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Wayne C. Wolsey
Macalester College

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Thoughts on Science Coordination in Minnesota

WAYNE C. WOLSEY*

My views on coordination of scientific society endeavors in Minnesota come from the perspective of a chemistry professor at a liberal arts institution who has been active in the Minnesota Academy of Science and the Minnesota Section of the American Chemical Society. I have served a term on the Board of Directors of the MAS followed by a stint as President-Elect, President, and three years of "Past-Presidency." Most recently, I completed a term as Chairman of the Minnesota Section of the ACS.

As I think back to my short industrial career in Ohio in the early 1960s, I recall a very successful operation called ACCESS (Akron Council of Engineering and Scientific Societies). ACCESS served as a linkage between the various societies and each member of a society received a periodic publication, which listed all technical programs and featured highlights of society activities.

It has been my feeling for several years that such a coordinating body is needed in Minnesota. The MAS would like to be this body, but has never really had the support of many professional scientists or technical societies. The Science Museum of Minnesota has made noises about being a focal point, but seems more interested in public recognition and building membership. The only successful venture in this area is the Minnesota Federation of Engineering Societies (MFES), which does serve as a linkage of 19 engineering-related organizations in the state. The MFES sponsors an award for a young engineer and a joint wine-and-cheese reception for the State Legislature. The latter event is co-sponsored by the Minnesota Society of Professional Engineers (MSPE). Some critics have said this affiliation with a group that does a significant amount of lobbying casts doubts upon the credibility of MFES. It should be mentioned that the MFES had a publication that was issued irregularly for a few years, *The Minnesota Engineer*. This folded recently and is being resurrected under new direction as *Technical Minnesota*.

The ACS has seemed content to be an observer of MFES activities, as has the MAS. The MAS and MFES have exchanged nonvoting board representatives. Two areas in which nearly all societies have standing committees are education and government relations. One wonders sometimes if there are too many education operations. A major focal point of educational activities is public school education. Although we have numerous independent Speakers Bureaus, Mentor Programs, etc., the Twin Cities Regional Science Fair as well as the State Science Fair are frequently short of judges. For

a brief period of time in the early 1980s, a Science Coordinating Committee of Minnesota (SCCM) operated with a strong education mission and a home base at Honeywell. Other industrial support came from the 3M Company and General Mills, among others. It was hoped at that time that the SCCM could do pilot projects which would be picked up by the Alliance for Science. Speaking of the Alliance for Science, what has happened to it? At one time this was touted as being a group of individuals and organizations, which would have a major impact upon K-12 science education in the state. The Alliance, under the sponsorship of the University of Minnesota (College of Education and Institute of Technology), appears to have never really "gotten off the ground."

It is interesting to note that the University administration would like the "U" to have a highly visible role in the science community in Minnesota. (Haven't we seen this before—MAS, Science Museum, etc.?) How this will transpire is puzzling when the University science faculty (with few exceptions) do not seem to want to participate in local scientific society work. They are generally quite active at the national level, but the reward structure does not seem to give parity for grass roots involvement.

Government relations was mentioned earlier as a common interest for most technical societies. A few previous attempts at inter-society collaboration in this area have broken down after a few years. Noteworthy among these are SETAC (Scientists and Engineers Technical Assistance Committee) and the State Legislature's Science and Technology Council. SETAC was previously an independent committee, but now is a very low-key part of MFES. The State Legislature at one time funded (with help from the National Science Foundation) an Office of Science and Technology with a full-time director. As funds became tight, the program was dropped and the Science Museum of Minnesota picked up the coordination of the Council. The Science and Technology Council did an especially good job of putting on "Legislative Foresight Seminars" on technical issues at the beginning of legislative sessions. This activity has also waned.

Not to be overlooked in our survey of fragmentary efforts in the state are the activities of the Minnesota Business Partnership, the Minnesota High Tech Council, the Governor's Office of Science and Technology, and the Minnesota Science Teachers Association. The first two are primarily organizations of the CEOs of companies in the state with the necessary clout to get things moving. There are few links to scientific society work of their employees, however.

The Tech Forum of the 3M Company is another group

*Macalester College

of technical people in the state that is interested in science outreach programs. MSTA has strong ties with the State Department of Education and competes in some ways with the MAS.

Where does this leave us? The present state seems to be a plethora of splinter groups with each one doing its own thing. There have been attempts by various organizations in Minnesota to try to coordinate activities. It amounts to competition both between organizations and for resources. The present administration of the MAS has been working to build bridges between various organizations, but it remains to be seen what will come of it.

Potentially, the MAS can serve in a major way as liaison

between various groups. The *Journal* of the MAS is already publishing calendars of events for a few scientific societies. The only problems with this is that only MAS members receive the *Journal*. Something like the ACCESS publication I mentioned previously is needed—to go to all members of all societies. This costs money. The engineers plan on having their joint publication paid for by advertising. Corporate sponsorship would be another option.

When finally the chemists can talk to the geologists, the electrical engineers, and the limnologists of the state, then we will have a true scientific community. The MAS must be part of this and not just a fringe organization as it sometimes appears to be.