



**Science
Societies**

Societies' top Strategic priority: Diversity, equity, and inclusion

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CEO/PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Societies' Top Strategic Priority: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

By Nicholas J. Goeser, CEO of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA; Ole Wendroth, SSSA President; Sylvie Brouder, ASA President; and Shawn Kaeppler, CSSA President

SSSA, ASA, and CSSA have made the commitment to resourcing actions supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion as our top strategic priority. In this article, the CEO and presidents of the Societies provide an update and their perspectives on the initiative.



Nick Goeser

Nick Goeser: Plan, Support to Improve Our Culture, Demographics, and Actions

The Societies have a short-term, five-phase action plan to raise awareness, conduct discovery, and develop long-term actions to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in our science community (Table 1).

- Phase 1: Discovery and resource allocation efforts will be focused on compiling ASA, CSSA, and SSSA policies and procedures and raising seed funding for actions through the Agronomic Science Foundation (ASF) and broader engagements.
- Phase 2: Establish a DEI-focused leadership body and define roles and responsibilities. This phase will be critical in establishing leadership for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA initiatives and ensuring accountability measures are in place.
- Phase 3: Extending beyond policies and procedures to understand the status of DEI across membership and staff activities. This will include multiple avenues (surveys, focus groups, and social media) to connect with members and certified professionals on needs and pathways forwards.

- Phase 4: Transparency and communications are essential in raising awareness and accountability for actions and DEI outcomes. This phase will include the website and other communication builds to ease access to DEI information across ASA, CSSA, and SSSA.
- Phase 5: Reporting and presentation for action will occur in this phase. ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Boards will be educated and presented recommendations from the DEI-focused leaders. The education and recommendations will be guided by member input and recommendations for actions.

This commitment requires several lines of increasing support for the broader agronomic, crop, and soil science community. First, each Society has allocated increased funding within its operational budget for DEI. Second, ASF established the ASF-IDEAS Fund to support DEI initiatives by ASF, the Societies, ACSESS, and allied partners (see p. 28 of this issue). Seeded with \$250,000 (with a goal to reach \$10 million in 10 years), this fund will increase recruitment, representation, and retention of women and underrepresented communities in Society membership, leadership positions, and awards by 25% in three years. We have additional support from our corporate sponsors to stand up several of the action areas (e.g., Bayer Diversity Fund supporting 200+ students and early career professionals at our Annual Meeting). Third, we have retained Dr. Elizabeth Gillispe to help coordinate and manage the portfolio of actions we are undertaking, and I look to build a team to further support this area.

Support is critical. Most importantly, we have the passion, dedication, and support from members to improve our culture to be more inclusive, our demographics to be more diverse, and our policies and actions to be more equitable. I have greatly

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Table 1. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) action timeline for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA.

Phases	Fall 2020			Winter 2020–2021			Spring 2021		
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May
Phase 1: Discovery and resource allocation									
Research current DEI strategic plans and initiatives									
Connect DEI actions to support ASA, CSSA, and SSSA strategic plans									
Define current and future contributors to DEI plan and initiative									
Outline challenges and possible solutions faced by developing DEI									
ASA, CSSA, and SSSA policy and procedure discovery and review									
Initial resource allocation—staff support, fund reallocation, and fundraising									
ASF-IDEAS Fund established—\$250,000 seed funding									
Phase 2: Assign DEI Planning Committee and outline its tasks									
Confirm number and members for planning committee									
Assign tasks and deadlines for each member									
Phase 3: Assess current state of DEI within the Societies									
Obtain understanding of DEI throughout organization from a staff and member level (surveys, focus groups, and social media campaigns)									
Create graphical statistics of extent of diversity within Societies									
Provide summary report combining survey and statistics									
Assess survey and statistics									
Phase 4: Develop communication conduit between DEI Planning Committee and members									
Update website with monthly DEI statements									
Provide CSA News with DEI Initiative plan overview									
Phase 5: Final report and presentation for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Boards									
Draft report									
Final graphs and statistics									
Final report and presentation									

appreciated the pressure from members to change the status quo—starting with reporting. We will have an annual report this year for the first time since 2008. We will also have our lead-

ership, nominations, elections, membership, Annual Meeting, publications, and other demographic information displayed on our websites.



