

Visioning for the Future of the Forest Products Society



By Paul M. Winistorfer, Ian de la Roche,
W. Ramsay Smith, Norm Kutscha, and Arthur B. Brauner

The Executive Committee of the Forest Products Society (FPS) convened a Strategic Visioning Workshop in January 2004 to address current and future challenges and opportunities facing the Society. This is an important time for FPS. Change is all around us – in the forest products industry, in our academic programs, in allied and competing organizations and societies, in the business aspects of technical information publication and distribution, and within FPS as an organization. Awareness of changing global technologies and the changing global marketplace are also important in our deliberations.

The Visioning Workshop was not an indication of a crisis mode for the Forest

Products Society, but rather a time to discuss ways to make our organization even stronger in the future to fulfill our mission and vision. There are many challenges facing the Society, including the retirement of our Executive Vice President after more than 37 years of service. He represents a tremendous wealth of knowledge and skill. We will need to recruit and successfully retain a high quality individual who can lead the Society forward.

The Executive Committee invited 15 individuals to participate in the Strategic Visioning Workshop. The participants formed a diverse group of vested and interested members (**Table 1**).

H. Michael Barnes
Mississippi State University

A. William Boehner
Trust Joist, A Weyerhaeuser Business

Jim L. Bowyer
University of Minnesota

Art Brauner
Forest Products Society

Thomas M. Gorman
University of Idaho

Vicki L. Herian
Society of Wood Science & Technology

Norman P. Kutscha
Weyerhaeuser

Charles D. Ray
Pennsylvania State University

Buddy Showalter
*American Forest & Paper Assoc. -
American Wood Council*

Ian De la Roche
Forintek Canada Corp

Paul M. Smith
Pennsylvania State University

W. Ramsay Smith
Louisiana State University

Paul M. Winistorfer
Virginia Tech

Steven C. Zylkowski
APA-The Engineered Wood Association

Dan Cumbo (meeting support)
Virginia Tech

Table 1. — Participants in the FPS Strategic Visioning Workshop.

The agenda for the Workshop was structured to include the presentation and review of FPS historical background information; participant input on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing the Society; and visioning about the Society's future through participant-led discussion of important issues and external influences.

FPS Historical and Information Perspective

This article is one of the follow-up mechanisms we chose to use to communicate the process and outcomes of the Strategic Visioning Workshop. It will serve as a reference for near-term action and become part of the emerging discussion among members concerning the future direction of our organization.

¹Winistorfer, P.M. 2003. Associations and organizations in the forest products arena: Understanding the landscape. *Forest Prod. J.* 53(6):6-15.

In January 1947, an organizational committee comprised of 13 individuals from industry, academia, and government approved a constitution for the Forest Products Research Society. The first business office was established in space donated by the USDA Forest Products Laboratory. Six regions were formed, with individuals elected to serve those regions on the governing board. In August 1947, the Society was incorporated as a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization in the State of Illinois. The first official meeting of the Society was held in October 1947 at the American Furniture Building in Chicago; 431 members and 47 spouses attended.

The Society has enjoyed a long and successful history of service to its members and has grown to be one of the leading organizations for dissemination of technical information to the forest products community. A previous article by Winistorfer¹ provided a thorough description of the organization, its history, and its relation to other professional organizations and societies.

