ASA President’s Message

Society Revenue Streams a Central Topic at Spring Board Meeting

In late May, the ASA Board of Directors met at the Headquarters offices in Madison, WI for our spring meeting. This is one of two face-to-face meetings that the board holds each year, with the other occurring at the Annual Meeting. The first day, the ASA board met jointly with the CSSA board to discuss issues of mutual interest. A year ago, we had a similar joint meeting where we developed a joint collaboration plan for interactions and cooperation between the two Societies. At that time, we established four priority areas for collaboration: Publications, meetings, industry relations, and education.

This year, we reviewed that plan and discussed some of our opportunities in each of those priority areas. Two items that generated a lot of discussion were the impact of dropping journal page charges on the revenues of both Societies and the impacts of SSSA having a separate Annual Meeting in 2018. There is no question that ASA will need to have some discussions on revenues over the next year or so, starting with the budget and finance meeting in August. Our traditional model has relied on three primary revenue sources: membership dues, the Annual Meeting, and publications. All three revenue streams have been under pressure in some form over the past few years.

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As we have gone from one big functional family (but not necessarily always a happy family) of Societies to three separate Societies who are business partners through Alliance of Crop, Soil, and Environmental Science Societies (ACSESS), we have seen a steady decline in the number of full, active members in ASA. I mentioned this in an earlier column, but over the past decade, we have lost about 1,000 active members. That likely reflects that ASA has historically been viewed as a scientific society, with a high percentage of members having advanced degrees and working in academia, government, or research institutes. As many of you have probably observed, land grant university agronomy departments have gotten smaller over that same period. Here at K-State, our department has lost nearly a quarter of our budgeted positions since I arrived in 1998.

Membership

The news on membership is not all bad, however. We have around 1,500 graduate student members and 600 undergrad members, and those numbers are increasing. Enrollment in many agronomy programs is booming, and the job market for our graduates. The problem is that a high percentage of our student members do not make the transition to full membership after graduation. Many move on to become Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) and stay in the industry, many remain in the profession but don’t become a certified agronomist or crop adviser. So we have a huge pool of agronomists around the country who potentially could be attracted to become members with the right incentives. Membership rates when they graduate? Why can’t we attract a third of the nearly 15,000 CCAs as members? Do we need some new professional membership categories focused less on publishing and big annual scientific meetings and more on educational opportunities and focused regional meetings?

Annual Meeting

The second leg of our revenue model traditionally has been the Annual Meeting. Is our current model meeting the needs of our members and potential members? The SSSA folks say no and are planning to have a separate meeting every four or five years, starting in 2018. SSSA has started to hold smaller meetings throughout the year focused on a single topic. Could we serve our CCAs and other potential professional members better? What would the cost and potential revenue stream to the Society look like? Also, can we use those years when SSSA meets separately as an opportunity to do some things differently? Go to different venues, perhaps meet at a different time of year? Make lemonade from the lemons.