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A native of Sheboygan County, WI, he earned a degree in mechanical engineering from University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1974. In 1975, he earned his master's degree in mechanical engineering at University of Wisconsin's Solar Energy Laboratory. In 1982, he earned his master's degree in engineering management from Stanford University.

Hughes joined ORNL in 1989 as a senior research engineer. In 2001, he was promoted to group leader, and then, in 2005 to his current position managing programs and sponsor relationships.

He became a registered professional engineer in Wisconsin in 1980. Prior to joining ORNL he was Vice President of a small consulting firm, W.S. Fleming and Associates, a senior research engineer at a large one, Science Applications International Corporation, and a research engineer at the University of Wisconsin—Solar Energy Laboratory. He has authored more than 110 publications, and the primary focus of his entire career has been on research, development, and deployment of building energy efficiency technologies.