The OSA Board of Directors, on suggestion of Lucien M. Biberman, created the Technical Council to oversee special meeting sessions devoted to emerging optics subfields that had sparked particular interest among members.

The OSA meetings of the early 1960s consisted of a spring meeting, usually held in March, and the fall annual meeting, usually held in October. Outside groups and committees that had large overlap in membership with OSA—examples are the National Research Council (NRC) Committee on Vision and the Inter-Society Color Council—used OSA meetings as opportunities to hold meetings of their own. The Infrared Information Symposia (IRIS) ordinarily held its meetings at government locations because some sessions were classified for reasons of military security. But there were also IRIS subgroups working on completely unclassified topics such as infrared optical materials and atmospheric transmission of infrared radiation. In the early 1960s, these groups decided to hold afternoon or evening sessions during OSA meetings because a large fraction of IRIS members were also members of OSA.

OSA meetings in the early 1960s were three-day affairs. They ran from Thursday to Saturday, with Friday evening ordinarily occupied by a social function: a reception, a banquet and an after-dinner talk.

One day in 1964, OSA executive secretary Mary Warga received an indignant letter from Lucien M. Biberman, an OSA member and one of the leaders of IRIS. (He had earlier been a member of the infrared team at the Naval Ordnance Test Station, Inyokern, Calif., that had developed the highly successful Sidewinder heat-seeking missile). In his letter, Biberman asked why OSA squandered the best night of its meeting on a dull banquet when the time could be better used for informal meetings of technical groups. Warga read his letter to the members of the OSA Board of Directors at their next meeting. They decided to give Biberman’s suggestion a try and asked him to chair an ad hoc group to evaluate interest among OSA members in some arrangement to permit informal discussions of specialized subjects.

The other members of the committee were Glenn A. Fry, Donald R. Herriott, Myron A. Jeppesen, R. Clark Jones, Robert J. Potter, David H. Rank, F. Dow Smith and Warga herself. Since the answers received to questionnaires distributed to the membership indicated that such an experiment was justified, at the October 1965 meeting in Philadelphia six discussion groups were convened.

Participants addressed a range of topics and seemed to enjoy the experience. As a result, at the 1966 San Francisco meeting, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings were set aside for meetings of the technical groups. By 1967, the technical groups had held informal sessions at five OSA meetings and the number of groups had grown to 11. The chairs of the groups were organized into a technical council, charged with helping to influence the general scientific content of OSA meetings by making recommendations for invited papers and special sessions or symposia on subjects of current interest.

The Board meanwhile formalized an arrangement for rotation of chairmanships every two years. At the end of 1967, after a year of planning and two years of operation of the council, Luke Biberman came to the end of his term as its first chair. He was succeeded by Robert J. Potter, who had been vice-chair. In 1970, the OSA by-laws were revised to make the chair of the council a member of the Board of Directors. John Sanderson, who served as OSA President in 1967, remarked: “There should be little surprise at the success of the technical groups. They serve the purpose of a hot-stove seminar in a country store. They get right down to cases with minimum fuss and bother. The demand for something like the technical groups grew out of the success and therefore the size of our meetings, and the limited opportunity for leisurely discussion of papers.”

The technical groups and associated Technical Council became the primary mechanism for planning OSA meetings. As of 1990, there were 20 technical groups organized into five divisions: optical science, optical technology, photonics, quantum electronics and vision/medical optics. The Technical Council was now so large that a subset, the Executive Committee of the Technical Council, met separately to conduct routine business. At meetings of the council, specific topical meetings were proposed and discussed, and plans made for invited papers and symposia. The planning mechanism was a way of assuring that exciting new areas in optics were
promptly recognized and embraced at OSA meetings.

The Technical Council also surveyed the membership to determine preferences on how meetings were conducted. In 1978, nearly two-thirds of those polled approved the usual OSA annual meeting practice of scheduling all proposed papers by OSA members for presentation without advance review. At the same time, however, a majority indicated that it was proper for the program committees of the smaller topical meetings to review and select the proposed papers. In other words, the program committees could decline papers or limit the presentation of multiple papers by the same author. In early 1979, poster presentation of papers was introduced.

Although the plans and goals of the Technical Council were all made by OSA member volunteers, the actual implementation of meetings required the assistance of staff in the executive office.

Jon Hagen came to the executive office in 1973 as meetings manager. He was joined in 1976 by Joan Conner, meetings secretary. A meetings manager, Barbara Hicks, joined the OSA office in 1980. By 1990, she was managing a meetings staff of eight.

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