



Solving problems

By Jim Cudahy

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What is the biggest problem you or your institution is facing now or will face in the next five years?

At their core, professional societies exist to solve problems. Any solutions the societies are able to provide to those problems become member or stakeholder benefits. The bigger the problem, the more valuable the solution becomes.

This past summer, the boards of directors of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA engaged in what we called a “homework assignment.” Each had the responsibility to reach out to three colleagues to ask three simple questions—about professional problems, about programs and services they value, and about how each Society might deliver additional value.

Few will be surprised at the problem that surfaced among all three groups—funding. Inextricably connected to funding were two co-conspirators: Declining student enrollment and lack of replenishment of retiring faculty, the three problems forming a perpetual circle of cause-and-effect.

These weren’t the only problems and challenges we heard about: DEI, a general declining respect for science, wage gap differences between academia and industry, and, of course, climate change.



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The question becomes—what can we do about the problems, together?

Identifying Solutions, Implementing a Plan

That will be the overriding purpose of a multi-phase strategic-planning process that began with that simple homework assignment for the boards and that will kick into high gear in 2023. At our Annual Meeting in Baltimore and thereafter, we will be seeking to reach out to wider audiences to get our heads around not just the problems faced by our members and stakeholders, but also to draw on their collective wisdom and creativity to identify solutions to problems, large and small.

With a full understanding of the problems, we move to potential solutions along with allocation of time, energy, and resources that will be necessary to achieve those solutions. Whose perceptions do we need to influence? How do we connect our science to the fundamental challenge of climate change? And how do we convince the next generation of environmental scientists to come along for the ride?

Those are just some of the subjects that we'll explore and debate at length. And, ultimately, we'll emerge with a document and a process for each of the three Societies, which will become our next strategic plans.

So, as we approach you in the months ahead to get your perspective and to tap your imagination for what might be possible, please take the time to engage. And if you have ideas right now—biggest problems you face and the solutions our Societies can be a part of—send me an email. We're eager to hear from everyone.

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