



**Society of Women Engineers  
GOVERNANCE TASK FORCE  
Background and Recommendations  
8/28/15**

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## Background

The Society of Women Engineer's (SWE) current structure and governance are the result of numerous decisions made over a number of years, and these decisions were made with the best intentions and the best information available at that time. Times change, however, and it's important to periodically step back and look at how things are going and where changes may be needed.

With that in mind, in October 2014, the SWE Board of Directors (BOD) engaged a consultant to help determine the ideal governance structure and volunteer service model to support the organization's growth and globalization goals and to maximize member engagement. A Funding Request was submitted to the Special Project Reserve for this purpose. The Funding Request stated in part:

“The organization is currently at an important stage in its growth as it looks to expand its reach globally and effectively serve members both domestically and abroad. SWE has also struggled in recent years with developing and maintaining a successful leadership pipeline to identify and engage volunteer leaders at all levels of the organization. The existing governance structure, while it has been effective for the organization in the past, has been perceived to be a limiting factor in both attracting volunteer leaders and sustaining the future growth of the organization.”

A small task force was established to work with the consultant on activities, review recommendations, and provide feedback. The task force consisted of:

- Elizabeth Bierman, FY15 President
- Colleen Layman, FY16 President
- Penny Wirsing, Director
- Alexis McKittrick, Region Governor
- Allison Terry, Senator
- Karen Horting, SWE Executive Director
- Peter Finn, SWE Deputy Executive Director

Development of a flexible SWE governance structure that supports globalization and inclusion is a strategic objective that supports a key Society strategic goal. As such, the primary goals of the effort were to evaluate SWE's current governance structure, benchmark comparable organizations, and develop:

- New, clearly-defined roles and responsibilities for volunteer leadership, which ensure that volunteering to serve is an attractive and smooth process,
- An appropriate process to identify, select and engage volunteers who can effectively lead the organization,

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- A framework for succession planning and cultivation of new leaders, and
- Analysis and recommendations on potential adaptations of SWE's leadership structure for sections, regions and committees; strategies for ongoing leadership and staff training; engagement opportunities that are appropriate given member preferences; and processes to ensure leaders are focused on and having an impact on critical association decisions.

McKinley Advisors was chosen to conduct the research and investigation and develop recommendations. McKinley works exclusively with associations and has specific experience providing this type of service, including enacting new governance and leadership models for other non-profit organizations and optimizing organizational performance. Their clients include American Institute of Architects, Pennsylvania Institute of CPAs, American Association of Engineering Societies, and American Society of Civil Engineers.

McKinley reviewed available data and conducted benchmarking to evaluate other organizations' effective governance and engagement practices to the extent applicable, and conducted in-depth interviews with SWE staff and both current and past volunteer leaders to measure perceptions.

Benchmarking sought to gain insight on topics related to governance structures, regional representation, leadership development and international perspective. Organizations that participated included National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), and American Institute of Architects (AIA), to name a few.

Interviews with SWE staff and volunteer leaders focused on SWE's governance and volunteer opportunities, to gain insight on perceptions of and experiences with the governance structure, assess the strength and challenges of the current governance model, and identify opportunities for SWE to create a more effective, inclusive model to attract and retain current and future leaders.

Interview participants were from across the country and the globe, and were primarily long-term SWE members with average membership tenure of 20 years. The pool included several SWE Fellows. All had served at the Section level, many in multiple positions. All had served on a committee or special task force, in regional or Senate positions, and/or as past or current BOD members. In addition, McKinley facilitated in-depth discussions with the Senators and Regional governance teams to gain their perspectives.

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## Recommendations

Based on the research conducted and interviews held, McKinley proposed a number of recommendations and options to optimize SWE's governance structure. These recommendations were discussed at length with the Task Force, and were shared with the BOD, the Region Governors, the Board of Trustees, and the Nominating Committee Chair at their first meeting of FY16, as well FY15 and FY16 Senators. These recommendations will be reviewed in more detail in the coming months by sub-teams, each led by a Board contact, in order to thoroughly vet the ideas and develop specific implementation plans.

