APS: The Times They Are A-Changin’

The next 12 months will see many changes in the American Physiological Society. First, you will have heard by now that our long-serving and much esteemed Executive Director Marty Frank announced his retirement from this position, effective June 2018. Second, with the sale of the APS Bethesda headquarters by FASEB that will occur soon, the APS will be relocating into a new building next year in late spring/early summer. Third, there are ongoing plans for a significant change in the organization and structure of the annual Experimental Biology (EB) meeting. Finally, we reported last year that a company called Minding Your Business (MYB) was helping APS devise a new strategic plan. MYB presented its findings and proposals to Council in June, and the implementation process is well under way. The current state of this initiative will be discussed below. So the three of us, as past, current, and future presidents have much to occupy our minds in the next few months. We hope that, together with you, members of the physiology community, we can guide the Society forward in these uncertain times. Our goal is to build on the very substantial, existing strengths of the APS and ensure that the Society evolves to meet your changing needs as we approach the second quarter of the 21st century.

These are not idle words. Over the past year, Council, together with current and past leadership and APS staff, have expended considerable time and treasure in discussing and planning the future of APS. We are all determined to take advantage of the confluence of events listed above to remodel the Society to provide more value to its members and other target audiences. In the face of all of these upcoming changes, it is important to realize that APS is far from broken—in fact, in the world of professional societies, APS is one of the most successful, highly regarded, and financially stable among its peers. Its publications have a tremendous and authoritative impact on the world of physiology and beyond. We have an educational program that currently extends from the young budding physiologist to the highly experienced professor. We have an awards program providing much needed support for students and scientists at different career stages, including specific programs for underrepresented minorities and overseas colleagues. We provide substantial financial aid not only for our own APS conference program but also for larger international meetings, including the most recent IUPS meeting in Rio de Janeiro, the 2016 joint TPS/APS meeting in Dublin, and a potential future meeting of the Pan American Physiological Society proposed for 2019 in Havana, Cuba. We spend countless hours lobbying and fighting for physiology and science in general by writing to members of Congress and contacting news outlets, in addition to participating in face-to-face meetings with representatives and staff on Capitol Hill. Advocating for federal funding for research and the humane use of animals in research are two of the most time-consuming topics that occupy APS staff on a daily basis.

Yet, despite all of these very important activities in which APS is involved, this is a time for positive change. Nothing that we do, or are involved with, has been taken off the discussion table. Everything has been placed under a powerful microscope. Events and situations move more rapidly in the present day than ever before, and we need to be ahead of the curve. It would be easy to rest on our considerable laurels and not try to be a step ahead, as large multi-billion dollar enterprises such as Kodak and Polaroid found to their detriment over the past couple of decades. Based on these considerations, we are looking at overhauling our efforts to keep pace with new paradigms in the publishing world, new and pressing needs of our members related to grants and awards, the challenging anti-science environment that seems to have reached the highest levels of our governing bodies, and rapid progress in cyber-outreach tools that allow constant contact with our membership and the facilitation of information sharing with interested parties.

How will this be achieved? The first step taken at the summer Council meeting in July was to create several task forces to look at specific aspects of APS activities and to recommend measures and tactics that are needed to meet our goals. Each of the seven task forces comprises about six or seven APS members who have been active in leadership at the committee or section level, and who have special expertise in the topic under examination by the task force, as well as a trainee member to aid in understanding the needs of early career physiologists. The seven task forces are: awards, communications, conferences, education, experimental biology, publications, and social media. Each task force has been given general and specific questions to answer, and goals to achieve. Although too complex to describe in detail here, these range from assessing the value/success of individual programs in terms of time, effort, and outcomes, to general questions related to the structure of APS with its sections, interest groups, and chapters, as well as the overall governance of the Society. All task forces are meeting two or three times over the next few weeks—some have already held their first meeting—and are expected to provide a report with concrete suggestions to APS Council in November. Hopefully, much of this will have been achieved by the time you read this article. The presidents expect the task forces to be very specific in their recommendations and to avoid typical feel-good clichés such as “we need to improve
communications with our members.”

