Science Societies

A long-term vision for growth, revisited

By Aaron Lee M. Daigh

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Seven years ago, SSSA President Aaron Daigh wrote a column in this magazine titled, "Diversity and Inclusion: Building a Vibrant Workplace." The column rested on a borrowed line from the book *Rebel Talent* by Dr. Francesca Gino, who wrote that “diversity is not a quota system, but a long-

term vision for growth." Do the arguments and framework of the 2019 column still hold up today?

Last month's column asked what we want soil science to still require of its researchers, educators, and practitioners 20 years from now. This month, I want to come at a related question from the opposite direction, by looking back instead of forward. Seven years ago in this magazine, I wrote a column called "Diversity and Inclusion: Building a Vibrant Workplace" (Daigh, 2029). I was an assistant professor at the time and in my last year serving as the Early Career Representative on the SSSA Board of Directors. Much has changed in the seven years since … in my career, in our discipline, in the country, and in the conversation around the topic itself. So, it feels like the right time to revisit that column from the president's chair and ask what, if anything, I would write differently today. The answer is very little.

The argument, still

The 2019 column rested on a borrowed line from the book *Rebel Talent* by Dr. Francesca Gino, who wrote that "diversity is not a quota system, but a long-term vision for growth." That framing held the column together then, and it still holds the column together now. The case I was making in 2019 was operational, though I believe in the moral case too. A workplace, a department, or a scientific society that keeps drawing from the same well of backgrounds and perspectives will eventually run out of answers to questions it has not yet been asked.

"Diversity is not a quota system, but a long-term vision for growth."
—Dr. Francesca Gino

Research shows what most of us have lived: In relatively small increments of increased diversity, teams are roughly twice as likely to arrive at successful solutions to complex problems, even while feeling about half as confident the work is progressing (Phillips et al., 2008). The discomfort and the effectiveness travel together.

Seven years on, I have seen that argument tested in enough rooms at various levels (departments, institutions, and Society-wide) to know it is not just theoretical. A diverse group with a shared trajectory outperforms a homogeneous group with a shared worldview, consistently and over the long run. The advantage may not be apparent in the short run and rarely is it comfortable, but it will emerge consistently where it counts.

A strong member signal

In my February column, I shared the committee appointment data from this year's volunteer cycle. Of all the SSSA committees members could self-nominate to serve on, the two that drew the largest volunteer pools were the Women in Science Committee and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. So many qualified members volunteered that we could not place all of them this cycle.

When you open the volunteer portal to your membership and ask where people want to give their time, and the answer comes back as these two committees more than any others, you have learned something about what your community values. You have not learned it from a strategic plan or a survey. You have learned it from the people who do the work.

I am not saying those two committees are more important than the others. Every SSSA committee matters, and the volunteers serving on the Fellows Committee, the awards committees, the Science Policy Committee, and the division committees are doing essential work that the Society depends on. When members vote with their time, though, we should pay attention. That signal is the Society telling the Society something about the next generation of soil science.

Pipeline logic

If the faces at the front of the room never change, the students in the back of the room will eventually stop sitting down. That is a matter of pipeline rather than politics. The students we are counting on to fill the workforce shortage in agricultural and environmental sciences over the next 20 years are watching who gets nominated, who gets elevated, who gets funded, who gets the keynote slot, and who is named Fellow. They are drawing conclusions about whether this profession has a seat for someone like them. Those conclusions are being drawn in real time, and they are long lasting. We cannot recruit our way out of a signal we spent a decade sending.

The inverse is equally true and more hopeful. When the front of the room does change, slowly, deliberately, and in a way that reflects the members who are showing up to do the work, the back of the room fills. We do not have to take this on faith because our own three Societies (ASA, CSSA, and SSSA) have been measuring it. In a recent DEI Committee progress report (Chapman, 2026), the numbers move in the direction this argument predicts.

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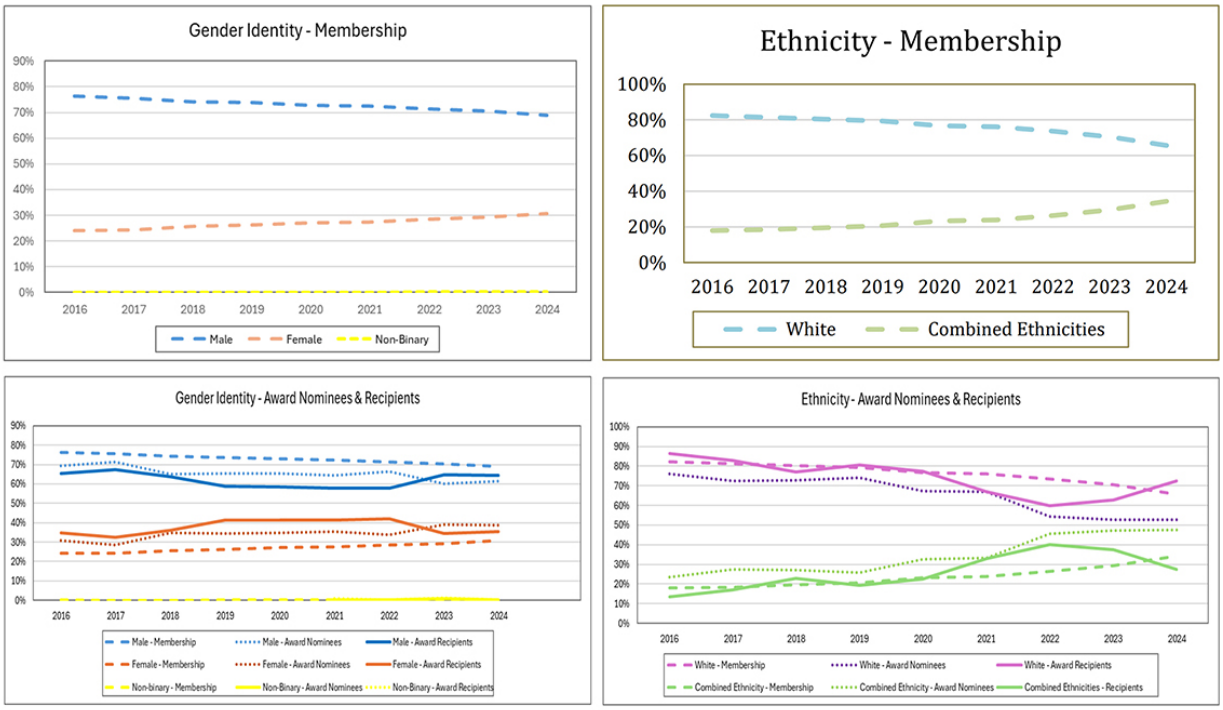
keynote slot, and who is named Fellow."

