ASA President’s Message

Bookends on the ASA Shelf

It’s hard to believe that this is my final column as ASA president. The year vanished in a blink, and in all honesty, I must admit to a feeling that I squandered many opportunities that were knocking on the door of ASA that went unanswered. The saving grace is that we have next year … amazing leadership on deck with Jessica Davis soon to take the reins and a dedicated board and professional staff that will help our foundation of communities and sections advance our new solution-focused mission.

I am writing this column on the Friday following our Annual Meeting in Phoenix. What a week! Presidential duties prevented me from attending all but just a few technical sessions, but those same duties provided opportunities to interact directly with numerous undergraduate and graduate student members at three luncheons and the SASES\(^1\) dinner. A couple of these events included a number of our senior members who attended as past presidents or as mentors in our Scholar programs. It was inspiring to see the enthusiasm, passion, and intellect of our young members meet the experience and wisdom of our senior members and witness the positive impact of each group on the other.

Though inspiring, this positive interaction also set off some alarms in my head considering ASA membership trends. Currently, 45% of ASA members have been members for five years or less. The next class (6–10 years) drops to 10%, indicating that we have a tremendous exodus of members in that time period. With that exodus, ASA is losing a great resource. Equally alarming is the trend for senior membership. Our emeritus membership exceeded 1,000 in 2005 but is today less than 400.

These statistics and observations define one of our greatest challenges as we contemplate a future where the profession of agronomy must grow—member retention. How do we sufficiently engage early career members to make ASA a permanent part of their lives and how do we provide opportunity and value to our senior members to assure their continued participation in the Society? Is part of the answer to expand opportunities for these two membership class extremes to interact? It seems that these two classes serve as bookends on the ASA shelf. If we can strengthen them and keep them standing strong, those of us in the middle of the shelf will stand straighter and stronger as well.

I thank you for the honor of representing the largest agronomic scientific and professional society in the world, at this time when so much opportunity is knocking at our door. 

\(^{1}\) Students of Agronomy, Soils, and Environmental Sciences, an undergraduate student program of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA.