A Tale of Volunteering and Service to the Profession

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Are you someone who volunteers 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-
I was accepted as part of the team and my voice was heard—although in those days, I usually had to be asked for an opinion. Now I don’t usually wait for an invitation to speak my mind, which may not always be a good thing!

I have been lucky enough to participate in many opportunities, including being part of the initial committee for SSSA that determined soil science competencies (now the Soil Science Performance Objectives). In the case of this committee, it was fairly early in my career. This was the committee that eventually led to the national soil science exams as well as licensing in several states. I met people on that committee who were also early in their careers, and we became friends. Twenty years later, they are still my friends and colleagues. Some are at the provost or dean level in the university system; others have made a name for themselves in private industry. Those are the relationships that I count on not only in my professional life, but also in my personal life since those professional relationships have become true and lasting friendships.

Little did I know back in the early 1990s, when I started the trek of professional service with this particular committee, that I would still be working on certification, licensing, and the national soil science exams—and be the person that has been associated with the exam program the longest at this point. Sometimes you build expertise without really thinking about it, while at the same time, providing service to the profession of soil science.

For me, the work on committees and boards has been truly enlightening, both from the standpoint of continued learning from those around me and also, and perhaps more importantly, from the aspect of giving. I like my chosen field of study. While I may never be wealthy, I am very rich in the experiences that I have had, the people I have met, and the knowledge that I carry. If I can share that with others and have them discover the world through a different set of lenses and understand, even in a small way, the importance of soil, water, and the environment and how we interact with and affect that world, then I feel like I am paying back in some small way all those who spent time teaching me. I still learn—everyday—and I hope I will keep doing that. I also hope in some small way that I have made my profession better by being involved, putting myself out there, and thinking we all can make a difference.

**Talking Soils at Dog Events**

For those who know me, you know that the other part of my life has to do with my dogs since I spend a significant amount of time showing them in conformation and competing in performance events with them. I am a judge for lure coursing and also teach obedience classes for dogs (and their owners). Because my dogs have been such a huge part of my life, I have also volunteered my time with a few dog organizations over the years as well as helping kids with dog training through the 4H program. I currently work with a rescue organization called Hand Me Down Dobes. This organization rescues Doberman Pinschers, provides any health care that is needed, and then matches them with adoptive homes. I help out where I can with fostering and training mainly younger dogs; last fall, it was two 7-week-old puppies, which is a story unto itself! Why? Because I feel like I am making a difference in these animals’ lives and giving them a chance at having a decent life.

What do all of these dog events and volunteering have to do with soil science or hydrology? Nothing on the surface, but you would be surprised at how many conversations I have had about soil, water, and environmental issues with people as part of conversations at dog events. People want to learn about things no matter where they are and sometimes are more comfortable asking questions in more relaxed situations. So, in the end, I have found another outlet for education related to my career, and it is, surprisingly, in the middle of participating in my favorite hobby with my dogs. Go figure.

Everyone has something to add as a volunteer—you don’t have to have a multitude of experience or a Ph.D. or be a faculty member at a prestigious university to have brilliant ideas or be a productive member of a committee. I have been on many committees and have participated in many types of meetings over the span of my career that have ranged from academic/faculty to the general public. I have learned from all of them and have observed that sometimes it is the person you least expect that provides the insight needed to truly understand the issue. And sometimes, the least eloquently spoken person is the one that shines the light on an issue for all to see.

So what is the final message of this article? Do the volunteer activities that make sense for you, that make you happy, and make you feel like you are giving back and making a difference. No matter how much or how little time you might devote to volunteering and no matter what you spend your time volunteering in, I think in the long run, you will find that you have learned, expanded your horizons, and made a difference in the world. And no matter how small that difference, the point is that YOU made a difference. And for that, I say WELL DONE!

A note from the author: I hope I have inspired you to think about volunteering. If you are a certified or licensed soil scientist, I have opportunities that will be opening up on the Council of Soil Science Examiners (this group writes the national soil science exams) and the Soil Science Certifying Board (this group runs the national certification program). If you are interested in either of these opportunities, please contact me at dferris@soils.org.