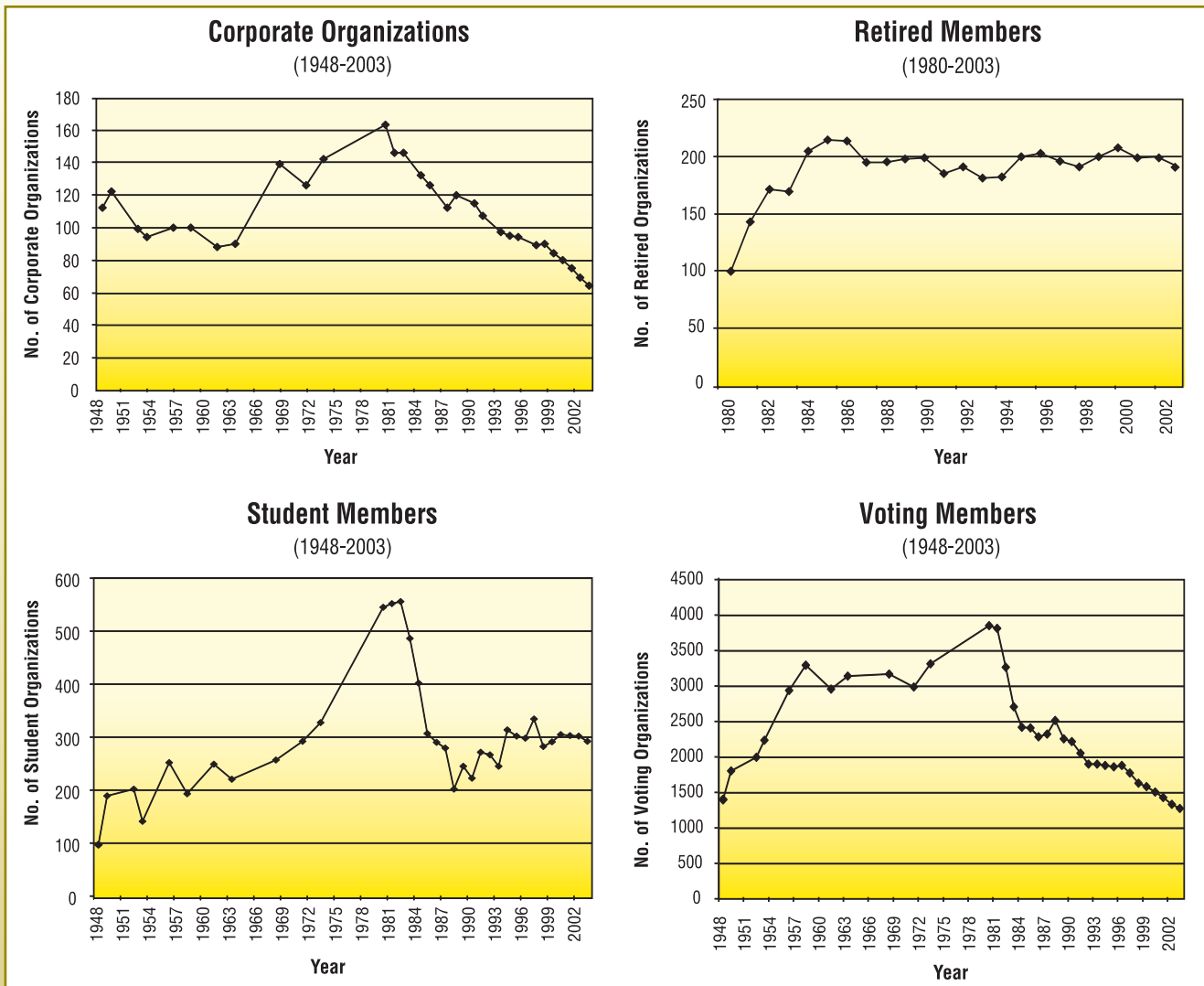


Figure 1. — Membership demographics over the history of the Forest Products Society.

The Society enjoys the benefit of an experienced and talented staff, all located at our international headquarters in Madison, Wisconsin. The average length of service of current staff is 14 years. A considerable amount of expertise resides in six staff members with the greatest longevity. Our organization has been extremely stable and well served by the entire staff. These individuals work mostly behind the scenes and the general membership may not be knowledgeable about the role, contributions, or value of the Society staff. The Executive Board is transient, as is the case in most volunteer organizations; hence, the role of the staff is critical to our success.

Categories of FPS membership include voting, retired, student, and corporate (Fig. 1). The significant changes in member demographics over time are obvious. Our voting membership, which

peaked at nearly 3,900 members in 1982, is currently almost the same as it was at the time of our incorporation in the late 1940s. The early 1980s was a period marked by high inflation in North America, record home mortgage rates, a dramatic consolidation within the forest products industry, and subsequent reduction in management personnel in the industry. The number of voting members declined by 40 percent from 1982 to 1985 and the trend continues to the present day, which is a major concern for the Society's future.

