

Guest Editorial

My Experiences as Executive Officer of AAPT



Arnold Strassenburg

One of the joys of serving as AAPT's Executive Officer was the variety of activities. One day I would be in the office working on correspondence; the next day I would be on an airplane on my way to a regional section meeting. Or, I'd have to review copy for the next issue of the *Announcer*, today, but tomorrow I'd have to meet my APS counterpart in New York City

to allocate hotel space for a joint winter meeting.

Though never in the years between 1972 and 1982 was I able to concentrate on one issue for more than a few days. I believe this memoir would be more comprehensible if I wrote about my major activities as if they were separated in time from each other.

Financial Matters

When I became E.O. in 1972, AAPT was close to bankruptcy. What to do? I did what any prudent householder would do when faced with a financial crisis. When officers, committee chairpersons, and journal editors proposed new activities that required funds not already committed, I said no. (Imagine how unpopular I became.) Of course, steps were taken to increase revenues. Dues and meetings fees were increased modestly. As our bank balance slowly increased, efforts were made to invest money profitably (the Treasurer helped with this). The first few months were scary. One occasion, Len Jossem—AAPT President—loaned AAPT \$10,000 from his personal bank account so I could meet the payroll.

As time went on, the financial situation improved. With the help of Robert Beck Clark, an AAPT Treasurer for many years, I learned to invest money soon after dues were paid so that investment income became one of AAPT's major sources of income.

The Journals

For the majority of members, the journals—*American Journal of Physics* and *The Physics Teacher*—are the primary benefits of membership. Fortunately for me, and for AAPT, both editors—Edwin Taylor and Clifford Swartz—were excellent. Not surprisingly, I occasionally clashed with them. Their job was to produce excellent journals. Mine was to insure that no activity cost a disproportionate portion of dues. I understood the importance of the journals to the health of AAPT, and so I made sure that the lack of money did not become a deal breaker with journal editors.

AAPT Meetings

I recognized early on that, after journals, meetings were the most important membership benefit. The winter and summer meetings were different matters. In my era, winter meet-

ings were organized jointly with APS. In the beginning, the meeting venue was rotated among New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco. Because APS is large, only a few hotels in each city would provide the space we needed, thus we tended to return to the same hotels over and over.

In the mid-70s, APS declared the winter meeting an "education meeting." We anticipated future APS attendance at this meeting to be much smaller than in earlier years; this opened up possibilities for new locations. To a large extent, APS lost interest in the location and turned over the task of selecting future sites to me. Choosing meeting sites turned out to be great fun. Hotels under consideration roll out the red carpet when a decision maker arrives for a site visit. Once the ball was in my court, I saw no reason not to consider cities we had never used before. The first break with tradition was a meeting in San Antonio. I believe attendees were pleased—though I contracted dysentery from a late night hamburger. I also took a flyer on a winter meeting in Toronto. A cold spell drove everyone indoors, but, fortunately, Toronto has an underground.

The summer meeting has always moved around, traditionally taking place on a college campus. During my early years as E.O. attendance at summer meetings was only one to two hundred participants, so my focus was on how appropriate the region was for a family vacation, and how adequately could the host institution house and feed our members. As the summer meeting grew, I paid more attention to the amount of meeting space available and whether the college could host our major events such as the Oersted Lecture and the Annual Banquet. Even so, I always visited a campus under consideration with a contract in hand that specified our requirements. I am certain that having a signed contract saved us from such embarrassments as a dusty site for the annual picnic or a hall too small for the Millikan Lecture. Regarding the location, I was proud to arrange one meeting in Puerto Rico and another in London, Ontario, both campuses a bit off the beaten track.

More important changes occurred during my tenure. The content of the meeting changed from an almost exclusive focus on 10-minute papers delivered in classrooms to an emphasis on workshops, exhibits, and poster sessions. The response was gratifying. Summer meeting attendance grew by 50 percent, and many more members became presenters, not just listeners.

Announcer

The *Announcer* was always a major concern for me; it changed dramatically during my tenure. In 1972 it was new and slim. Its sole purpose was to provide information about future meetings. I recognized that it was the perfect vehicle for other information of possible interest to AAPT members. My staff and I began to devote pages to news about the activities of our committees. We initiated a "Letters to the Editor" feature. We began to take ads from

apparatus manufacturers and film makers. Naturally, the number of pages grew many-fold.

