

‘The Role of Engineering Faculty in Professional and Technical Societies.’

Dr. Jirsa, although the current chairman of the Civil engineering department, started off by stating that he liked being a teacher more than being a chairman. He liked being actively involved in research and being able to interact with students and colleagues.

As a faculty member one should be able to divide one’s time between various activities. There are generally three aspects to a career in academia – teaching, research and service. It is the third aspect – service, that is often the most neglected. One often gets “caught” in internal departmental committees, especially as a new faculty member, but it is external service that sees a dearth of volunteers. Faculty members need to get involved in professional societies, both for building networks as well as in order to get ideas for research, collaborations with peers etc.

Dr. Jirsa, as he is the president of the American Concrete Institute, (ACI) spoke about his experiences with the institute. The ACI has about 120 technical committees. Most of the work is done by volunteers. If one serves on a committee one generally tends to become an expert in the field. This helps in being able to prove a need for research in an area, helps in strengthening funding proposals etc. Moreover, if one is able to put something down on paper it is easier to get colleagues/peers to comment about it. The ACI, however, has found it most difficult to attract volunteers to committees and to get them to continue to serve.

Often, the time commitment required is not large –maybe 2 or 3 meetings a year. And the benefits outweigh the effort. Papers that one gets access to in journals, are those of research that is approximately 2 to 3 years old. Often, at technical meetings however, one is exposed to ongoing research, and the latest ideas and techniques. Dr. Jirsa also gave the example of a person he knew (name withheld) who was a fairly well known person in the field of steel structures. After the California earthquake, however, he was asked (by virtue of being on a committee) to present analyses on various aspects of the earthquake. He did some preliminary study and because he was able to get information out quickly on a “hot” topic became in a short time, a leading expert in the field and was quoted extensively in subsequent papers.

Dr. Jirsa also spoke about University support for such activities. In his department there is a research initiation grant of approximately \$5000 for new faculty members. Different departments also have discretionary funds for faculty members to attend important meetings and present papers. Some universities also have start-up funds of up to \$200,000 for buying equipment etc. Part of this could be earmarked for society activities. In response to a question about small schools, Dr. Jirsa said that membership and active involvement in technical societies was even more important in smaller schools since there may often be only 1 or 2, if any, faculty members familiar with a particular field. In such cases it is only through external sources such as professional societies that one can get to meet with other people in one’s area of expertise for exchange of ideas and possible collaborations.

The meeting ended with informal questions and conversation.