



Science
Societies

Why volunteer? Five ways service strengthens your career and community

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Volunteering with the Societies does more than support the scientific community—it builds your network, strengthens leadership and practical skills, and opens doors to mentorship and influence. Through five member-driven insights, this article shows how service can accelerate your career

while helping shape the future of agronomy, crop, and soil sciences.

When you serve with the Societies, you are not just supporting the scientific community, you're investing in your own professional growth.

We asked members across career stages to share what they've gained from volunteering with the Societies. Their stories reveal five compelling reasons why service matters.

1. Build your professional network

One of the immediate perks of Society service is access to a network of colleagues who share your passion for the sciences. Committee work, editorial service, and program planning create natural opportunities for connection.

"One of the most surprising aspects of volunteering with ASA, CSSA, and SSSA has been how quickly it connects you with an incredible network of scientists who are passionate about advancing agronomy, crop, and soil sciences," says Prakash Kumar Jha.



The Graduate Student Leadership Conference at CANVAS 2025 in Salt Lake City.

Jha is currently an associate editor of *Agronomy Journal*, an ASA community leader, and has served as chair of multiple programmatic and award committees.

"Serving as a volunteer has strengthened my leadership and collaboration skills while giving me a deeper appreciation for the collective effort that sustains our scientific community," he says.

Whether you're collaborating on a symposium, reviewing award nominations, or planning student programming, volunteer work creates the connections that lead to research collaborations, mentorship opportunities, and lasting professional friendships.

2. Develop leadership skills

Volunteer roles with the Societies offer something you can't always find at your day job: the chance to lead, shape strategy, and influence the direction of your field. From chairing a division to serving on editorial boards, these positions provide leadership experience that can accelerate your career.

"What surprised me most was how collaborative and welcoming the committees were. As a graduate student, I expected mainly to observe, but instead I was encouraged to contribute ideas and perspectives," says Swas Kaushal, a graduate student serving on the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Graduate Student Committee. ["Through these experiences, I gained leadership and networking skills, a better understanding of the professional landscape of crop and soil sciences, and valuable connections with researchers and mentors across the community."](#)

This is particularly valuable for early career professionals. While you might be years away from senior leadership at your institution, volunteer service lets you develop those skills now by making strategic decisions, managing projects, coordinating teams, and representing your peers.

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3. Build practical skills that advance your career

Beyond leadership, volunteer service develops a range of practical skills you can add to your professional toolkit. Reviewing manuscripts sharpens your writing. Organizing sessions at CANVAS improves your project management skills. Mentoring students enhances your communication.

Dwarika Bhattarai, who has served as a graduate student committee member, manuscript contest reviewer, and associate editor, reflects on the breadth of skills gained through service.

"My experience as a reviewer [and] associate editor of *Agronomy Journal* has allowed me to think critically and stay engaged with emerging research. I have learned how serving behind the scenes can have a lasting impact on both individuals and the broader academic community," Bhattarai says. "I learned a lot from my experiences: leadership, communication, connection, and critical thinking skills, as well as an understanding of academic service and the importance of teamwork to build a strong community."

4. Give back through mentorship

For many Society volunteers, giving back is the most rewarding part of their membership. They give their time through roles that support students, advise early career professionals, or create opportunities for the next generation through mentorship. These roles offer a unique kind of fulfillment that comes from investing in others' success.



Mentorship can be a very rewarding part being a volunteer with the Societies.

"Mentoring students has been a very rewarding part of my service to the Societies," says Chris Schaefer, a dedicated mentor who has participated in multiple Society mentorship programs. "The curiosity, drive, and passion they display during one-on-one or group mentoring activities is very inspiring and I look forward to seeing where that passion for science and agriculture takes

the next generation of scientists."

The Societies have several mentoring programs, including the Golden Opportunity and Greenfield Scholars programs, virtual and in-person [Mentor Match programs](#), and

informal connection opportunities at CANVAS networking sessions and happy hours.

5. Gain insider perspectives of your field

Volunteer service offers a behind-the-scenes view of how the Societies operate, how priorities are set, and how decisions that shape the discipline are made. This perspective is invaluable for understanding and influencing the direction of your field.

Xia Zhu-Barker, who progressed from presiding over sessions as a graduate student to serving on the SSSA Board of Directors, describes the eye-opening nature of this experience.

"What surprised me most was how much discussion and effort goes into the decisions that shape our societies and the discipline," Zhu-Barker says. "Serving in leadership roles allowed me to see how ideas are debated, how priorities are set, and how important it is for different voices to participate."



Members of the SSSA Board of Directors visit the University of Wisconsin Soils Department in 2025. Pictured front left is Xia Zhu-Barker.

Zhu-Barker also participated in the Societies' initiative to bring our disciplines' policy priorities to legislators on Capitol Hill through [Congressional Visits Day](#).

"Visiting Capitol Hill to speak with legislators about science was another eye-opening experience," Zhu-Barker says. "It showed me that advancing science also involves communicating its value and advocating for research support."

This insider perspective helps you stay current with emerging priorities, understand policy discussions that affect research funding, and recognize opportunities before they become widely known. It positions you to be a thought leader rather than a follower in your field.

Ready to get involved?

There is something for everyone in Society service.

As Prakash Kumar Jha puts it: "I encourage members, especially early career scientists, to volunteer. It is an incredible way to expand networks, gain leadership experience, and help shape the future of our disciplines."

[Volunteer opportunities](#) with ASA, CSSA, and SSSA are open now. Whether you're interested in award committees, editorial boards, student programming, policy work, or mentorship, there's a way for you to contribute your expertise while gaining valuable professional experience.

Visit sciencesocieties.org/volunteer to explore current opportunities, or reach out to Grace Moran (gmoran@sciencesocieties.org) to discuss which roles might be the best fit for your interests and career goals.

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Your service doesn't just strengthen the Societies—it strengthens your career, expands your network, and deepens your connection to the agricultural science community. The question isn't whether you have time to volunteer. It's whether you can afford not to.

Special thanks to the members who shared their volunteer stories for this article: Prakash Kumar Jha (Mississippi State University), Swas Kaushal (South Dakota State University), Dwarika Bhattarai (South Dakota State University), Chris Schaefer (Corteva Agriscience), and Xia Zhu-Barker (University of Wisconsin–Madison).

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