AIP Matters

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Director's Matters

By H. Frederick Dylla, Executive Director & CEO

Congressman and physicist Vern Ehlers: A champion for science

One of the science community's own, US Representative Vernon Ehlers, is retiring from Congress this year. Recognized widely as "Mr. Science" and the "smartest" Member of Congress, Ehlers was the first research physicist to serve in Congress and has been a tireless champion of science in this nation.

Representative Vernon J. Ehlers.

"Either you're a nerd, or you work for one" is one of Ehlers's favorite sayings. He is also fond of pointing to his pocket protector with pride. Vernon Ehlers received his undergraduate degree in physics and his PhD in nuclear physics from the University of California, Berkeley. After six years on the faculty at Berkeley, he moved to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI, where he taught physics for 16 years and became Department Chair. During this time Ehlers also served as a volunteer science advisor to then-Congressman Gerald R. Ford. He was first elected to the 103rd Congress in a special election on December 7, 1993.

Vern Ehlers speaks with Philip Hammer (AIP Associate Vice President of Physics Resources), Curt Callan (APS President), and Mike Lubell (APS Director of Public Affairs) at his retirement celebration.

We take this opportunity to honor Ehlers's 17 years of working to advance science education and research. Ehlers helped to create the Department of Education's Mathematics and Science Partnerships program, to secure substantial funding for teacher training, and to oversee the 1998 rewrite of the United States' first major statement on science policy since the end of World War II. He held positions of leadership on the House Administration Committee and the Science and Technology Committee. As co-chair and founder of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education (STEM Ed) Caucus, he has been a leader in trying to improve instruction and learning in American schools. His work with STEM Ed led him to take a seat on the House Committee on Education and Labor in 1999.

Of particular importance to AAPT and AIP, Congressman Ehlers took time to serve young physicists by introducing a statement in the Congressional Record each year to honor the members of the US Physics Team.

Many of those statements also specifically honored the coaches and teachers who supported the student team members. Ehlers met with the US Physics Team members each year on Capitol Hill and was always generous with his time and his praise for this small group of students.


Vern Ehlers with a student member of the US Physics Team.

Congressman Ehlers's interests and accomplishments are diverse. He co-chaired the National Prayer Breakfast; championed congressional internet usage and government transparency; advocated for a federal ban of online poker; and led the development of the Great Lakes Legacy Act, which authorized $270 million to clean up the lakes. Ehlers leaves a respected legacy of bipartisan efforts, especially those focused on science education standards and renewable energy.


AVS delegates meet with Vern Ehlers during the 2010 Science-Engineering-Technology Congressional Visits Day. From the left, David Castner (President), Rudy Ludeke, Janice Reutt-Robey, Vernon Ehlers, and Alison Baski.

We all might wonder how one person can be admired and respected by such a wide variety of people and interests while faithfully serving the constituents of the 3rd District of Michigan. Vernon Ehlers's unwavering character has taught us how taking a thoughtful approach to any issue can bridge differences. With Ehlers's influence, many are beginning to recognize that Congress isn't such a strange place for a self-professed geek. In fact, it's a perfect fit for a person with an analytical mind and the drive to improve science and science education. Congressman Ehlers will be missed far and wide. We wish him well and send him our deepest thanks for his fine service.

PUBLISHING MATTERS

UniPHY and Scitation eBooks platform shortlisted for ALPSP awards

UniPHY has been selected as one of the four finalists for the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers' (ALPSP's) Award for Publishing Innovation 2010. The award recognizes substantial innovation, originality, and utility within the publishing sector. Scitation eBooks hosting platform has been shortlisted for ALPSP's Award for Best eBook Publisher 2010. This award recognizes exceptional expertise, innovation, and enterprise in the publishing of academic or scholarly book content in electronic

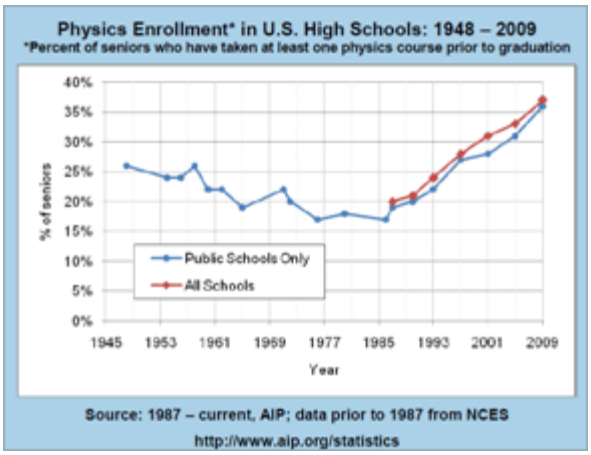
form. The winners will be announced during the ALPSP International Conference 2010, which will take place September 8–10 near Cambridge, UK.

PHYSICS RESOURCES CENTER MATTERS

High-school physics enrollments double since first AIP survey

The AIP Statistical Research Center (SRC) conducts a survey of high-school physics teachers every four years. Based on data collected from a 2008–09 survey, we find that more than 1.3 million students were enrolled in physics courses in the US and that 37% of high-school graduates had completed at least one physics course.

When the SRC conducted its first Nationwide Survey of High School Physics Teachers in 1986–87, only 624,000 students were enrolled in physics courses, and only one out of every five students took physics before graduating from high school. Enrollments grew very fast among both conceptual physics courses and advanced physics courses (for example, advanced placement and honors).



Consult the SRC website for more on high-school physics. SRC's current reports examine the availability of high-school physics and high-school physics courses and enrollments. Future reports will present data on textbooks commonly used, high-school physics teachers, underrepresented minorities in high-school physics, females in high-school physics, and more. Questions about physics in US high schools can be directed to Susan White, SRC Research Manager.

AROUND AIP

Physics in dance; dance in physics

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's "The Matter of Origins" will debut at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center of the University of Maryland on September 10 and 12. Inspired by Lerman's meeting a group of physicists who conduct research at CERN, the work explores the outer limits of the universe and the inner spaces of our own minds. Read more. In conjunction with "The Matter of Origins," the UM Department of Astronomy will hold a special panel discussion about origins in astronomy on September 8. Leading department faculty members will give brief overviews of origins that relate to their specific areas of research followed by Q&A and star-gazing, weather permitting. This panel event is free, but reservations are required.

We invite your feedback to this newsletter via email to aipmatters@aip.org.

For past issues of this newsletter, visit the AIP Matters archives.