learning. In some places, wood science and technology and forest products have grown up to become independent departments in several colleges. A very few became parts of engineering programs.

Despite a relatively long history of wood science and technology, in many respects, the wood technologist or forest products specialist is still an adolescent who resents his parent (forestry), envies his brothers (the biological and material sciences), and is unsure of himself.

Let's take a closer look at this statement.

Resents his parent. . . . Although most wood science and technology programs were spawned in forestry, that parent has become less management- and production-oriented than it was in the past, responding to public pressures. As such, some university forestry programs have become almost ashamed of having a few "wood busters" among their faculty members. The result is the closing or eliminating of wood science programs at some institutions where wood technology used to be among the leaders in the field. And the process is not over yet; more wood technology programs will probably disappear in North America. No wonder we dislike in these days our forestry parent.

Envies his brothers. . . . Biology found ways to fit easily into the environmental era. As a result, biology has grown up to be "important." Material Science and Engineering? We should remember that the late George Marra advocated that we should follow a material science and engineering approach in Wood Science and Technology. Well, Material Science and Engineering did not even exist as a profession at the time SWST was formed. But now most major university engineering programs have independent departments of Materials Engineering and that profession has created its own societies and associations that provide services to the professionals. What have we done to measure up to our "brothers"? Not much . . . but it's not too late.

First of all, we must trust ourselves and must be self-assured that ours is a profession that should be recognized as one that has contributed, and is still contributing, to the preservation of natural resources, to the development and production of new and improved products made from renewable resources, to the education of young professionals and the general public. However, professions are recognized by the employers. In engineering, a graduate first passes the EIT (Engineer in Training) exam. After five years in practice, the engineer has to pass the PE (Professional Engineer) exam to be allowed to practice independently in engineering. The PE exam may be taken by anyone on the basis of experience, even by those who do not have degrees in engineering. All states in the country have their own examinations for the PE, and employers of engineers recognize the need for the PE.

In most professions, there exists some type of certification, and those who are certified must

upgrade their professional knowledge at regular intervals. Such upgrading opportunities are organized by the respective professional societies through short courses and workshops. State authorities and employers require such periodic upgrading for continued practice by the professionals. When Dr. Fred Kamke was president of SWST, he proposed a certification for practicing wood technologists. When that proposal was put to vote, only about half of the membership was in favor. Therefore, with such weak support, the proposal was not pursued any further. Well, it shows that we are not sure of ourselves, or perhaps we distrust ourselves. Even electricians and plumbers are required to pass certain tests before they may practice their trades.

SWST's major role as a professional society is to provide services to its members and to the profession in general. We have already taken a step forward by establishing and recently improving accreditation procedures for university programs. The new and improved accreditation guidelines are based on outcomes rather than on prescriptions of specific courses. Should we take the next step and establish a WTIT (Wood Technologist in Training) program at universities and administer the exams by SWST? Should SWST administer PWT (Professional Wood Technologist) certifications and re-certifications in cooperation with extension programs that could provide the refresher courses? Not unless employers and public agencies recognize the value of such certification and periodic upgrading of the practitioners' knowledge. However, somebody would have to convince the employers regarding that value. And it's a very tall order for a small society with ever-dwindling membership.

When I asked one of my sons, who has two degrees in wood science and forest products and now is working for a large forest products company, why he is not a member of SWST or FPS, his answer was: "I don't get anything out of such memberships." He can read the journals at his work if he wants to. His industrial clients and competitors do not go to the annual meetings either where he would have a chance to mingle with them. We, as a society, have to provide im-

portant services to our members. Perhaps one of them is certification.

Yes, it would be a very tall order. It is a catch-22 situation though. We cannot afford it now because we are basically a very small volunteer organization. However, we could with a significantly larger membership base. To increase the membership, we would have to show the need and value of certification. But without a larger membership base, we cannot afford to retain an expanded staff whose responsibility would be to set up the certification process and convince the employers of wood technologists that certification is good for them. Please note that WoodLINKS USA has recently proposed to coordinate certification of entry-level wood technologists. Should we join hands with WoodLINKS USA in that effort? The Forest Products Society (FPS) is also grappling with this dilemma as you may note in a feature article in the July/August issue of the *Forest Products Journal*. Should we join hands also with FPS to pursue certification?

We run this society on a shoestring. The \$75 annual dues per individual member run the society and, at the same time, provide each member with about 600 pages of high quality technical publication each year in a prestigious journal. Try to buy these days a 600-page textbook for about \$25, if according to my estimates, dues contribution to running the society is at least \$50 per member. We appear to be in a dead-end street.

If SWST would have up-front funds for the establishment of a professional certification system, we might be able pull it off. Would a government agency or an industry consortium be interested in funding such an effort? Should we join hands with other organizations, such as FPS and WoodLINKS USA, and others? We have never tried it. It perhaps is only an unrealistic dream but if we do nothing, are we a professional society?

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