

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Clinton J. Andrews

## What Should We Become?

**A**re IEEE and SSIT membership organizations like a country club, or volunteer organizations serving the more general good?

The preamble to the IEEE constitution emphasizes service to the profession and the betterment of humanity. The IEEE annual report, on the other hand, tends to enumerate member benefits and tally our net publishing and conference revenues. Indeed, this third view — the Institute as a business — seems to predominate in meetings of the leadership of the IEEE and, increasingly, of SSIT. Are these views in real conflict?

Perhaps it is a matter of means and ends. The IEEE is a large and complex organization that needs to be carefully managed to ensure its continued existence. Even SSIT, with a single publication and conference, needs to ensure that its revenues offset its modest expenses. We need to be business-like as a means to greater ends. But the IEEE should parse its business objectives differently from Elsevier.

The means-ends distinction also affects whom we think the organization serves. Plausibly, the IEEE and SSIT should not want members for their own sake, but because members provide a pool of volunteers who will work to serve the general good. As a means of attracting talented and dedicated volunteers, we should provide valuable member benefits.

This story line — attract members, get some to volunteer, operate in a business-like manner, and thereby serve the profession and the public interest —

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is generally accepted among the IEEE leadership. But vocal skeptics doubt the conventional wisdom.

Some skeptics point out that non-members who author publications and make conference presentations generate the majority of our intellectual output, crassly called “intellectual property” at our board meetings. Authors and presenters receive direct rewards in the form of professional recognition from their peers. Volunteer members play a different, facilitating role, by editing the publications and organizing the conferences. But only a tiny minority of members are actually active volunteers. Perhaps, skeptics suggest, we should reward volunteers and forget about mere members. Get rid of member benefits but treat volunteers royally.

Other skeptics point out that the multi-cameral, federalist decision-making apparatus of the IEEE, with its many societies and regions, is so inefficient that we should get rid of the volunteers too. Perhaps the IEEE should become a lean, mean, professional publishing and

conference management house. SSIT and other societies should disappear, and only the magazines and conferences should remain. As we fully enter the era of electronic publishing, even the magazines should disappear and all that should be left are a web portal, individual articles, and a peer review process.

What do you think? Email me or come to a board meeting and describe your vision for our future.

Personally, I think that both sets of skeptics miss the dynamic picture. Membership is the easy first step that many people will take, often for self-serving reasons such as access to technical information, a professional network, or a portable insurance policy. We need a substantial pool of members, both for recruiting volunteers and to provide some financial stability to the organization. Also, not everyone volunteers for life. Many conference organizers and transactions editors will give a few years to IEEE and then return to the ranks of simple membership. A few do become hooked for life, rotating from one volunteer position to another until well after retirement. But for the



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majority, we need to continue offering attractive member benefits and, more importantly, fostering a sense of community.

Commercial publishing houses don't attract people into learning communities or foster effective professional networks, but the IEEE does. This sense of community was recently endangered by IEEE's financial weakness and by efforts to promote a more commercial business model. Those problems are receding, but IEEE's storyline bears watching. We need to acknowledge and enhance the value of our community to ourselves, to our profession, and to the world at large.

SSIT is small but it has a vital niche that needs to be protected as the IEEE evolves. Our members are

particularly active and distinguished. Although SSIT has never awarded Fellow status to any of its members (that may change soon), some 333 IEEE Fellows are SSIT members — that's almost 20% of our total membership! SSIT members come from the full spectrum of technical specialties and regions. This magazine regularly wins awards. The Barus Award for Outstanding Service in the Public Interest focuses attention on worthy practitioners. The annual ISTAS conference attracts participants and co-sponsorship from a variety of sister organizations. SSIT members have a clearer sense of the public interest than most. I hope that you will actively promote your vision of what SSIT and the IEEE should become.

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