Science Societies

A Fond Farewell and Reflection on 2023

By Seth C. Murray, CSSA President, Seth.Murray@ag.tamu.edu

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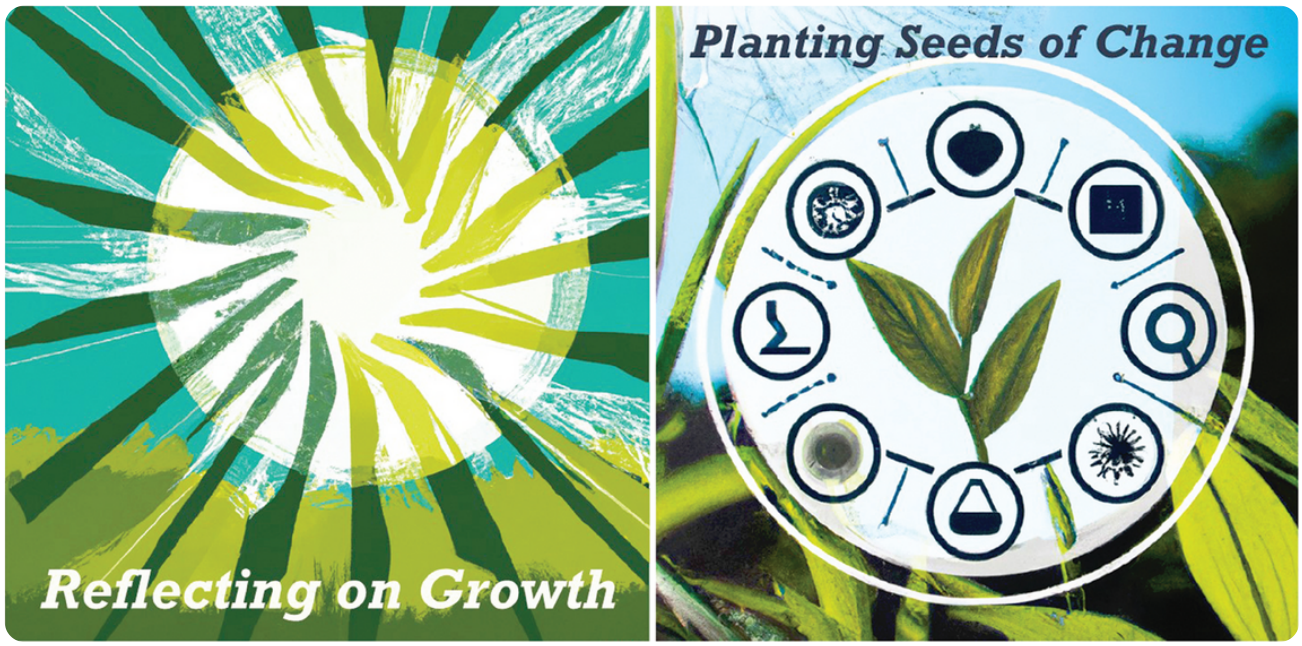


Image generated by DALLE2, using a prompt created by ChatGPT from the text of this article.

December is a time for celebration, friends, and perhaps most importantly for reflection. Reflection is relevant to all our Society members, colleagues, and friends as there is much we should be thankful for. It's enjoyable at the end of the year to look

back at what we experienced and accomplished. It's even more enjoyable when someone else helps with all that reminding, like those end of the year "Greatest Hits of 2023" playlists DJs put together.

One major change in 2023 that we will long remember is the capability and growth of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. I will remember using ChatGPT to make countless outlines and help overcome writer's block for the first time this year, and I have had students do the same. It truly seems transformative. I've even used ChatGPT to help in drafting two President's Messages. Unfortunately, AI can't (yet) help us remember and digest what we personally have learned, so I will just have to wing this President's Message with my own reflection of "greatest hits."

Foremost, I am so thankful and honored that many of you chose to put your trust in me and elect me as president. I've learned and grown so much, which with age I've realized can be a major motivator that lasts beyond any experiment, publication, award, or accomplishment. True learning and growth can only come through action, not osmosis, and requires taking responsibility to create the changes that we want to see, not just griping about them.

Change Requires Teams Engaged in Mission

Probably the most surprising thing I've learned as president is how big the gulf is between the impact we want to achieve and the ability for any individual (including a president) to make that impact. Both in CSSA and throughout our work, we need teams of people all engaged in a mission for change to occur. As the proverb goes, if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. Upon reflection, these President's Messages may have created the most positive impact on the most people I've been able to have within the Societies. *CSA News* magazine is clearly an effective

platform I hope we maintain. These President's Messages have opened numerous necessary conversations and stimulated critical thinking about things like the positive effects of AI, how we measure impact in our discipline, perennializing our agriculture system, the importance of awards, and about loneliness and social isolation.

I have personally heard from several of you about these messages, including those I count as my mentors and thought leaders. I have also heard from the audience foremost in my mind when writing: our early career members who have the most time and will have the most opportunities to enact change in their careers. My general response, other than "Thank you," has always been to encourage involvement and leadership in advancing the issues they care about. Too often we do not get involved and stay silent or are overwhelmed by distractions. If you want to see change, get involved!