The retired member category was added in 1980 to keep professionals involved in the Society after retirement. The number of retired members has remained fairly stable at around 200 members since 1985. Student member numbers also peaked in 1982 at about 575, dropped significantly throughout the 1980s, and have been slowly increasing

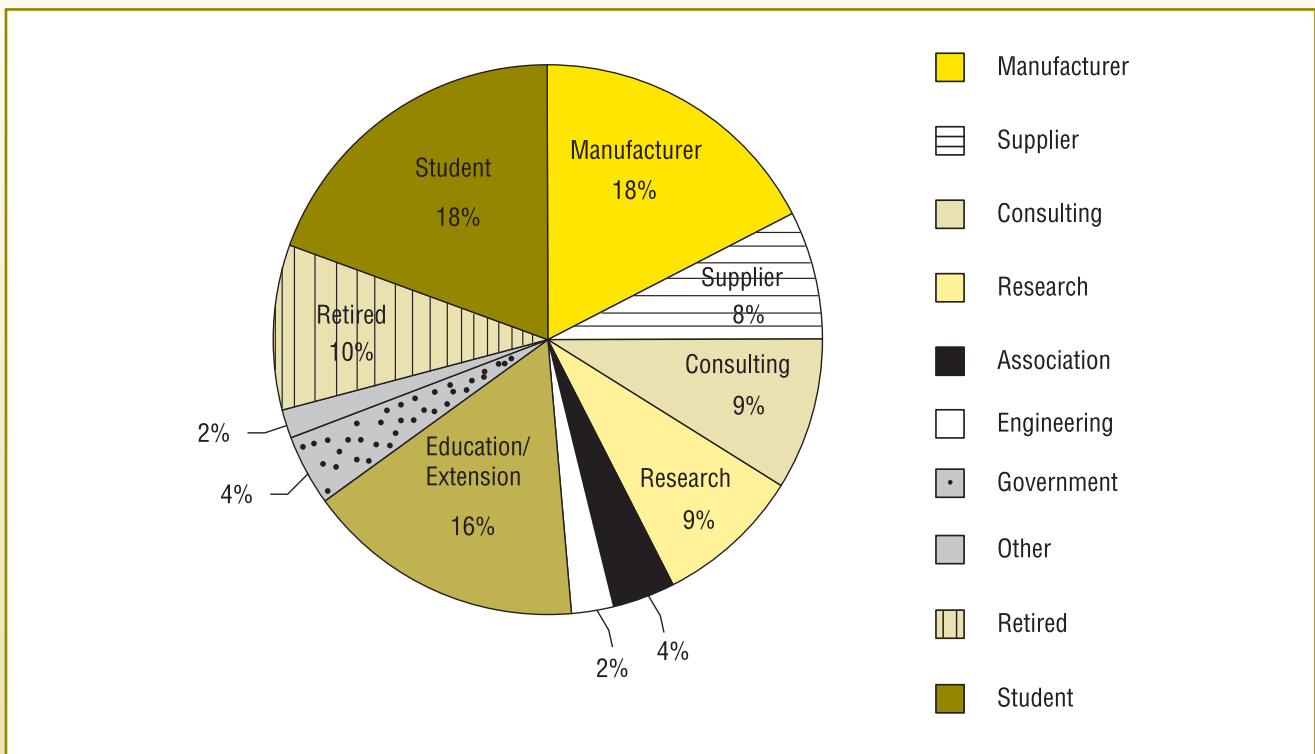


Figure 2. — Job class distribution of Forest Products Society members.

over the past decade. Several university programs purchase student memberships for all students enrolled in their academic major and this has had a positive effect in recent years. Nevertheless, student membership remains about half of what it was in 1982. Student members are an integral part of the Society's future. The Society offers a continuance of the student membership fee for the first year after graduation and yet we fail to capture these students in our quest for conversion to voting members. Why do our student members fail to remain active in the organization after graduation?

Corporate member numbers peaked in 1982 at about 170 organizations and have since declined continually. Continuing consolidation in the industry and recent offshore relocation of significant manufacturing capacity has further eroded the corporate member base. The forest products industry remains a top 10 manufacturing sector employer in 42 of the 50 states, and yet we fail to attract and successfully involve as members a majority of the industry professionals.

All geographic regions of the country (Sections and Chapters) have seen a decline in voting membership over the past decade. The Pacific Northwest Section remains the largest section with about 300 voting members. Seven of the 14 Sections have less than 100 voting members. No Section or Chapter has

more than 100 student members, and 6 of the 14 have less than 10 student members.