Since 2016, female membership has risen from 24 to 31%, and combined non-white membership from 17 to 34%. On our committees, where so much of the Society's real work happens, female participation has grown from 25 to 36% and combined-ethnicity participation from 16% to 36%. The change reaches the places that matter most for the pipeline. Award nominations from the combined-ethnicity group nearly doubled, from 24 to 47%, and female nominations rose from 31% to 39%. At CANVAS, our own annual meeting, female attendance climbed from 30% to 39% and combined-ethnicity attendance from 25 to 47%.



These trends did not appear overnight. The SSSA Representation and Recognition Task Force, formed and approved by the SSSA Board of Directors in early 2018, laid down the baseline for them in its 2019 gender report, and the Inclusivity Assessment

Committee that grew out of it did the same for ethnicity in 2023 (SSSA Representation and Recognition Task Force, 2019; SSSA Inclusivity Assessment Committee, 2023). Those reports were candid that representation was rising faster than recognition and that ethnic diversity was lagging behind gender, which is exactly where the work in nominating, inviting, and mentoring still needs to be done.

None of this is fast, and none of it is symbolic. It is the compounding effect of a lot of nominations, a lot of invitations, and a lot of mentors who said, “Yes, I will write that letter”.

What the members themselves said

The members themselves also named the real difficulties in this work. When the DEI Committee surveyed the membership, the open-ended responses pointed to some genuine tensions, among them the challenge of balancing this effort with scientific excellence, and the persistence of implicit bias and representation gaps (Chapman, 2026). The Society takes those responses seriously because they come from the people we are talking about serving. I raised a version of the first concern in 2019, when I wrote that this work done badly can reinforce the very stereotypes it means to dismantle. That caution was true then, and it is true now. Done poorly, with the metric mistaken for the mission, these efforts can do more harm than good.

"A scientific society that cannot draw widely will not think widely, and a discipline that cannot

think widely will not keep up with the problems the next 40 years are going to put on its desk."

What has not changed is the underlying argument. Diversity is the long-term vision for growth, and inclusion is the environment that lets it bear fruit. A scientific society that cannot draw widely will not think widely, and a discipline that cannot think widely will not keep up with the problems the next 40 years are going to put on its desk. I still stand by my 2019 column. The words I used then I would use again today, and it encourages me that our own DEI Committee chose in this year's progress report to lead with inclusion and to put members' experiences ahead of the metrics, which is close to the conclusion I was reaching toward in 2019 (Chapman, 2026).

What you can do

Because the argument is operational, so are the asks. Here are the four asks I am making of you:

Nominate: Awards season runs through early spring each year. Write the letter. Nominate the colleague whose name should already be on the Fellows ballot and is not yet. Nominate the early career member whose work has surprised you. The Fellows, the early career awards, the student scholarships all start with someone taking an hour or more to write a glowing nomination.

Mentor: Take on one. If you already have five, take on one more who is not like the first five. Good mentoring, as I wrote in 2020 (Daigh, 2020), is less about imparting your own path and more about helping someone design theirs.

Good mentoring is less about imparting your own path and more about helping someone design theirs. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Krakenimages.com.

Volunteer: Visit the Societies' volunteering page to see what opportunities are available. Some opportunities have application windows, so pay attention to announcements via email, *CSA News*, social media, and the Member Hub. If you are watching from the sidelines, that is the move. The Society runs on the members who fill out the form.

Show up: Be at your division's business meeting, at the student poster session, and at CANVAS in Portland this November. Presence is a form of teaching that we tend to underestimate.

Scientific societies are long-term projects. The choices we make this decade about who feels welcome in our rooms will shape the discipline our students lead in the 2050s. The members who volunteered for those the Women in Science and DEI committees this year already understand that. What I can do from this chair is notice aloud, thank them, and keep the argument from 2019 on the table long enough for the long-term vision to keep doing its work.

Seven years from now, someone else will sit where I am sitting and look back at whatever I wrote this year. My hope is that the argument still holds.

I suspect it will.

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