Merger of OSA and SPIE Goes to the Polls

Members of the Optical Society of America and SPIE—The International Society for Optical Engineering are voting this summer on whether to merge the two societies. The results will be announced in October; if the merger gets the nod, it will go into effect on 1 January.

In the proposed merger, OSA and SPIE would come under a new umbrella organization and share a single budget. Proponents bill it as a "merger of operations and federation of cultures" that would institute closer ties between the two professional societies while preserving their distinct characters—OSA's more academic bent and SPIE's more applications-oriented focus. Scientists would join the parent organization, and membership in OSA and SPIE would cost an additional $10 each.

This isn't the first time that such a merger has been considered. In 1987, OSA, SPIE, and the optics arm of IEEE considered forming a federation, but the idea foundered.

The current proposal has also been controversial. One of the main arguments against the merger is that basic science would become "the tail on the dog," as MIT physicist and OSA board member David Pritchard puts it. For example, Pritchard fears that without full editorial and financial control, the quality of OSA's journals would drop. For their part, some SPIE members worry that it would slow decision making at their organization. Critics contend that the advantages of closer cooperation can be had without actually merging the two societies. In the process of examining a merger, "a lot of trust has been built up," says Pritchard. Therefore, if the merger is defeated, "and if we don't throw too many tomatoes in the debate, there will be enough cooperative spirit to get things done together."

Despite such concerns, the OSA and SPIE boards voted in May to put the current proposal to their members (the OSA board vote was 13 for, 6 against, with one abstention; SPIE's was 14 to 1 in favor). Those in favor argue that a unified organization would be more influential politically, more compelling for young scientists, better able to collaborate with international scientific societies, and have lower publishing expenses.

OSA's Paul Forman, cochair of the joint task force that recommended the merger (see PHYSICS TODAY, June 1998, page 60), says a single cashbox "will attenuate competition." Adds M. J. Soileau, Forman's SPIE counterpart, "The rank-and-file members are saying, It's about time, don't screw it up, and don't raise my dues."

For further information, including the task force's report and a membership survey, visit http://www.spie.org/info/jtf/home.html on the Web.

IUPAP Elects New Officers

The International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP) elected officers for the new millennium at its triennial assembly in Atlanta this spring. Beginning three-year terms on 1 September will be Burton Richter, who is stepping down from the directorship of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center and will become president, succeeding Sweden's Jan Nilsson; Yves Petroff, who heads the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble, France, and will become president designate; René Turlay, who is a scientific adviser to France's Atomic Energy Commission and will serve a second term as secretary general; and Judy Franz, the American Physical Society's executive officer, who will become the associate secretary general. Eight new vice presidents and new leaders for the organization's working groups were also elected. IUPAP currently has 46 member and 18 observer countries. (Libya lost its membership this year, having not paid its dues.)

At the assembly, IUPAP's council voted to form a working group on women in physics to "survey the present situation . . . and suggest means to improve the situation for women in physics." Another item on IUPAP's agenda, Richter says, will be to "do something about the fragmentation of physics" by getting IUPAP's subgroups, or commissions, to work more closely together on big-science issues, including neutron sources and nonaccelerator-based particle physics facilities, such as an underwater neutrino detector and gravity wave detectors.

Number of Physics Faculty Is Edging Up

The professorial ranks in physics have made slight but steady increases through the 1990s, according to the latest academic workforce survey conducted by the American Institute of Physics. The biannual survey found that as of the spring of 1998, there were 8350 "full-time equivalent" physicists employed by degree-granting departments in the US, a 2% increase since 1994 (this figure does not include postdocs, professors in departments that do not grant degrees, or researchers in so-called soft-money appointments).

About 500 new faculty members were hired for the 1997–98 academic year, the survey found, with nearly half of them filling temporary or part-time positions. Among the new hires at PhD departments, about half had earned their PhDs in the US before 1994 and one-fourth had gotten their PhDs outside the US. Condensed matter continued to be the most common specialization among new hires, followed by astronomy/astrophysics and elementary particle physics.

Since 1994, the annual turnover among tenured and tenure-track physicists has remained steady, at about 3.6%, while the annual retirement rate has increased slightly, to 2.6%. For 1998–99, one-tenth of the departments reported having frozen positions—vacancies that temporarily could not be filled due to budgetary restraints, dropping enrollments, or other factors—and two-thirds said there was at least some possibility that they would lose a position if a faculty member left or retired. On the other hand, some departments intended to expand: Of the 373 tenured and tenure-track positions being filled for 1998–99, one-fifth were newly created.

The representation of women physicists in academia has been climbing. In 1998, 17% of assistant professors in physics were women, up from 12% in 1994. Women now account for 8% of all physics faculty slots, and nearly half of the departments have at least one woman faculty member.

The *1997–98 Academic Workforce Report* is available free of charge from AIP, Education and Employment Statistics Division, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740; e-mail stats@aip.org; Web http://www.aip.org/statistics.

IN BRIEF

Radio astronomers in Europe will enjoy quiet in the 1610–1613.8 MHz hydroxyl band about half the time until 2006, the European Science Foundation announced in late May. That agreement, between ESF and telecommunications giant Iridium LLC, covers the period remaining until a stricter pact kicks in (see PHYSICS TODAY, October 1998, page 75). For the interim, signal spillover from Iridium's flotilla of mobile satellites, which operate in a neighboring frequency band, may not top -238 dB W/m^2 Hz for seven contiguous hours each weeknight and throughout weekends. The good news, says Jim Cohen, who chairs the ESF's Committee on Radio Astronomy Frequencies, "is that we will be able to continue observations at the level we've