This we know already—we now want to understand how this can be achieved. We want to see proposals about grants and awards programs that would best help our members. What can be removed, and what needs to be added? In our opinion, APS needs to build a robust grant program for postdoctoral fellows and junior investigators. How can this be constructed, and how will it be funded? These are just a couple of examples of the specifics that will be addressed in detail. This will not be a painless exercise, but with everyone on board, we strongly believe that the APS will, as a result, provide added value and meaning that we hope will encourage new members to join the Society and stimulate existing members to have a greater participation in our activities.

As mentioned above, the annual Experimental Biology meeting is also being placed under the microscope for detailed examination. Several changes have already been put into place for the EB 2018 meeting in San Diego, and yet more will appear in 2019 in Orlando. The most significant visible changes for 2018 will be a reduction in the overall length of featured topics and symposia, which will be reduced to 90 min. The poster sessions will be from 10 AM to 12 noon, and will be unopposed by symposia, featured topics, or major lectures. This allows more time for poster viewing and addresses a frequent complaint from both presenters and attendees alike. There will be a lunch hour from 12 to 1 PM with no programming, allowing more networking to occur during this “free” time. For the following year, the plan is to eliminate Wednesday and end the meeting on Tuesday evening. The precise plans have not been finalized, but the poor attendance on Wednesday coupled with exhibitors noisily packing up their wares into dusty boxes leaves a negative impression. This is especially the case among more junior investigators and fellows who participate in the late-breaking poster session on Wednesday afternoon, which is usually as well attended as a pool party at the North Pole. Finally, as of today, there are no EB meetings planned after the San Diego event in 2020. This may seem a long way into the future, but in terms of large conference planning, it is really just around the corner. The five remaining societies who still participate in EB are in consultations to decide the long-term future of EB. It will undoubtedly be smaller, due to the withdrawal of the American Society of Nutrition this year, but whether it will take its current form is uncertain since it is not clear whether all of the remaining societies will continue to attend EB. Although some feel that this size reduction provides an opportunity for them to have a more focused meeting in a smaller and more affordable venue, our feeling is that we all benefit from the multi-society EB meeting by attending sessions in other disciplines, which broadens our scientific horizons—but it is all up in the air at this point.

We learned last year that FASEB was planning to sell the old campus in which APS is housed in Bethesda. Thus, plans were already underway to seek a new home for our Society, and it was no surprise when the sale was finalized earlier this year. APS leadership carefully examined space in four buildings, all in the Bethesda/Rockville area, but a little further from DC and some nearer the Metro. At the moment, a lease has not been finally signed, but there is a clear favorite location that will most likely be chosen. The building itself is more modern than the existing headquarters but has plenty of surrounding green space, and may also have a conference center (this is not yet certain) that can be used as a hub for APS conferences in the future. This would be a tremendous advantage to keep the costs of our conferences down and to allow attendees to interact more with APS staff who would be on site. We are keeping our fingers crossed for a positive outcome. Final news will be announced in an upcoming issue of The Physiologist.

And last but not least, we come to the retirement next year of Martin (aka Marty) Frank, who has been at the helm of the APS ship for over 30 years. Many of us in the Society have known no other executive director. He has been part of our lives for the past three decades as we grew from our junior faculty positions to senior leadership roles in the society. He has played a major role in the remarkable growth of the Society, which now has over 11,000 members, close to 100 staff, and impressive resources. It is an organization that is respected worldwide and has shown leadership in many aspects of our scientific lives, including publication trends, animal welfare, education, and lobbying efforts for science. Although most members interact with the APS through its most visible entities—notably publications and conferences (including EB)—the involvement of Marty and his excellent staff in the “invisible” activities mentioned above continues to benefit all of us in academia and beyond. Marty has shown indefatigable strength and leadership, and has worked with (or tolerated!) numerous presidents and council members over the years to achieve our mutual goals. As we begin the search for his successor, we wonder how and if all of his qualities and experience can still be found in a single person. The world is a more complicated place than when he took the reins in the last century. Finding a person with the appropriate balance of knowledge, administrative and scientific experience, leadership qualities, and vision will be a daunting task for the search committee.

We began this editorial by pointing out that this is a time of great change in the society. Indeed it is. But we are sure that, with the collective input from our members, from current and past leadership, from Council, and from APS staff, we cannot only get the job done, but we can drive the Society to new heights of achievement. This will be a tremendous legacy not only for Marty but for all those who went before him. The times they may be a-changin’, but they are also exciting! ■