The following are the general areas of recommendation, with a very brief overview and path forward, as well as the Board contact.

### Senate

BOD Contact: Amy Jo Moore, [amy.jo@swe.org](mailto:amy.jo@swe.org)

There was a clear and well-recognized disconnect between the intended purpose of the Senate and the current activities. The recommendation is to develop a representative body whose primary responsibility will be to advise the Board and other areas of the Society on key issues, opportunities and priorities for SWE and the engineering profession consistent with the organization's strategic plan – that is, to be the strategic body of SWE – and to ensure the members of this body have the needed skill sets.

The focus will be on competency-based (vs geographic) selection criteria. Collegiate interests will be represented, although the overall percentage of collegiate members may change. Consistent staggered term lengths are recommended for all members. As the focus of this body will be on strategic issues, the Strategic Planning Committee can be sunset. Details will need to be worked out regarding selection criteria, appropriate term length, leadership structure, transition process, etc.

### Bylaws

BOD Contact: Stephanie Loete, [stephanie.loete@swe.org](mailto:stephanie.loete@swe.org)

The current bylaws document is lengthy and contains much detailed information, requiring frequent revision, whereas recognized best practices would only require updates every few years. The recommendation is to audit and revise the bylaws to ensure they include only essential governing parameters, with other aspects of governance being moved to SWE's operating procedures as appropriate. This will result in infrequent bylaws changes, which should be subject to a vote by all eligible SWE members.

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The composition, structure and responsibilities of the Bylaws Committee would be revised to support this improved process.

## **Regions**

BOD Contact: Heather Doty, [heather.doty@swe.org](mailto:heather.doty@swe.org)

The current regional structure reflects the earlier years of SWE when communication was very dependent on mail, telephone and personal contact. This focus on geographic structure does not adequately support the demographic and professional diversity of today's Society, or provide consistent experiences for all of our members.

This regional structure also often represents overlap and duplication of efforts between the various layers of sections, committees and HQ, and many of these responsibilities could be administered more efficiently and consistently elsewhere (e.g. HQ). It was also acknowledged that there is often difficulty filling the multiple roles at the region, section and committee levels.

In order to dissolve the permanent geographic boundaries, a matrix of all the current activities performed at the region level will be developed. It will be important to identify those things currently being done that need to continue, including maintaining "connectedness" with members, ensuring section vitality, and providing leadership development, training and opportunities for professionals and collegiates. For those activities that need to continue, recommendations will include how and where best to maintain that activity (e.g. HQ, committees, etc.).

It was also recommended that options be identified for distributing financial assets currently held at the regional level, consistent with SWE's mission.

## **Sections**

BOD Contact: Jessica Rannow, [jessica.rannow@swe.org](mailto:jessica.rannow@swe.org)

Many of the comments from the member interviews highlighted the benefits of connecting and developing relationships with other women engineers at the local level. However it was also noted that bureaucracy and complexity of our current structure can cause frustration and volunteer burnout.

The current Section bylaws will be reviewed to emphasize efficiency in governance, flexibility in leadership structure, and maximizing the time and contributions of members serving in local roles, with the focus on maintaining member value.

## **Collegiates**

BOD Contact: Melissa Lindsey, [Melissa.lindsey@swe.org](mailto:Melissa.lindsey@swe.org)

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It was recognized that the current one-year terms for Collegiate Director and Senators can make it very difficult to actively participate. This concern must be balanced with the challenges of committing to a longer term during a period of work-life transitions. It was also recognized that collegiates can represent a broad range of interests (e.g. just out of high school, return and grad students, etc.).

With the potential change in Senate structure, and as the Society moves toward greater professional/ collegiate integration, collegiate interests need to be adequately incorporated throughout the new governance structure. Note that a separate sub-group was not designated to address this issue; rather the intent is for collegiates to participate in each sub-group to ensure complete integration.

