

# WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

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## SWST—WHAT ABOUT TECHNOLOGY?

In this 25th year of the SWST journal, it seemed appropriate to reflect on where SWST has come in those years and where we are headed. An editorial in Volume 1 discussed the premise that the Society is a professional not a research society and that it was not the intention of SWST to provide a vehicle for academicians and fundamental researchers to talk to one another. My contention is that this has become a major function of SWST. Consequently, we do a good job with the science in our Society name but a poor job with the technology.

SWST is relatively healthy, but to remain this way requires increasing membership—not necessarily in leaps and bounds but incrementally. This was also an issue 25 years ago, and the Society has in fact decreased in size by 25 percent since 1969.

In these times of increasing change, we have seen our companion organization, the Forest Products Research Society, become the Forest Products Society. This provides an opportunity for SWST to become “the research society” of our profession. However, to remain viable, to encourage the communication and use of knowledge distinctive to wood science and technology, to encourage the wise use of wood, and to foster education programs, we need to relate to the total profession rather than one segment of it. This can be done by putting more emphasis on applied research and how wood science relates to the real world.

The United States is a leader in the production of ideas but has fallen behind other countries in their commercialization. Many universities encourage the issuance of patents as a mechanism of technology transfer. This has

not been particularly successful as evidenced by the relatively insignificant royalty income generated by most universities. The production of a patent does not constitute commercialization; and while we do adequately in information transfer, we do poorly in technology transfer.

Much of our industry is relatively “low tech” and comprised of many small companies. In Minnesota more than 80 percent of wood products companies have fewer than 20 employees. Because of their size, many of these companies do not have large profit margins or an abundance of investment capital to drive change and innovation. It is difficult to support in-house R&D, and employees are often not oriented towards innovation. It is critical for more of these companies to consider new ideas, providing a role for those of us in the public sector to assist in lowering barriers. The low level of introduction of innovation is not due to the lack of opportunity but due to barriers that exist.

There is also a role for SWST by putting more emphasis on the technology in our Society name. Articles in the Society journal should have an executive summary that indicates how this research fits in the big picture and discusses the potential for commercialization. We need to look at all our programs and put more emphasis on the use of our knowledge, e.g., the visiting scientist program should feature visits by industry technologists to public sector institutions. In this way, perhaps we can make SWST and our profession more attractive to new members.

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