Science Societies

Mentorship: Where leadership and strategy intersect

By Jim Cudahy, CAE, CEO of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA

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SSSA President Aaron Daigh meets with CANVAS attendees at the 2024 meeting in San Antonio.

Our new “Connections” series will showcase different parts of our membership community. This month, CEO Jim Cudahy talks about the central role that mentorship plays in sustaining and growing our scientific community, highlighting new initiatives to retain and support students and early career professionals while calling on veteran members to help cultivate the next generation of leaders.

“The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders.”

–Mary Parker Follett

At my first Annual Meeting, what we now call CANVAS, in Baltimore three-plus years ago, we assembled a series of focus groups where we gathered information from

Society members and attendees, which we then used to inform an extended strategic-planning exercise that took place across the calendar year of 2023.

What struck me as clearly different about ASA, CSSA, and SSSA from other non-profit organizations for which I've worked is that nowhere else have I seen the concept of mentorship on higher display. In one focus group of graduate students, it seemed like every student was there with a faculty adviser on whom they were relying to show them the ropes of networking and soaking up the full benefits of our community. In other focus groups, we heard from veteran members who could harken back to 20, 30, and 40 years ago when they first attended the meeting with their faculty advisers and who had, since then, returned the favor many times over by introducing their own students to our community, which more than one referred to as their "professional home."



Jim Cudahy

Workforce development already was a big topic by the time we assembled those focus groups; the diminishing ranks of scientists within our disciplines was an existential problem. Replenishing our scientific workforces—and building visibility of our sciences—would become central themes within our strategic plans.

Another strategic objective became "innovating our member and stakeholder experiences," which has compelled us over the time that has elapsed to reimagine how our Societies can deliver value to you as members and stakeholders of our Societies. Sitting right at the intersection of those two objectives is mentorship.

Building the next generation through connection

From my first days in the role as CEO, it was impressed upon me that students and early career professionals left our Societies in disproportionate numbers. At play is probably some version of the chicken–egg paradox. Do students and early career professionals leave our Societies because they leave our community, or do early career professionals leave our scientific disciplines *because* they leave our community?



There probably is no perfect answer to that question; however, what is plainly clear is that—in our quest to ensure that enough professionals and scientists exist to ensure that our scientific disciplines continue to flourish—it is monumentally easier to *retain* students and early career professionals who already have found our community than

to *attract* new students in the first place.

It's not either/or. We are embarking on a significant, sustained workforce development campaign to attract new talent to our sciences, which you'll hear more about and see in the months ahead.

But we also are doing what we can to enhance and support the spirit of mentorship that already manifestly exists in pockets of our community. At CANVAS 2025 in Salt Lake City, we introduced a pilot mentorship program—what we call "Mentor Match"—within our new Member Hub. We're using the early experiences of mentors and mentees who have volunteered for the pilot to work out the kinks. We'll then roll the program out en masse sometime this spring. You can learn more about the program here.

My urgent plea to our veteran members is embedded within the quotation at the top: "The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders." That is wise thinking from Mary Parker Follett, a social philosopher who was way ahead of her time in the late 19th/early 20th century in leadership theory. There is scarcely anything more important that you can do than to mentor a student or early career professional, and I highly encourage you to take part in our Mentor Match program, both to serve as a mentor and to help us continually shape this new member benefit to ensure it aligns with our collective needs.

My urgent plea to students and early career professionals: Cultivating a professional network and learning from those who stood in your shoes a generation ago is perhaps the smartest, lowest-cost way you can ensure success in your career.

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It is my fervent hope that 30 years from now, when focus groups are assembled at CANVAS 2056, that it is today's students and early career professionals who will be waxing poetic about the power of community and how our "professional home" made such an indelible impact on their careers.

Member Hub

More Connections

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