

Members and Meetings

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Recently a colleague came to my office to inquire about symposium topics planned for the MRS meetings next year. He had attended his first MRS meeting last December and was impressed by the number and quality of papers related to his presented work. Having made significant progress and new discoveries this summer, he was looking forward to the opportunity of presenting his results at another one of our symposia. He expressed considerable disappointment when I told him there was no symposium topic scheduled during the next several meetings for which his findings would be appropriate. The symposium he had participated in last year was not being repeated, and the topical coverage in related areas did not embrace his current work.

This situation occurs commonly and regularly, and it illustrates a dichotomy within the Society. On one hand we want our symposia to address in-depth, interdisciplinary issues associated with fresh, emerging technologies and the development of advanced materials. This requires a commensurate selection of topics, and a narrow focus on the important features of those chosen. For a variety of reasons—including our criteria, the intensity of new developments in a field, and meetings on a similar topic elsewhere—the topics and issues at our meetings can and do change yearly. This puts a substantial number of members in a position similar to that of my colleague, and that position is not conducive to the development of a stable membership.

Members of most other technical societies are accustomed to the unrestricted right to present a paper at their major, general meetings. The Materials Research Society does not provide its members with such a guarantee. Instead we expect our symposium chairs to accept only those papers which are relevant to the defined symposium topic. For many researchers, especially in tight economic times, the difficulty with this restriction is compounded by institutional requirements of an accepted paper as a condition for attendance at a meeting. Unable to attend a technical meeting of MRS because their work is not directly pertinent to a scheduled symposium, the members tend to lose affinity for the Society. Thus by strict enforcement of the noble objectives of the Society, we have created an instability (or even an alienation) mechanism among the membership. But with an unstable membership, how can the



Society possibly function to successfully fulfill its objectives?

The answer to this question is not simple. In spite of this apparently self-destructive mechanism and its consequent membership instability, MRS has experienced a rapid and sustained rate of growth over the past ten years. This growth is due mainly to the concept and production of interdisciplinary symposia on forefront materials topics. The appeal for this type of forum is very strong, and the desire to be informed about the specific topics at our meetings appears to overshadow the possibility of an individual not being able to present his/her work. Also with the growth of the technical meetings, the diversity of topics covered has increased. This has not only increased the opportunity to learn about initiatives in new fields, but has also improved the probability of finding a symposium related to one's own research at a given meeting. The impact of this is clearly favorable.

Another factor in the Society's ability to grow and fulfill its objectives is the utilization of human resources from the entire materials research community—and not just the current membership. The directives from Council and the willingness of the Program Committee to search beyond the bounds of previous programs have facilitated this widescale involvement. The infusion of new research areas has definitely strengthened our meetings, and we must conscientiously maintain this flexibility to preserve our vitality. A variety of Society activities are advancing other objectives, and also combating the instability mechanism. One of the driving forces in establishing *Journal of Materials Research* was

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to provide a publication emulating the interdisciplinarity and topical coverage of our meetings. *JMR* provides a forum for reporting results even when a symposium on a research topic has not been conveniently scheduled. The recently expanded MRS BULLETIN, featuring technical themes, provides members with overviews of selected new research areas plus detailed accounts of MRS activities. Our newly developed short course program is seeking to educate professionals in the same emerging technologies covered in our technical symposia.

These activities are all important improvements in service to our members and undoubtedly contribute to the growth of our membership. However they are all relatively recent while the Society's growth is longer term. One must therefore conclude that our meetings are the mainstay of our membership in spite of the difficulties inherent in the principles and procedures of selecting symposium topics. Every effort must be made to continue the tradition of our meetings while searching for new ways to serve, rather than alienate, our members.