Ole Wendroth

Ole Wendroth: A Personal Perspective on Diversity

Diversity is one of the key elements in our main strategic plan, not only for SSSA but also for our two sister Societies. We have seen that our Societies reallocate their capacities and resources towards this goal. I am proud of being a member of scientific societies that take these topics seriously and put into place constructive measures to make a difference.

What Can We Do to 'Live' Diversity and Inclusiveness?

History tells that prejudice and crimes against members of minority groups or even large ethnical groups are often caused by misleading propaganda. Therefore, awareness and engagement of citizens against prejudice are important but not always easy. Actions against injustice must not leave the grounds of civility because if they do, problems will not be resolved but escalate. One of the conclusions that I draw from the history of large-scale prejudice is that we need to step up against discrimination, unfairness, and crimes with determination and not create any doubts about our peaceful and forward-oriented attitude. Looking for ways to engage and trying to positively influence behaviors and habits are essential for avoiding new waves of indignation and escalation.

As scientists, we can have a positive impact in our daily lives as researchers and teachers. I see a great opportunity in our work with graduate students by teaching them science in the best possible ways, building on their strengths, and helping them become experts in the areas they have chosen for themselves and for their future. We as their educators not only help them build expertise in their scientific disciplines, but also serve as role models in their lives. Discussing diversity with these young scientists is important because we want them to become well-qualified experts as well as outstanding, respectful, and caring individuals in their fields.

It is essential for individuals to know that they were hired into a position

because of their accomplishments and merits. This would be more of a possibility if education were affordable for everybody, but our current business model of education could certainly be improved in that regard. On the other hand, we see substantial efforts made by individuals, private industries, and initiatives to raise support and open up educational opportunities for those who would otherwise have to decide for another path in their life. These efforts need to be further encouraged so that governments invest in education and science. Making college education affordable is way more efficient than fixing follow-up problems. But that requires vision.

Feeling Welcomed at our Annual Meeting, Prioritizing Diversity

Over the past years, I have observed the positive development at our Annual Meeting that we have special events for underrepresented groups to raise equality in our Societies and profession. We invite members of local minority groups to introduce them to our three Societies and to areas of educational opportunities that they may pick for themselves. Society members who are part of minority groups and who attend our meetings deserve special attention. My ultimate goal as their colleague is to help them feel welcome and fully participate in sessions, symposia, and other Society events. I want to see them get involved with their colleagues, be absorbed in discussions, develop friendships, feel part of the crowd, gain the experience of being appreciated for what they bring to the science community, and feel accomplished at the end of the conference.



Source: Kyle Spradley | © MU College of Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources.



Kyle Spradley | © 2014 - Curators of the University of Missouri.

Each Member Has Unique, Personal DEI Lens

I understand that some may feel uncertain regarding why a scientific society should devote effort and resources to something that seems important but not necessarily seminal to long-standing core mandates such as serving as the standard-bearer of the profession, promoting communication of cutting-edge research, and facilitating education and knowledge translation to practice. Some may be weary and cynical, perceiving that we are simply adding more lip service to something that has been and continues to be a crying need in our society and dismiss these elements of our strategic plan as politically motivated, assuming efforts will be largely ineffective and outcomes minimal. Others may feel frustration at the glacial pace at which we are proceeding. I know the lenses through which one views DEI in a Society like ASA are myriad and interest and expectations run the gamut. The lens through which each of us views DEI is unique, and what we see is deeply personal. What follows is a bit of my personal perspective on the need and the challenge.

