



It's Your Turn

It was a historic week for optics. Beginning on Saturday, March 22, boards of SPIE and OSA met together in Baltimore to inform themselves and to discuss the unification of their two societies. Then the separate boards voted, SPIE the next day and OSA the following Wednesday, to approve the merger and send it to their members for approval. The discussions were deliberate and cordial. They encompassed all aspects of our societies' business.

Most of the members of both of our societies want this merger to occur. A survey of a representative fraction of these members showed that a large majority would support a merger. In a less scientific vein, the members' responses that I hear are similar to those that my most Southern of colleagues, M. J. Soileau of CREOL, has received. They can be summed up in three simple comments: "Don't raise my dues.," "Why haven't we done this already?" and "Don't mess it up!"

However, there is a small, but very vocal minority in both societies that oppose unification. Over the past year the Joint Task Force (JTF) and its steering committee have provided a forum for a discussion and listened to the objections to the merger. We have tried to incorporate these objections into the transition plan as it was assembled for the meeting.

Some feel that combining optical scientists doing basic research with a society of optical engineers will reduce the clout of those in the basic research area in the new society. But I believe that they will find that the engineers will be their staunch supporters. What designer of heads-up displays does not depend on the valuable insights and relevant data that come from the vision community? What optical system designer does not look forward to breakthroughs in shorter wavelength sources and shorter pulses discovered by the laser science researchers? Without basic research to open new possibilities, optical engineers would be reduced to incremental improvements on current systems.

At times, those of us on the Joint Task Force have been asked to state the member benefits. In most cases we direct the questioner to the JTF report that enumerates these benefits. But that is only the beginning of the reasons for merger. Beyond any dollar and cents benefit, there is a

need to get rid of the "us vs. them" mentality and bring the field of optics together as a coherent whole. This argument is harder to make because it does not rest upon a concrete benefit like a dollar in your pocket. Rather it calls upon all of us to contribute our best efforts to unify this magnificent part of the physical world. John Greivenkamp, an Associate Editor and Chair of SPIE's Publications Committee, expressed it best when he compared optics to a rainbow:

I know that there is some fear that a unification will marginalize or orphan certain technology subgroups of our societies. As with any change, there is always a potential for failure, but we as members must not allow this to occur. The beauty of a rainbow is lost or degraded if isolated colors are eliminated or diminished. Full brilliance requires that all the colors shine as brightly as possible. Similarly, a unified society must provide an environment where all of its constituents can flourish simultaneously. Partial measures will not suffice; true unification is the only way to bring us all together.

My career in optics has included laser Raman spectroscopy of solids and biological materials, Brillouin spectroscopy of lubricants, optomechanical design, optics education, diffractive optics, and low vision devices. So I have seen quite a bit of the rainbow. I would not value one endeavor over the others. They were all interesting and they brought me in touch with wonderful people from many communities. In the course of my work I have found that we are at our best when we collaborate. To do this demands a measure of trust if we are to push forward the boundaries of our field. The worst enemies of research enterprise are exclusivity and secretiveness.

We must recognize our common needs to collaborate, and communicate. We need to heal a field too long divided. To best respond to the competition and challenges of the new millennium, there must be a mutual interdependence and common purpose between these two societies. I believe we should firmly resolve to unify them into a single entity that preserves the individual cultures and best features of its founding partners.

Both boards have approved the Plan of Merger and voted to send the final unification decision to the mem-

bers. Now it's your turn. Ballots to SPIE and OSA members will be mailed the end of this month. For many of us, it is the summer holidays and we tend to overlook or misplace our mail. Please do not ignore the ballot. Please do not put off your vote till later. Please do not rely on the opinion of a friend or colleague. Take the time to inform

yourself and vote. It is your opportunity to have a say on how we take optics into the 21st century—divided or united.

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