The overall member distribution by the various job class designations the Society currently uses is shown in **Figure 2**. Student members comprise just under one-fifth of the FPS membership, which is the same percentage represented by voting members who identify themselves specifically as being involved in the manufacturing sector. While many FPS members and industry personnel have expressed the sentiment that the Society is mostly a collection of academics, the actual data indicate the contrary. When student member numbers are removed from the total, nearly 70 percent of the remaining Society membership is comprised of manufacturers, suppliers, consultants, researchers, or those designated as engineering. However, attendance at the Annual Meeting is usually dominated by academics (60% of all registrants in 2003). By contrast, attendance at conferences other than the Annual Meeting consists mostly of non-academic and non-government registrants (e.g., 70% at the 2003 Woodfiber/Plastic Composites Conference). Non-member attendance has surpassed member attendance at FPS-sponsored conferences by more than 2:1 during the past decade.

The age distribution of voting members (including retired) is shown in **Figure 3**. Distribution is nearly normal, with the exception of some retired

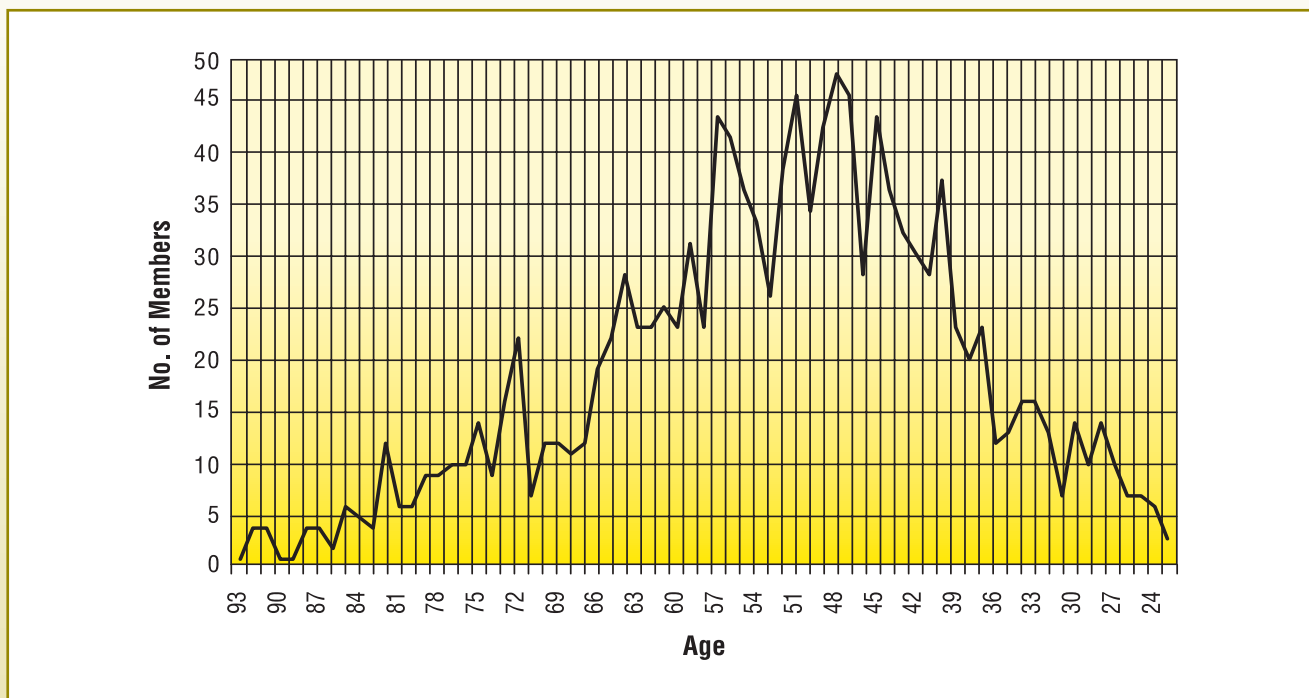


Figure 3. — Age distribution of voting members in 2004 (this category includes retired members but not student members).

members who have maintained membership well beyond their working career. The median member age is about 48 years. This is very similar to recent survey data from the Society of Wood Science and Technology that reported a median member age of 51 for that organization.² While age is currently shown to have a normal distribution, it is possible, considering the extremely low rate of conversion of student members to voting members, that the bell curve is shifting to an older population.

