

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR



Scott L. Melnick

Recently, a popular engineering listserv (www.seaint.org) has been abuzz about the future of engineering education and its relationship to licensure and certification. While I hesitate to say any one position represented a consensus, the impression I received was that many of the participants were in favor of de-emphasizing liberal arts courses and increasing the number of technical courses undergraduate engineering students take.

In contrast, if I had my druthers, I would increase the liberal arts requirements for engineering students.

My friend Richard Weingardt, a Colorado-based structural engineer, regularly writes about the need for structural engineers to be more involved in public affairs. In his wonderful book, *Forks in the Road*, he states: "With challenges in technological advancements and the struggle of maintaining—and funding—an advancing quality of life in the industrial powers and the developing countries, the value-adding skills of engineers have never been more important to our communities, our country and the world at large. However, engineers are woefully under-represented in the important policy-making bodies and boards, from local levels to the halls of U.S. Congress. Why have engineers, by and large, not been involved enough in the leadership opportunities available to them? Because the world is run by people who show up."

So why don't engineers "show up"? Why aren't they involved in politics? Why don't they serve on public boards and commissions? Why don't they speak out—via writing and lecturing?

I believe that in part the answer has to do with the nature of the type of person who tends to choose engineering as a profession. Most of the engineers I know tend to be analytical and reserved. But part of the answer also has to do with their training. Unlike other professionals, such as attorneys and physicians, most engineers do not have a liberal arts emphasis in their undergraduate studies. They

don't have to take enough writing courses. They don't have to take enough political science courses. They don't have to learn how to influence public policy.

This lack of a liberal arts background also shows up in the invisibility of the profession. The most common lament I've heard from structural engineers is that "no one knows what we do; we get no respect." Yet these same structural engineers are unwilling—or unable—to actively communicate the importance of their profession. At best, marketing is an afterthought for most engineers—and more typically, it might just as well be a four-letter word. Here's an easy test: When was the last time you entered one of your projects in an awards competition? And if you won an award, did you trumpet your achievement to the world? Architects are far more visible to the general public—not surprising given their substantially larger marketing budgets.

It's never too late. Richard Weingardt is right. The world is run by those who show up. So get involved, whether it's with your local SEA or your school board.

GREEN STEEL

This month's issue focuses on sustainability, one of the hot buzz words in the design community—and rightly so. We have finite natural resources and it's important that we don't squander them.

And while it's easy to talk about the sustainable aspects of steel construction (steel is recycled, reusable, and recyclable—and with less waste and site disruption than other construction materials), it's also important to remember that the structural system will have far less of an environmental impact than other systems, most notably the HVAC system.

So think green, but also think about how sustainability fits in with the rest of your design principles.

Editorial Contacts

Editorial Offices

Modern Steel Construction
One E. Wacker Dr., Suite 3100
Chicago, IL 60601
312.670.2400 tel
312.670.5403 fax

Editor & Publisher

Scott L. Melnick
312.670.8314
melnick@modernsteel.com

Managing Editor

Keith A. Grubb, P.E., S.E.
312.670.8318
grubb@modernsteel.com

Assistant Editor

Beth S. Pollak
312.670.8316
pollak@modernsteel.com

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Vice President, Communications
Scott L. Melnick

Advertising Contact

Account Manager

John A. Byrne
847.699.6049 tel
847.699.8681 fax
byrne@modernsteel.com

2400 E. Devon Ave., Suite 380
Des Plaines, IL 60018

To receive advertising information,
contact John Byrne or view it online:
www.modernsteel.com

Address Changes and Subscription Questions

312.670.5444 tel
312.670.5403 fax
kingston@modernsteel.com