Reflecting on the year's outcomes, it is also critical to think about what we can improve going forward for ourselves, in our science, and for society at large. It's easy to lose focus on things that we cannot meaningfully affect and that the news cycle constantly berates us with, like the current barriers (dysfunction?) in our federal government, the war in Ukraine, and natural disasters. A key takeaway from one of my college philosophy class professors was to only focus your limited energy on that which you can control and impact. It is hard though, isn't it?

Our Response to This New Age of Uncertainty



Eventually the student becomes the teacher, and we must develop takeaways for our own students. In my undergraduate class we read Dr. R. Douglas Hurt's book *American Agriculture: A Brief History*. Dr. Hurt refers to the period from World War II to the 1980s farm crisis as "the age of uncertainty." I think current events of the last few years indicate we've entered a new age of uncertainty, and the next generation of leaders will need to address issues we have never had to think about, formed by external factors we don't control. We can respond to these changes defensively, or we can leverage them as opportunities to help drive the changes we wish to see across our discipline and society.

The Societies' Decode 6 (www.decode6.org) project is one embodiment of addressing climate issues. This is a promotional graphic of a recent Decode 6 podcast on enteric methane emissions.

Among the best ways to learn to respond to change while making an impact is to spend some of your time engaging in service, science policy, and science facilitation. Running for leadership positions in CSSA or other societies is an easily accessible action at any career stage. You are competent to do this, and there is a role for you! Additionally, we have disciplinary expertise and can address agriculture's effects on and response to climate change through science and technology. Climate change is one of the grand challenges of our time and has come to impact our work. The extremes of 2023 are particularly notable. Decode 6 (www.decode6.org), a project from ASA, CSSA, and SSSA, is one embodiment of addressing climate issues. The theme for the 2024 ASA□CSSA□SSSA Annual Meeting, "AI Innovations for a Changing Climate," will connect climate change with technology that our scientists lead or can use. Again, we must focus on the issues we can control.

Among the best ways to learn to respond to change while making an impact is to spend some of your time engaging in service, science policy, and science facilitation. Running for leadership positions in CSSA or other societies is an easily accessible action at any career stage. You are competent to do this, and there is a role for you!

Strategically Planning for the Future

Another way we focused on what we can control in 2023 was to develop the Societies' 2024–2029 Strategic Plan. This included lots of member input and leadership energy; thanks to our CEO Jim Cudahy, who just completed his first full year in 2023, and his leadership team, it was a success! It would be naïve to not acknowledge that we face a lot of challenges, such as lack of resources and public perception, fewer people in our discipline, and fatigue of what is asked for us in our jobs and personal lives, let alone those current events distracting us. However, we also have a lot of strengths we can build on. We have awesome publications, a large investment fund, a great meeting, close to neutral budgets (and a path to getting closer), increasing membership for the first time in years, great trust and reputation among scientists, fantastic staff, and a

new generation of highly engaged members looking to change things for the better. Looking at all the other scientific societies I have worked with, I am struck by how well ASA, CSSA, and SSSA are set up for long-term success. Our strategic planning is a symptom of our success and a path to our future. We have a plan! And thanks to your input we will continue to improve the Societies going forward, but we need your help in execution.

In 2023 I had the opportunity to give a talk at the Michigan State University (MSU) Student Organic Farm Gala, an event supporting an organization I co-founded as an undergraduate. One 2023 reflection this thrust me into, and that I am so thankful for, is that this organization has no "founder's syndrome." The MSU Student Organic Farm has evolved and risen to meet the current needs of current students and society and has not been locked in the past. Our Societies are similar, in part because of the short timeline of executive board service (three years). Leaders need to know when it is time to step aside and let someone else lead, and I encourage current and future potential leaders of CSSA, especially early career members, to step into these roles now. I had not previously understood why past leaders of various organizations seem to "check out" and become absent from discussions. Upon reflection, I think this is partly because they are burnt out for giving so much of their time and energy to a cause, and partly because they lose official power to effect change in the ways they become accustomed to. But this also may be to allow others to elevate their careers, and so the next generation of leadership can steer and put the stamp of current times on new activities. I am excited to see Dr. Kimberly Garland-Campbell ascend to president of CSSA next year, and to see all that we will achieve under her leadership. Truly the best way to "go together" is to let new leaders lead and for past leaders to assist them behind the scenes however they are able.

In closing, I am so thankful for all your trust, energy, and input given to advance our Societies! I will be looking for new opportunities to take what I have learned and contacts from the Societies to lead other groups that may not currently think they have roles in or connections to agriculture or agricultural research. As part of our strategic goals, we plan to elevate our discipline beyond the insular world of scientists who are like us and make a greater impact outside of our Societies. This is a goal I hope we all can impact. As you reflect on 2023, please consider how in 2024 you will step outside of what you do, learn new things, and give back to your country, discipline, and Societies that have helped you get where you are. Thank you!

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