A Tale of Volunteering and Service to the Profession

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There are many reasons that people volunteer your time to causes or groups whose goals, objectives, or philosophy align with your own? If not, why not? For many of us, the end of the day is something that we tend to look forward to, and many days the thought of having to do, or be responsible for, one more thing in our already overcommitted schedules is more than we want to think about. It is difficult to find time for ourselves and our families, much less anything else.

I am going to use this month’s column to talk about volunteering in general and also service to the profession of soil science, why it is important, and how volunteering your time can pay back in ways you may not have thought about. I hope to give you some reasons to consider volunteering and hope you decide that it could very well be worth your while to do so.

There are many reasons that people have for volunteering their time. For me, the motivation to volunteer comes from the fact that I like to be involved in different things, meet new people, and facilitate projects getting done. My volunteer activities really come in two very different types of things I do: activities involved with my professional life and those with my personal life. What has surprised me over the years is how much those two can overlap when you least expect it.

I really didn’t start doing a lot of volunteering until I was in graduate school, working primarily with graduate student-related groups at the University of Minnesota. I won’t go into detail, but I will say it provided an opportunity to learn from faculty in a much different way; in one case, about governance of an academic department and to some extent the college. The period that I spent volunteering my time during this stage in my life forged and strengthened bonds with people that I respect and have remained friends with throughout my career. The mentoring, conversations, and working relationships that were an outcome of that time were certainly never expected when I started that journey, but I have found that they are experiences that are still much appreciated and irreplaceable in how they have impacted and shaped my career.

Get Involved Early

For those of you reading this who are in graduate school—notably, a busy time with research—I would still encourage you to take the time to get involved with various groups within your departments or professional organizations or throughout your campus. I have found that graduate school didn’t just teach me about science, data, and research, but also about leadership and working with diverse groups of people and ideas. I was lucky enough to lead several different groups in graduate school, including the Soil Science Graduate Student Association and the University of Minnesota Chapter of the Xi Sigma Pi Forestry Honor Society. Was it extra work? Yes. But it was also worth it because those opportunities that you seek out and make for yourself will pay you back with learning experiences, professional relationships, accomplishments, confidence, and a sense of personal achievement. I also understand that leadership positions aren’t for everyone, and if that isn’t your thing, you can still be involved in the group and will still find all the benefits of volunteering coming back to you. I wasn’t always in a leadership position; sometimes it is better to just be part of the team.

As I moved through several different jobs and work sectors over the years, volunteering for committees, boards, etc. has remained important to me as a source of learning, mentoring, professional relationships, accomplishments, and practical knowledge that I just never expected. I have had experiences and learned things that serve me well but that I would never have discovered had I not taken that step to volunteer. It was a bit scary at first when I was just new to actually practicing in my profession because at that point, you don’t think anyone will take you seriously. It’s funny, looking back, I am not all that sure what the trep-