What we see in any given moment depends on how and where we focus; our choice of focus reflects a complex amalgam of conscience and subliminal thoughts rooted in a moment but arrived at through the arc of a lifetime of experiences. For myself, I find the prominence of DEI in my line of sight has waxed and waned as I have parsed my attention between the scientific questions that can fully engage me, my immediate, personal life and the larger, social fabric in which my personal and professional lives exist.

At last year's opening plenary, my comments included a very specific statement on the issue of harassment within our disciplines, something the leadership had only recently started including in our welcome. To me, the need to make such a statement while welcoming colleagues is both unfortunate but highly necessary. In my 30-plus years as a member of all three Societies, I have witnessed harassment, and yes, I have experienced it (and at our meetings). However, over the years, and as recently as during the 2019 meetings, I have had friends and colleagues tell me with complete sincerity that they have never seen anything, whether illegal or simply marginalizing, happen at our events or in the context of our Society activities. Such professions often come with a great

Generations of scientists did not prioritize diversity as a special issue. Some did not care while some practiced it without knowing it. We need to pay attention and recognize each other and help to integrate new members and visitors. That is a social and human skill set that can be obtained easily for free. For those around us, we need to set an example of recognizing each other and being socially open minded. Not being able to convene in person for our Annual Meeting this year makes me miss the atmosphere of getting together, meeting and caring for each other, and being part of the crowd. I look forward to celebrating our next in-person Annual Meeting.



Sylvie Brouder

Sylvie Brouder: A Self Reflection

In the chaos of converting almost everything I do to Zoom, including our Annual Meeting, I have found it difficult to pause and reflect. Ironically, I suspect reflection and introspection would be a much better foundation from which to do what I can to provide leadership for organizational

change in a year turned upside down. If you have been reading or viewing just about anything ASA has sent you since January, you will know that our new strategic plan prioritizes initiatives that will enhance the diversity of those engaging in our mission as well as the equality, equity, and inclusivity of our programs to bring the highest level of engagement value to all.

deal of genuine distress that our Societies are not yet a welcoming environment to all. Fortunately, I find most that are newly awakened to such deficits in our professional culture are energized, want change, and desire to help.

At this stage of my career, I vacillate between feeling like the Central Park Bird Watcher—somewhat ambivalent to routine slights (see <https://bit.ly/3fsu2sp>)—and feeling completely dismayed by the drip, drip, drip of seemingly innocuous small incidents and situational inequalities that can leave anyone feeling marginalized by what should be an open environment for the betterment of agriculture and the natural world. From my current perch, I can almost dismiss my own experiences as trivial, but I know that is not the best way forward for anyone, and as a healthy Society, we need to dedicate ourselves not only to the eradication of fresh cuts but to a new, more proactive and intentional model of engagement.

Success Requires Embracing Other Viewpoints

We say we want to address Grand Challenges to effect positive change for humanity, but “we” are not likely to be very successful if our “we” is not expanded. As someone who has a finger in all three land grant mission areas, I am keenly aware that the knowledge deficit model does not work as a driver of scientific solution implementation, something I am reminded of every day as U.S. society debates the value of the mask. We explore and develop novel solutions based upon our perception and internalization of problems. Narrowly constraining our viewpoint to a consensus of the likeminded increases our comfort level but erodes away the probability our research and outreach will be broadly useful. Routine success in developing truly functional solutions to complex problems requires a creativity that only comes from a habit of embracing the uncomfortable thinking of others.

How do I foresee us proceeding with our strategic plan and making meaningful changes to enhance a culture of DEI within ASA? Many specifics are not yet clear to me, but first and foremost, we need to pursue co-production of strategies with those not already fully vested. We need to distribute the power and authority to make change to the full diversity of membership that we want to feel embraced by ASA. However, all of us must retain



Source: Bioversity International/Alfredo Camacho.

the responsibility for effecting change. We must all commit to ourselves and to each other to be thoughtful, respectful, deliberate, and persistent. I look forward to honest conversations about our current culture and the way forward. If we consistently preserve a fair measure of grace and curiosity for each other, we will make progress.