### **Board of Directors**

BOD Contact: Colleen Layman, [colleen.layman@swe.org](mailto:colleen.layman@swe.org)

The BOD currently has the ability to invite guests to participate in Board meetings to provide key perspectives and insights as needed. It is suggested that the BOD be more proactive in inviting guests on an ongoing basis, as needed on specific issues.

It is also recommended that the BOD review appointed positions vs elected to determine the optimum number of each, and that all directors have the same term length (e.g. Collegiate Director consistent with others). It was recognized that, given the more strategic role of the Senate body in the future, additional review of the BOD composition may be needed at that time.

### **Committees**

BOD Contact: Mary Perkinson, [mary.perkinson@swe.org](mailto:mary.perkinson@swe.org)

Many members gain valuable leadership experience through participation on a SWE committee. However inconsistent expectations and accountability can make this experience less effective for some members. With committees becoming more important in the leadership pipeline, committee chairs need to be strong with very clear expectations about roles and responsibilities.

The current committee structure, responsibilities and accountability will be reviewed, focusing on leadership opportunities and communication pipelines. The potential for term limits will be considered if/as appropriate in order to ensure seats will be open on a regular basis, creating additional leadership opportunities for new members to get involved, and minimizing volunteer burnout. Pending other structural changes being proposed, consolidation of certain committees may be considered.

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## **Nominating Committee**

BOD Contact: Penny Wirsing, [penny.wirsing@swe.org](mailto:penny.wirsing@swe.org)

The Nominating Committee plays an essential role in ensuring a robust slate of candidates. It is recommended that a review be undertaken to consider how Nominating Committee members are selected and what skills are needed, rather than relying on geographically based selection.

The committee currently uses a competency matrix as a basis for selection, but does not consider specific competencies that may be needed under the current strategic plan, or potential gaps in the specific skill sets of the current BOD members. It is recommended that the nomination and election process be revised so the committee is more proactive in identifying the needed skill sets and seeking out candidates with those skills, rather than relying on the pool of candidates that are identified through the current nomination process.

Ballots over the past several years have ranged from multiple candidates for all seats, to no contested seats. Based on election data from 2010 to 2015, voting participation has remained consistent with no correlation between a contested officer election and the percentage of members who vote. It is recommended that a decision be made as to whether or not to present a contested ballot, and that a consistent process be used for all Society-elected positions (e.g. BOD, BOT, Senate).

## **HQ**

BOD Contact: Karen Horting, [karen.horting@swe.org](mailto:karen.horting@swe.org)

Many of the above recommendations will involve moving some roles and responsibilities to HQ staff. This will require monitoring all the various working groups and gap assessments to determine what should reside with HQ, developing a transition plan for HQ staff to take on those roles, and incorporating that into the strategic plan and budget.

In addition, taking a more coordinated and professional approach to volunteer relations will allow SWE to more effectively match members with appropriate leadership opportunities relevant to their skills and interests (e.g. right person for the right job), while filling the leadership pipeline with qualified candidates for future successful leadership roles.

## **International**

BOD Contact: Brooke Switzer, [brooke.switzer@swe.org](mailto:brooke.switzer@swe.org)

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It was recognized that, with the relatively small number of international members, the shifting needs of that group, and our evolving understanding of those needs, a significant change to SWE's governance structure to specifically accommodate international members is premature at this time.

The engagement of international members and international growth opportunities will continue to be incorporated through each of the changes being considered. For this reason, similar to collegiate interests, the intent is for international perspectives to be considered as appropriate in each of the sub-groups to ensure complete integration.

## **Other Considerations**

### **Documents**

It was recognized that many of the changes being proposed have interrelated effects on other changes and other parts of the organization. An extensive list of all documents that may be affected is being developed to ensure consistent and coordinated updates.

### **Training**

Improving the value and consistency of volunteer leadership training, and ensuring all leaders have access to them, will significantly increase the efficiency and productivity of the governance structure.

As such, enhanced leadership development training will be developed. Building on the current Leadership Coaching Committee (LCC) model, the focus will be on ensuring adequate funding and competencies of the trainers, and ready availability of training to leaders throughout the organization.