The income categories for the Society are shown in **Figure 4**. Surprisingly, individual member dues account for only 10 percent of the total income stream of the organization. As a result of earlier work by the Committee on Restructuring of the Society, a decision was made to move away from individual member dues to products and services as the principal income stream. The largest income categories of the organization are from conferences, income from the distribution of publications for the American Wood Council, *Forest Products Journal* subscriptions, sale of numerous special publications, and finally individual dues. These income categories reflect the changing

nature of the Society’s operations and are consistent with our mission “*To foster innovation and research in the environmentally sound processing and use of wood and fiber resources by disseminating information and providing forums for networking and the exchange of knowledge.*” Our organization is an efficient conferences and publications business vehicle that serves the wood community at large. It is fair to speculate that our organization would have ceased to exist had the Executive Board and staff not made changes over the past decade.

During the Visioning Workshop, there were many interesting discussions and revelations concerning the Society, some of which will be discussed below under three broad categories: Membership Value, Knowledge Generation and Dissemination, and Strategic Alliances.

Membership Value

Membership value begins and ends with how “membership” is defined. Depending on your background, education, and your perspective of what it means to be a “wood products professional,” you could be an engineer, material scientist, wood scientist, architect, etc., which can result in a lack of

²Vlosky, R. 2003. SWST membership survey results. *Wood and Fiber Sci.* 35(3):478-480.

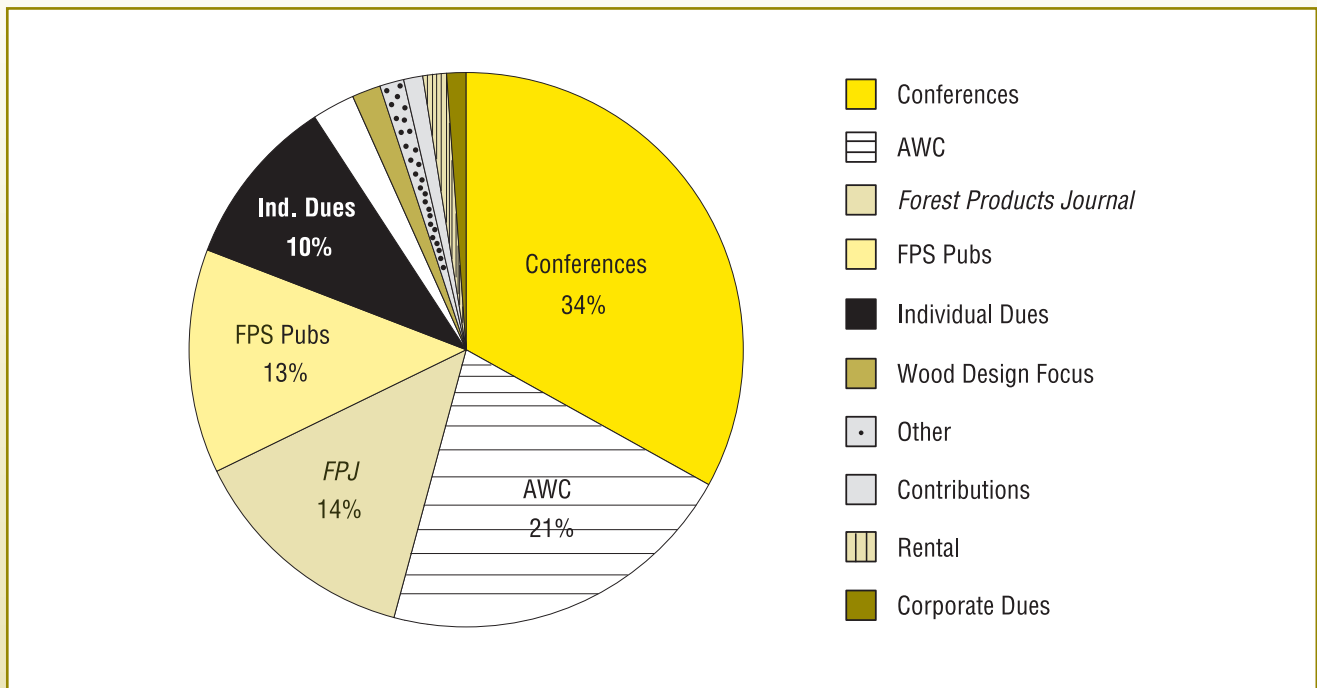


Figure 4. — Income categories and percentages, 2002 data.