We never solicited subscriptions to the *Announcer*; it was sent as a bonus to every member. Understandably, the cost of publishing it skyrocketed. I took the bold step—and was severely criticized for it—of changing the format from glossy paper to newsprint. There is no doubt in my mind that this step enabled the *Announcer* to serve multiple purposes without an associated increase in member dues.

Membership

For every organization that is dependent on dues for its existence, soliciting new members must be a constant priority. It was my view that targeted campaigns would be the most successful. For example, using a mailing list obtained from NSTA, we mailed a packet of materials to every high school teacher who taught at least one section of physics. Similarly, we pitched another mailing at two-year college physics teachers. Both of these efforts were quite successful.

The most ambitious campaign I attempted was aimed at four-year college and university physics professors. I compared the AIP Directory of College Physics Teachers against the AAPT Membership Directory. I constructed lists of every name that appeared in the former, but not in the latter. These names were then sorted by region and parceled out as appropriate to AAPT section representatives. I asked these representatives to make a personal contact—by phone or mail—with each person on his or her list. In some cases, the number of contacts required exceeded a hundred. I suppose I should not have been surprised that many of our section representatives balked at the workload. In those days I seemed to have a penchant for making enemies.

The membership did decline slowly during the years I was in office. The pain of that fact was somewhat ameliorated by knowing that a larger number of members became active in AAPT activities, and that our income from investments more than compensated for the loss of dues income.

AAPT Products

AAPT was always in the business of producing and selling educational products—mostly booklets and short films—designed to help physics teachers. Typical of the booklets category was reprints books. Each book was prepared by an expert on some topic and consisted of a bibliography and a few important articles from the literature on that topic. AAPT commissioned one or two such books a year: total inventory grew to thirty to forty distinct volumes. AAPT also inherited quite a few booklets from the Commission on College Physics, including such titles as “The Report of the Ann Arbor Conference on Physics Curricula.”

AAPT became a distributor of short films produced by NASA, showing remarkable physics photographed during various NASA missions. All of these products were stored and distributed by the Executive Office. An AAPT Products brochure was created and updated frequently, and the products were always on display at AAPT meetings.

Executive Board

The Executive Board consists of officers, journal editors, and three members elected to serve on the Board. A tradition developed that called for these elected members to represent the high school, two-year colleges, and the four-year college and university sector. The Board met four times a year—two occurred in conjunction with the summer and winter meetings. The Board made final decisions on all issues concerning AAPT governance. Preparing for these meetings was one of my major activities.

Executive Board members chaired four major committees: Finance, Publications, Meetings, and Membership. Even when the chairpersons were diligent, it was my job to prepare committee reports, and an agenda that addressed actual and potential problems.

Some Executive Board members consistently provided wise and valuable service and advice. Not all Board members did their homework. I want to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of Leonard Jossem, Robert Karplus, Albert Bartlett, and Robert Fuller.

My Staff

The good we did was made possible by a number of people who worked in the Executive Office. People came and went, but several stuck by me for many years. There was always an office manager; two different people—both excellent—held that position during my 10 years. There was the person who shepherded the *Announcer* from raw copy to the final version. There were typists who were swamped with my correspondence, committee reports, and *Announcer* copy.

As the years flew by, the work became too much for me, and AAPT hired a Staff Physicist. Three people filled this position during my tenure: Walter Gross from CUNY Community College, Dean Zollman from Kansas State University, and Tim Ingoldsby from a high school in Omaha. Each served with distinction. Zollman deserves a special commendation because he was there during the two years in the mid-seventies, when I took a leave of absence to work for the National Science Foundation. And Ingoldsby did what I would not have been able to do: He implemented a computerized membership database.

During my years on leave, Melba Phillips served as Acting Executive Officer. Without Melba’s knowledge and wisdom, I could not have left the office without causing a serious disruption in AAPT’s operations. Over the years, she served AAPT well in many different capacities, but none more important than those two years at Stony Brook.

Final Remarks

My experiences as E.O. rank at the top of the many challenges I have faced in my professorial career. AAPT is an organization for which we can all be proud. I am pleased to be a part of the 75-year history of this fine association.

—Arnold A. Strassenburg

Editor’s Note: Strassenburg served as AAPT Executive Officer from 1972 to 1982—an important period in the history of the organization. The editors appreciate the time and effort that Strassenburg devoted to this memoir in celebration of AAPT’s 75th Anniversary.