CSSA President’s Message

Science Is a People Business, Not a Data Business

You might notice I am standing in front of a blue spruce tree in the photo on this page. This is a reminder of my family’s tradition of selling Christmas trees to the public for more than 50 years. While I can’t say I always enjoyed doing the work necessary to bring trees to market every year, engaging the public when they came to our farm to buy a tree was heartwarming and enlightening. Generations of families would come back year after year because they had made an emotional connection to the event of buying a tree from our small family business.

I firmly believe this life lesson applies to how we engage the public with our science. This includes our friends, colleagues, and elected representatives. I tell graduate students, “Science is a people business, not a data business. We simply use data to help us convince others of a novel idea, a better understanding, or new way of doing something. If you can motivate others to action based on the way you communicate your discoveries, you will be very successful.” Sometimes this is a tough sell. I often hear, “But my data are novel and exciting,” or “The statistical analysis proves my conclusion is right,” or (my personal favorite) “What I’m interested in working on…” So many of my students and colleagues are convinced what it takes to be published, attain peer recognition or public acclaim, and secure funding is collecting the right data (dare I say big data?). My experience on editorial boards, review panels, university administration, in the private sector, conducting government research, meeting with congressional representatives, and interacting with my neighbors, however, tells me that relying on scientific data alone rarely “motivates others to action” on our behalf.

How Does My Research Relate to the Concerns of the Public?

Rather, when we address the public, we need to consider what they are concerned about. How might the successful outcomes of our research, teaching, and Extension activities address those concerns? Why is what we do as scientists and practitioners important to them? How might they be emotionally invested in the outcomes of our work? Will they be more successful if we are successful? These questions are not easy to address, especially when we are overwhelmed with collecting data, writing grants, managing personnel, fulfilling administrative duties, and meeting family obligations (not listed in order of importance!). But I submit if you consider these questions, it will change the way the public values what you do.

Obviously, there is a lot going on in the halls of Congress these days. We have a large stake in the way funding is allocated in the various titles of the 2019 farm bill. Our Science Policy Office has already sent CSSA funding priorities to Congress (view here: http://bit.ly/2jZJeBe). As president, I will be promoting these priorities aggressively.

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Published online January 4, 2018