professional identity for the Society. This issue was originally identified to spark discussion related to enhancing the focus of FPS on the needs of the "professional" working in wood. There are many professional organizations that serve specific professional disciplines. The lack of a professional identity for most wood-oriented careers can lead to an inability of the organization to focus its products and services specifically on the needs of the professional. Perhaps FPS should think outside its current objective, purpose, mission, and offerings, and consider fulfilling the needs of professional support and development in addition to promoting wood as an industrial raw material. The FPS mission is currently focused on dissemination and application of technical information. The "professional" is currently recognized by FPS as the creators of technical information, i.e., a very few wood-focused academics and R&D professionals. This excludes the professionals who "use" the technical information. Currently, a rather small group of "professionals" creates the technical information for the broader community. Is FPS the vehicle to foster the profession of wood science and technology based on our mandate, membership, efficiency in operations, and capacity for information dissemination? Could FPS become a "professional" organization that would attract the range of professionally prepared individuals work-

ing in the wood industry and still maintain its mission and vision? The answer to these questions remains elusive.

The value of membership in the Society must be critically examined to identify changes that could be made to better serve the specific needs of the members. One route that might be considered is to provide products and services on an "a la carte" basis. We also need to reconnect with members at the grass roots level. A GIS overlay map of current members in relation to industry distribution has been developed in order to analyze member demographics, industry location, and our offering of products and services. We must increase our membership to remain viable in the future. While a core group of members continues to be actively engaged in volunteer work for the Society, the declining member base has significant implications for our long-term success.

The most important weakness identified by Workshop participants appears to be the declining membership of the Society. Many professional and trade organizations have experienced a similar decline in membership during the past decade. Contributing factors include the reduced student enrollment in academic programs, consolidation of the industry, and questions regarding the value members currently receive from their membership. As mentioned earlier, membership dues

make up only about 10 percent of the Society's income, but the decline in membership is more significant and important for the future role of our organization within the wood community. Clearly, an engaged, vibrant membership is critical to our future success and the long-term viability of the Society.

A second possible weakness lies in the extremely diverse collection of stakeholders that the Society attempts to serve. We are not a professional organization and yet we serve individuals who consider our organization their professional home. We do not tailor our products and services to a specific clientele (academics, government workers, industry, or students), and we do not target our products and services to either the primary or secondary wood industry. We have landed ourselves in the "middle of the pie" and not tied ourselves to a particular membership base or industry sector. This positioning in the marketplace has obvious advantages and disadvantages and lends further importance to developing strategic alliances with other organizations in the future.

The overall decline of forest products graduate and undergraduate academic programs in the United States was identified as a major threat facing the Society. Students in these programs get exposure to the Society through FPS Student Chapters. If there are fewer programs, this avenue of exposure will be less fruitful. For the students who are in these programs, we need to ask ourselves the following question. What role does FPS have in fostering student professional development? The Executive Committee has completed development of a student survey to be distributed to both student members and students in academic programs who are not current FPS members. The survey will be distributed in September 2004 to all forest products related academic programs in North America.

One weakness of the Society is that it does not appear to attract the industry we serve. There are two prevailing notions that likely contribute to this belief: 1) that the Annual Meeting is largely attended by academics; and 2) that much of the technical information published in the *FPJ* may not be targeted to application in the industry.

In addition, the fragmented nature of our industry at large can be viewed as a threat to the Society. There are over 300 trade associations that serve the wood industry, there is a natural division of interest and needs between primary and secondary producers, and there are other profession-

al organizations that serve the academics and managerial professionals in our community. Can the Society be (or does it want to be) the vehicle to unify a larger, more strategic voice of the wood industry and professionals at large?

A major strength of the Society is its unique contribution to the forest products community. While not a "professional organization" (i.e., it does not require professional credentials for membership), FPS is a recognized resource for information and networking for many individuals who cannot receive similar services and benefits elsewhere.

Knowledge Generation and Dissemination

The publication of the *Forest Products Journal* is one of the Society's greatest strengths. This is not surprising since the *FPJ* has been in existence for more than 50 years and it is our flagship publication. The *FPJ* is one of only a handful of high-quality outlets for academics to publish forest products research results in a peer-reviewed journal. In addition to providing technical information, the *FPJ* also serves as a monthly reminder of the presence and role of our organization to the membership.