### **Communication**

By facilitating ongoing communication among all levels of the governance structure, SWE will be better positioned to identify opportunities for collaboration and decrease redundancy across the Society.

HQ will evaluate channels for more effective communication throughout the organization. Programs and mechanisms will be developed for ongoing multi-faceted communication from/among sections, the BOD, and HQ, including in-person and virtual town-hall meetings and video updates.

### **Board of Trustees**

Although the Board of Trustees (BOT) was not specifically identified in the McKinley

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recommendations, there are a number of changes which will impact the reserves and/or the processes used for fund issuance and the BOT will be engaged in these changes.

Separate but concurrent with the governance task force, and recognizing there had been no changes in their governance since establishment in 1956, the BOT identified a need to add two additional trustees for a total eight. This change will allow more oversight on the funds and programs under the BOT's purview, and will be proposed and voted on in the near future.

### **Next Steps**

Over FY16, sub-groups will take an in-depth look at these recommendations and determine an appropriate path forward, including implementation timelines. These sub-groups will be staffed with current Senators, Region Governors, BOD members and other key individuals. In addition, input will be solicited from members to help identify and overcome potential barriers to success.

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## FAQs

**Q1:** Is the full report from McKinley available?

**A1:** There were a number of individual documents generated throughout the process, but no single final report. Without having participated in the discussions, those individual documents are not intuitively clear. The information presented here is a summary of the recommendations.

**Q2:** How fast is this all going to happen?

**A2:** It is recognized that there are a lot of changes that will impact multiple areas of the organization. While we are anxious to make the changes needed to take us to the next level, SWE leadership is committed to taking the time to do it the right way. As such some changes will be implemented in FY16 while others will need to transition a bit later. As the implementation plans are developed for each area, the exact timing of the overall changes will be better understood. We estimate a 3-5 year transition timeline overall.

**Q3:** How can we create leadership succession plans this year with everything up in the air?

**A3:** As with any organizational change, there is a period of uncertainty. Each sub-group will be tasked with developing recommendations for a smooth transition from the existing processes and structure to the new. For now, please continue doing your role to the best of your ability. If you have specific questions, please speak with your BOD liaison, Senator or Region Governor.

**Q4:** Who do I contact if I want to be involved in creating this new structure?

**A4:** Each recommendation has been assigned a champion. For example, the Senators and Region Governors are developing specific sub-groups to address changes related to their structure. Later this fall a general call will be distributed for others wishing to have input. If you have a specific area of interest, please contact your BOD liaison, Senator or Region Governor.

**Q5:** How will we maintain a diverse geographic representation in a competency-based Senate?

**A5:** It is important to retain the voice of the various perspectives from across SWE's membership, and with that in mind one basis for selection may be section size (e.g. small, medium and large). The specifics will be worked by that sub-team.

**Q6:** Where do MALs fit in these changes?

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**A6:** The MAL organization was considered with the Sections, rather than with the Regions. That organization is seen as functioning well, and may serve as a model for some of the changes being considered.

**Q7:** Who will make the ultimate decisions?

**A7:** Some of the decisions rest with the Senate (e.g. bylaws revisions), while many others rest with the BOD. In order to ensure the optimum changes and buy-in, all changes will be vetted and extensively communicated. Even so, it is recognized that some of the changes will not please everyone.

**Q8:** Without the support of Regions, how will we prevent collegiate sections with no nearby professional section from losing their connection to role models and to SWE at the Society level?

**A8:** The importance of “connecting” at the local level, for both collegiates and professional members, is fully recognized and will be taking into account when determining what changes will be made to the governance structure.

**Q9:** Was consideration given to changing the membership structure (e.g. collegiate, professional, life, fellow)?

**A9:** No, membership levels were not part of the governance structure review and no changes are being proposed at this time.

**Q10:** How and when can this information be shared with local sections?

**A10:** This document provides information that can be shared. It will be important to encourage discussion with those who have more detailed background, such as Senators and Region Governors, in order to ensure good dialog and avoid misinformation.