

PAST PRESENT FUTURE



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The 1994 Annual General Meeting marks the 75th anniversary

of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia (APEGBC). Coincidentally, October is also Women's History Month, as designated by the federal Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. What better time to reflect on the role of women in the engineering and geoscience professions in British Columbia?

Women have long been engaged in the practice of engineering, whether or not they have been recognized as professional engineers — the first woman in Canada to receive a patent was Ruth Adams, who invented the cookstove in 1850. However, women have been members of our Association for less than half its existence. The first woman registered as a professional engineer with APEGBC was Anne Reading PEng who joined in 1965, at a time when less than 0.5% of engineers in Canada were women. The first woman to participate on APEGBC Council was Dr Carolyn Small PEng in 1981, and in 1992 Kathleen Gissing PEng became the first woman President of the Association. Geoscientists were brought into the Association fold in 1991 and women geoscientists were among the first to register with the Association. Linda Thorstad PGeo was one of those individuals and she has been very active in Association affairs ever since, becoming, in 1991, the first professional geoscientist elected to Council.

The Genesis of DAWEG

The low participation of women in engineering and geoscience in the early years of the Association was typical of all professions. In the early 1960s, only 7% of medical doctors and 3% of lawyers were women. Now, however, while half of all new doctors and lawyers are women, only 10 to 20% of engineering school graduates are women. Today, 75 years after the formation of APEGBC, only 555 women are registered in BC, which translates to 3.6% of the total membership. It was this low participation of women in the profession that led to the formation of the Canadian Committee on Women in Engineering (CCWE) in February 1990.

In November 1990, APEGBC sponsored the West Coast CCWE Public Forum, organized in part by Karen Savage PEng and Janet Calder PEng. In response to the overwhelming interest of women engineers at that forum, APEGBC held followup meetings that ultimately led to the

formation of the Division for Advancement of Women in Engineering and Geoscience (DAWEG) in September 1991. Since its formation, DAWEG has grown to a membership of over 300, which includes both female and male engineers and geoscientists, government agencies and departments, and businesses that are committed to the promotion of equity in our professions. Richard Hancock PEng, Past President of APEGBC, has recognized DAWEG as being the most active Division within the Association and Dr Monique Frize PEng, Chair of the CCWE and holder of the Northern Telecomm-SERC Chair of Women in Engineering, has similarly commended DAWEG as being one of the most proactive groups within a provincial engineering association.

Current Initiatives

DAWEG's purpose, as stated in its terms of reference, is "to develop and implement programs to promote, advance and increase the participation of women in engineering and geoscience". It is, in fact, a dual role that addresses both recruitment and retention issues. The recruitment initiatives focus on the promotion of engineering and geoscience as career choices for young women and are largely conducted through the School Interaction program. The second role, retention, is more complex. It requires the support of practicing women engineers and geoscientists to reduce attrition as well as programs to improve the acceptance and equitable treatment of women in engineering and geoscience workplaces. DAWEG's Mentoring, Advocacy, Outreach and Social programs have been designed to address these goals. The bimonthly DAWEG newsletter keeps the membership informed about current programs and activities and is the main communication tool for members outside the Lower Mainland.

The School Interaction program has placed many volunteers in BC schools, at all grade levels, to present the value of engineers and geoscientists to society and to promote engineering and geoscience as exciting and satisfying careers. This is coordinated, in part, through involvement with the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology through its Scientists in the Schools program and groups such as the Association for the Promotion and Advancement of Science Education (APASE). Other activities include involvement in career days orga-

nized by universities and colleges as well as the provision of prizes and judges for school science fairs.

The DAWEG Mentoring program was developed in conjunction with the Faculty of Applied Science at the University of British Columbia and is currently expanding to include Simon Fraser University. There are now at least 40 active mentor/protégée pairs. The program's structure and guidebook are being used by other APEGBC Branches and by corporations such as BC Hydro to implement their own mentoring programs. A very favourable writeup in the *Globe and Mail* in May 1994 gave the program significant public exposure and coordinators Joan Hutchinson EIT and Sarah Dench of UBC received several inquiries as a result. In addition, the Mentoring program is recognized by the National Research Council of the United States.

The Advocacy program has undertaken two significant projects thus far: a comprehensive study on flexible work options, and a guidebook for engineers and geoscientists new to British Columbia that will provide a "road map" through the APEGBC registration procedure, advice on finding employment and other professional information. Other activities include video and discussion evenings and assertiveness training workshops.

Through its Outreach program, DAWEG has forged

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links with government departments such as Industry, Science and Technology Canada, science groups such as Science World, and other women's groups such as the Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology (SCWIST) and the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology (CCWESTT), all of whom are working towards similar objectives.

Benefits for All

As we look forward to APEGBC's next 75 years, it is interesting to note how well the activities of DAWEG fulfil many of the current aims of the Association. It has been suggested that DAWEG is a special interest group not relevant to the majority of the APEGBC membership. On the contrary, DAWEG's programs have proven to extend beyond what may traditionally be considered "women's issues". By promoting the engineering and geoscience professions as careers for women and by improving the acceptance and equitable treatment of women already in the professions, all Association members cannot help but benefit.

One of the current priorities of APEGBC is to improve the public image of engineers and geoscientists. The results

of the Strategic Planning Task Force Survey showed that 71% of respondents feel that APEGBC provides insufficient communication with the public and 84% feel we should pursue ways to enhance the image of the Association and its members with the general public. Many of DAWEG's initiatives address these aims. The positive coverage of the Mentoring program and the exposure provided by the School Interaction program will help reverse the stereotypes held by the public about engineers and engineering. DAWEG's involvement with large national groups such as SCWIST and CCWESTT gives exposure to our Association and the engineering and geoscience professions as a whole.

APEGBC members gain other advantages from DAWEG. Many Association committees now include DAWEG members — either directly as DAWEG representatives or through natural progression as APEGBC members originally interested primarily in DAWEG programs become more involved in the mainstream workings of the Association. Activities of the Advocacy Committee to improve the workplace for women in the professions will benefit all professionals. Recommendations made through the flexible work options report and the guidebook for engineers and geoscientists new to BC will be useful to both men and women members.

Looking Forward

During DAWEG's recent Strategic Planning process, we identified a number of issues to be faced as we mature into a well-established, proactive division of the Association. If our programs are to increase and grow, as they have in the past, we need to continue to pursue funding from APEGBC program grants, corporate sponsorships and membership fees. We need to keep involving new members in the Division's Executive Committee and subcommittees to provide new ideas and energy. During the 1993/94 year, our first regional branch was formed in Victoria. If there is sufficient interest, other branches will be formed in the coming years.

We need to develop means of evaluating our successes in promoting engineering and geoscience as careers and retaining women already in the professions. We also need to develop a broader network with other professional and technical associations, both provincially and nationally, to combine our efforts towards achieving mutual goals.

It has been suggested that DAWEG's ultimate goal for the future is to become redundant. Perhaps, when there is equal representation by men and women in engineering and geoscience, DAWEG can be dissolved and the energy we currently invest in DAWEG programs can be refocused elsewhere in the Association. Which anniversary will APEGBC be celebrating then, we wonder?

If you would like more information about DAWEG or its programs, please contact the DAWEG Executive Committee through our new voice mail service at 299-0540. 

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