Conferences and special publications are also major strengths of the Society. As previously mentioned, most FPS conferences attract a majority of attendees who are not members of the Society; therefore, in addition to providing a major revenue stream, conferences are an important vehicle for the Society to reach a broader audience. The sale of a large variety of special publications (conference proceedings, manuals, textbooks, etc.) is another major strength in the Society's income-producing stream and should be maintained and strengthened. As in the case of conferences, purchasers of these publications are largely non-members. Our principal communication tool – the FPS website – must continually evolve to be a leading communications link to members, as well as for non-members seeking our products and services.

We should consider expanding our knowledge generation and dissemination capacity to reach a broader audience. We should consider continuing education credits for all of our conference offerings as a way to expand our utility to a broader audience of professionals. We should consider renaming the Annual Meeting to more accurately reflect the fact that the meeting is actually a pre-

sentation of research results. We should consider strategic alliances with other professional organizations to enhance our ability to reach a broader clientele with our technical information.

The negative public perception of the forest products industry as a whole is another threat to the Society. The value of forest products research is not easily recognized by the average consumer. Inexpensive or free alternative sources of technical information can be a perceived threat – as this is at the core vision and mission of the Society. Information dissemination drives the programming, publications, services, and income of our organization. Recognition and exploitation of global technologies to disseminate technical information is considered to be an important success factor for the organization in the future.

There are many opportunities upon which to build. Greater use could be made of the World Wide Web as a tool to reach the public with our products, services, and information. There is an opportunity to re-examine the role of the Society with respect to the broad view of research, education, and outreach for the wood community. Can our organization envision a more critical role within the "knowledge" supply chain for the wood industry and wood professional? All executives and business leaders today are examining the supply chain as a critical way of thinking about the role and place of their organization within a particular business or industry sector. Shouldn't we think of the future of FPS in a similar way? In addition, we can expand our services internationally and offer or expand professional training as a mechanism for involving the greater professional community engaged in specifying or using wood as a material – specifically engineers and architects.

Strategic Alliances

The Society must expand linkages to other key organizations in a variety of ways to broaden our impact. One of the innate strengths of our organization is its dissemination of technical information through publications and conferences. This is a capability the Society can leverage with other organizations. We need to develop a current and potential list of strategic alliances and approach those organizations that could be fruitful partners. We should periodically revisit our vision and mission statement and engage the membership as related to future strategic alliances. We must also

continue to analyze our relationship with the Society of Wood Science and Technology.

A major opportunity is the notion of fostering strategic partnerships nationally and internationally to further the mission and success of our organization. The Society currently has several strategic partnerships that are mutually beneficial and advantageous to all parties: 1) the distribution of publications for the American Wood Council; 2) cooperation with the Southern Forest Products Association in developing technical seminars at the SFPA EXPO; and 3) the long-standing relationship with the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, related to the production of publications and cosponsoring of various conferences. There is clear recognition that our Society can and should foster strategic partnerships with other organizations to promote our mission and secure our future. We are perhaps the leading technical information dissemination organization that is broadly serving the wood industry. However, no one organization can be the single global supplier of information, so alliances are important.

Recognizing the importance of strategic alliances, we need to carefully examine our respective roles and relationships with technical, educational, governmental, and industrial organizations and associations and determine ways to develop mutually beneficial activities and programs.

Society of Wood Science and Technology (SWST)

SWST and FPS both serve a relatively small client base, and nearly all of the members of SWST are also FPS members. While it is recognized that the tax code status of the two organizations is different (SWST is a 501(c)6 professional organization that has requirements for membership and can be involved in lobbying; FPS is a 501(c)3 educational organization open to the public and with very limited lobbying powers), it makes sense to explore ways in which the two organizations can work together more closely. Recently, an FPS/SWST task force was appointed by the two organizations to review the current relationships, products, and services.

Society of American Foresters (SAF) and the Technical Association of the Pulp and Paper Industry (TAPPI)

SAF is the national scientific and educational organization that has represented the forestry profession in the United States for more than 100

years. TAPPI, which was founded in 1915, is the leading technical association for the pulp and paper industry. Some years ago FPS entered into a number of cooperative programs with both SAF and TAPPI, but with a change in leadership in these organizations in recent years the links between FPS and SAF/TAPPI have been weakened and it appears at this point that it would be mutually beneficial for the three organizations to work on renewing closer alliances.