Shawn Kaeppler: It Starts with Feeling Safe, Respected



Shawn Kaeppler

Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been prominent themes within our Societies and home institutions for years. The Civil Rights Act was signed in my birth year—1964—ending segregation in public places and banning employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. That was a significant step in history, and much has changed, but clearly more change is needed. I am proud that our CSSA and cross-Society plans have highlighted increased diversity and equal opportunities for all as a priority.

While many of the problems are clear, the base causes and paths to solutions are complex. As a white male with sufficient means throughout my life, I continue to learn about the experiences of others. I have traveled to various places throughout



Source: Genevieve Martin/ORNL, U.S. Department of Energy.

the world and have been a clearly identifiable minority in some of them, categorically identified as a person of concern due to being an American in some cases, and have felt unsafe at various points in my travels. But, I would return home to a place where I felt safe the vast majority of the time, and I feel respected most of the time at home and abroad as a scientist and an educator.

There have been many stories that have impacted my perception over time. There were memes such as “Women, what

would you do if there were no men in the world? I would run in the evening without looking behind me” and “Do you look in your back seat before you get in your car? No? Then you must be a male.” There was a story on social media about a successful Black man that experienced differential treatment by police when walking in a neighborhood with his daughter and pet dog than when walking alone. There are also many stories globally of the individual impacts of poverty and malnutrition and horrible treatment of one individual by another, especially children. These all impacted me directly even though I have not had those experiences. I strive to understand and integrate many stories into my thinking and actions. There are many heroes out there, and sometimes the heroic act is simply the willingness to

wake up in the morning to face the next day. We need to understand and acknowledge the battles that each individual faces, and the reasons those battles exist.

The history of inequality and reasons for it and ways to enact far-reaching and effective change are complex topics. However, the reasons that individuals feel unsafe and/or disrespected are based on individual decisions by another person. A person might attack another person out of pure desperation, but most often, that is not the case. What if each person chose

to ensure that their direct actions would not jeopardize the safety of another? Those daily direct actions are conceptually simpler than understanding all of the complexity and advocating for actions that may be directly beyond our control. What if each interaction started from a position of respect? Respect for human life. A notion that each individual is unique and valuable and has a right to make it through each day with hope. People's outlooks are affected by what they have learned and experienced, so those simple asks are not simple for all. But, I do think that acting to ensure the safety of others and treating them with respect should be reasonable expectations for members of our Societies in the context of our activities and within our careers.



Source: John Powel/NIH.

We are making plans as a coalition of Societies to improve and grow in the area of DEI. My hope is that we start very quickly with the basic principles of safety and respect. Our Annual Meeting should not require behavior monitors and statements of behavior expectations. Certainly, individual accountability should allow all participants to have a positive and useful experience. Individual talents and abilities do vary, but all of the participants have the same desire to be respected and valued and to not need defenses activated at professional events. When

we are protected by the computer screen, I implore that we all formulate our social media posts and manage our manuscript reviews as if we were interacting directly with a valued and respected colleague in person. The relative safety of the distance provided by the internet has raised our overall

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quickly advance us to a new place. My hope is that you look at each person you know or meet through our Societies in a new way, starting from a perspective of how you would treat treasured colleagues and developing your interaction and relationship from there.

willingness to express opinions, whether or not we are in any relative position to have them. We are emboldened, for example, by commentaries on professional athletes by people who can barely make the walk to the refrigerator for the next beverage. Computer-bravewith social media amplification can quickly change a dialog in negative ways. Can we return to a concept of human-to-human interactions—starting with our professional activities?

The overall global and national equity and diversity situation may be complex, but there are simple person-by-person actions that can



Source: Argonne National Laboratory.

[Back to issue](#)

[Back to home](#)

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