RETURNING SERVE

by Gary White

They say you can’t serve two masters, but in today’s world, where multitasking is considered a job requirement, it can sometimes feel like two is the mathematical lower bound, approached but never realized! Personally, I don’t always fare too well in the mandatory multitasking environment in which we live—I’m better at single-tasking, and I really excel at half-tasking!

However, I’m pretty sure that I have turned the aphorism about serving two masters on its head—it’s not about what it feels like to be overwhelmed with the “tyranny of the immediate” (to borrow a phrase from an otherwise long-forgotten sermon), it’s about the reality that, when push comes to shove, the sole and true master will be revealed by the actions of the servant. It’s a biblical saying from an era when the use of the word “serve” had the taint of serfdom and slavery associated with it. Still, it carries truth in my view.

Today, we use “serve” and “service” in many different ways, not usually so tainted—my Dad “served” in the Navy, a waiter “serves” us a meal, and we attend worship and memorial “services.” Service is one of the four pillars of the Sigma Pi Sigma mission—in fact, “Sigma Pi Sigma exists to ... promote an attitude of service of its members towards their fellow students, colleagues, and the public ...” In this issue of Radiations, we see fine examples of physicists describing their service to the community in a variety of ways, making tangible what the physics community means by service. Other uses include “full-service” gas stations (Remember those? Oh well, ask your parents ...or your grandparents!), politicians routinely “serve” two terms, and in tennis we refer to “returning serve.”

continued on page 23
Physics Puzzle 2

Graduations and recognizing service got the author of our second puzzle, Gary White, thinking about what he calls the “gift-wrapping” problem:

A. Given a square piece of wrapping paper with an area of one square meter, what is the largest volume box that can be gift-wrapped?

B. Suppose you allow any rectangular sheet of wrapping paper with an area of one square meter. Can you wrap a larger volume with a rectangle rather than a square of equal area?

Note: The terms “gift-wrapping” and “boxes” are shorthand for the usual method of covering rectangular parallelepipeds with paper—folding and overlapping is allowed, but no stretching, tearing, cutting, etc.

Experimenting with your hiring process?

Finding the best scientific job or hire shouldn’t be left to chance. SPS Jobs (the online job site of the Society of Physics Students and Sigma Pi Sigma) is your ideal recruitment resource, targeting over 125,000 undergraduates, graduate students, early professionals, and mentors in physics, chemistry, computer science, engineering, medicine, mathematics, geology, and other science-related fields worldwide. Whether you’re looking to hire or be hired, SPS provides real results by matching hundreds of relevant jobs with this hard-to-reach audience each month.

http://jobs.spsnational.org

The Director’s Corner

Returning Serve

 continued from page 3

Returning serve ... I especially like this phrase because it evokes what strikes me as one of the key ingredients of service of the kinds featured in this issue of Radiations. The analogy is not perfect, but think of two friends enjoying a cordial tennis game—where improved play is more important than the score—rather than acting as tooth-and-nail competitors. As you read what your colleagues have written in their reflections on service, you’ll see that they seem to get as much as they give ... that the returns from serving are as important as the service itself.

That’s the way that I feel about my 11 years here as director of Sigma Pi Sigma. While in some sense I feel that my role has been to serve the needs of physics students and the larger physics community, it is also true that I have received even more in return—more education, more fellowship, more encouragement, more science, more fulfillment, and more sense of belonging. It has been a terrific 11 years that has seen the development of the SPS web presences, the expansion of SPS zone meetings, the reinvigoration of the Sigma Pi Sigma Congresses, and an increase in overall SPS activity and participation that parallels the unprecedented numbers of recent physics degree recipients. But it has also been terrific in what I have received in return. Thank you, SPS!

As you may have sensed, I am leading up to an announcement. I will be taking a leave of absence from my current SPS position to become a member of the “rotating” staff of the National Science Foundation (NSF). As a “rotator,” I will work as a full-time grants officer for one to two years at the NSF, but I will retain my formal affiliation with the American Institute of Physics and plan to return to AIP after my rotation is completed. Of course, I have mixed emotions about this, but all in all, it is a very exciting opportunity. It has been my honor and privilege to serve as the director of SPS, and it will be hard to watch from the sidelines for a while. With its tremendous staff of dedicated professionals, though, SPS remains in very good hands. In addition, SPS is fortunate that Dr. Toni Saunty of Angelo State University will be replacing me in the leadership role. Toni has served SPS and Sigma Pi Sigma admirably as president of the SPS Council and in many other ways. She has also filled many other leadership roles impressively, including service as president of the campus faculty senate and as President of the Texas section of the American Association of Physics Teachers. By the time this is printed, I have no doubt that she will have already hit the ground running.

I am especially grateful to so many of you for all the support for physics students, for SPS, and for me that you have shown over the years—the “return service,” if you will. I look forward to working with you to improve the climate for physics students even further as I transition to this new role.

Sincerely and humbly,
Gary White