University Programs

Over the years, FPS has provided various collaborative opportunities for academic programs, such as technical conferences and publication outlets for academic researchers. In addition, FPS has encouraged student participation in various programs (especially at Annual Meetings) and has supported the formation and growth of Student Chapters. Given the decline in students entering the field of forest products in recent years, it makes sense that FPS should closely examine ways that we can assist academic programs without creating a conflict of interest or entering into competition with academic programs and services. In addition, it appears possible that FPS could broaden its membership base within universities by creating services that appeal to disciplines other than forest products, such as engineering and architecture.

Federal Programs

FPS has had a long-standing relationship with the USDA Forest Service Forest Experiment Stations and the USDA Forest Products Lab. With increasing pressure on federal organizations to outsource many activities that were previously accomplished in-house (e.g., publishing/distributing technical information and organizing technical conferences), it will be increasingly beneficial for FPS to actively nurture these alliances.

Industry Associations

Consolidation has changed, and continues to change, the face of the wood industry, and as these changes have occurred, the pressure on the numerous trade associations that represent the wood industry (over 300 in North America) to increase efficiency through cost sharing and collaboration has mounted. While FPS has developed and maintained close cooperative efforts with several trade associations in the past (e.g., AF&PA and SFPA) there appear to be numerous opportunities to expand our alliances with other associations, with the objective of creating mutually beneficial programs.

What is Needed for the Future?

Forecasting the future is difficult, but one of the objectives of the Strategic Visioning Workshop was to think about the future of our organization, in the context of where we are now and where we think we should be or would like to be in 10 years. Workshop participants brainstormed some possible directions for the future.

General Society

- Be the recognized voice for the wood community, professionals, and students. Grow our membership with this recognition.
- Be the international leader as the source of technical information about wood.
- Provide support and development for the professional working in wood.
- Become the superhighway for information development and transfer.

Membership

- Reach out to and actively engage architects, engineers, builders, code officials, industry professionals, manufacturing operators, and technical sales personnel.
- Be conscious of gender distribution and work toward more diversity in our organization.
- Work toward stronger international membership.
- Actively pursue strategic alliances with other organizations.

Activities

- Complete electronic distribution of all products and services.
- Develop "sound bites" that are promotional about wood and its use in society.
- Convert scientific papers to application briefs for public consumption.
- Develop a larger interactive library.
- Become the clearinghouse for technical and educational information.
- Develop information that teachers can use in K-12 and post-secondary classrooms.

Continuing Education

- Enter into distance learning dissemination.
- Develop internet learning centers.
- Provide certification of industry workforce.
- Offer more highly focused and more regionally centered conferences.

A list of possible "action items" was developed

by the Workshop participants. The FPS board was presented a summary of the Workshop activities and action items at the Spring 2004 board meeting. This article serves as the next step in the process. We hope to receive feedback on these issues from the membership. Then it will be up to the Strategic Issues Standing Committees to prioritize, develop action plans, and make recommendations to the Executive Board.

Our Challenge to the Membership

Will you join with your Executive Board and move FPS forward into the next five decades? We need your input in our deliberations. The climate is ripe for change – it is all around us. Please contact any member of the Executive Board to share your comments. We need your help to act on our

vision "To be the world leader in technical information transfer to further the socially beneficial use of wood and fiber resources."

Following are the current affiliations for the authors plus the FPS offices they held at the time of the Visioning Workshop: Winistorfer is Professor/Head, Dept. of Wood Science and Forest Products, Blacksburg, VA, 540-231-8853, pstorfer@vt.edu, FPS President; de la Roche is President/CEO, Forintek Canada Corp., 604-224-3221, idlr@van.forintek.ca, FPS President Elect; Smith is Professor, Louisiana State Univ., 225-578-4155, wsmith@lsu.edu, FPS Vice President; Kutscha is Scientific Advisor Emeritus, Weyerhaeuser, 253-835-9781, lkutscha@juno.com, FPS Past President; Brauner is FPS Executive Vice-President, 608-231-1361, art@forestprod.org.