

A Matter of Balance

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Back when Bob Nerem (as Chair of the U.S. Committee on Biomechanics) and I (as President of the Alliance for Engineering in Medicine and Biology) were given the charge from NSF to come up with a plan to unify the many voices claiming to represent bioengineering, the biggest hurdle as we saw it was to bring the many interested technical societies together in a non-threatening way. The new organization, if there was to be one, had to be clearly distinguished from member-oriented technical groups. And so, after many long and tenuous negotiations, AIMBE was formed as an organization without open membership and centered on public policy rather than technology.

Of course, the public policies that were of importance were those related to medical and biological engineering (MBE), and so had a technical foundation. Although AIMBE is primarily *not* a technical society, technical issues still had to be understood to propose and support the best public policies of that time.

The largest group of AIMBE members, the Fellows, were by and large selected based upon their technical accomplishments. Just reading Fellow induction citations confirms that very few Fellows are selected for achievements other than technical works. Some Fellows have moved on to interests of a more public affairs nature, but many still retain their primary interests in technical issues. This, then, forms the inherent paradox within AIMBE's mission: the role of the organization is to be primarily public policy, but the interests of a large portion, if not the majority, of its members are technical.

Very few of us are conversant with the wide range of technical issues pertinent to MBE public policy decisions. In recognition of this fact, past AIMBE meetings have been highly technical, but with a difference. Presentations given at AIMBE meetings have been more similar to keynote addresses at technical society meetings than to individual papers. The very reputation of AIMBE has allowed us to hear from preeminent experts in particular fields, and their talks have included perspectives on history, future, and implications of their subjects. So, AIMBE, a public policy organization, has conducted some of the best technical meetings that could be found.

The bylaws of AIMBE state that the purposes of the organization shall be to:

1. Promote public awareness of medical and biological engineering.
2. Establish liaison with government agencies and other professional groups.
3. Improve intersociety relations and cooperation within the field of medical and biological engineering.
4. Serve and promote the national interests in science, engineering, and education.
5. Recognize individual and group achievements and contributions to the field of medical and biological engineering.

As I read them, the bylaws neither prohibit technical interests and activities nor limit AIMBE to public policy issues. Indeed, as set forth in the bylaws, the purposes of AIMBE are closely aligned to education, cooperation, and recognition related to MBE.

AIMBE shall not infringe on the technical activities of its member societies, but neither should it ignore the technical foundations upon which our econotechnological society rest. Like living systems themselves, somewhere between the extremes of

technology divorced from its public implications and public policy unrelated to technology lies the most fertile ground for survival and growth.

I have heard comments reacting to Annual Event content: some say that they are not interested in all this public policy stuff. Others say that we need to have more public policy and fewer technical talks. These reflect the breadth of MBE as well as its elite.

Under the heading of “you can’t satisfy all the people all of the time,” neither of the above commenters is likely to be completely satisfied. AIMBE must strive for a balance incorporating the technical issues of the day and their public policy implications. It is this tie that makes AIMBE unique. We cannot afford to stray far from the middle ground, because to do so would lose distinctions we have from other successful and well-established groups.

AIMBE’s public policy goals make it effective, but so do its non-partisan technical experts. With this unique combination of interests, we may come to agree with Melvin Kranzberg, who said “Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.”