



**Science
Societies**

Why serve as a Society leader?

**Questions and answers with Sara Uttech, Director of
Governance**

By Alison Jennings

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Society elected leadership and ACSESS staff volunteer at Red Butte Garden and Arboretum during CANVAS 2025.

If you have ever wanted to make an impact on our Societies, all while networking within your scientific discipline, consider reading on—*CSA News* magazine recently sat down with Director of Governance Sara Uttech to provide some insight into why someone might want to serve as an elected leader with the Societies.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Can you tell us about your position with the Societies?

I manage six boards of directors: the boards for our scientific Societies (ASA, CSSA, and SSSA) as well as the [ACSESS](#), [ASF](#), and [ICCA](#) Boards.

What that means is I develop, with our elected leadership, the agendas for board meetings. I also support elected leaders by answering their questions about our policies and procedures and their roles and responsibilities. In addition, I look for collaborative opportunities across the Societies—a lot of connecting of the dots.



Sara Uttech

Last month, we put out a call for volunteers to serve in leadership. What positions are we filling, and who should volunteer?

Anyone who is interested in serving in a leadership role and looking to network within their division, section, or community should consider running. Let's say you are in Division C05—Turfgrass Science. If you want to work on ways to make that division more vibrant, more active—within its members, at [CANVAS](#), or in our journals—you can volunteer within that division to help manage and bring forth some ideas for changes, opportunities, and growth.

We are asking for volunteers to run for one (or two!) of several available elected leader positions:

- ASA elected leaders:
 - Community Vice Leaders
 - Section Vice Chairs
 - Board of Director Representatives
 - Graduate Student Representative
 - President-Elect
- CSSA elected leaders:
 - Division Chairs-Elect
 - Board of Director Representatives
 - Graduate Student Representative
 - President-Elect
- SSSA elected leaders:
 - Division Chairs-Elect
 - Board of Director Representatives
 - Graduate Student Representative

- President-Elect

After volunteering, if you are selected by the current division/section chair or community leader, you will be on the ballot for election this spring. The winning candidates start on January 1 of the following year (so, for this cycle, elected leaders will start their term in 2028).

**Why do CSSA and SSSA have divisions, while ASA has sections and communities?
Are these groups different in any way?**

[ASA sections and communities](#), [CSSA divisions](#), and [SSSA divisions](#) are ways to organize members into groups of common professional interests. These groups organize symposia and sessions at CANVAS, so members can present papers and compete for awards. These groups may also organize activities outside of CANVAS.

ASA used to have divisions. But over a decade ago, they opted for a more “grassroots” approach to forming groups of professional interests. So, they switched from “divisions” to “communities,” where each community is grouped together within something called a “section.” There are seven sections all these communities are grouped under. The idea behind this is that these are smaller groups that dive into specific scientific disciplines.

That kind of change required a change to the bylaws. It was a large undertaking for ASA. I think CSSA and SSSA are watching how it works and how it will all unfold. But I know the one thing that many like about the communities is that being a community leader is less intimidating, so to speak, than being a section or division chair, a board rep, or a president. Because a community is a smaller group of people, you manage a smaller lift—a smaller number of sessions or papers at CANVAS vs. a division’s dozens of papers, dozens of sessions, and handful of symposia. This means that our grad

students and early-career members can more easily become community leaders and can gain some of that initial leadership experience that way. It may seem harder for an early-career member to jump into a division/section chair role without having worked on the community side for a bit. ASA has that as a benefit.

Though that is not to say CSSA and SSSA early-career or graduate student members cannot get leadership or networking experience. There are still many ways to get involved. They can [volunteer with a committee](#) (such the ACS Early Career Members Committee), no election required. They can reach out to their division chair to see what they might need help with—maybe the divisions need assistance judging posters or moderating sessions at CANVAS. There is a [Peer Review Mentorship Program](#), too, if you want to get involved more with the journals.

What does a board member do?

A board member represents their division, section, or representative group (such as graduate student, early career, DEI, etc.) on the board of directors. They serve as a liaison between the board and the group they represent. For example, Graduate Student Board Reps serve on the Boards of Directors for each Society and the Graduate Student Committee. They bring items of discussion from the Graduate Student Committee to the Board as an item on the Board agenda, and topics or feedback from the Board go back to the Graduate Student Committee.



ASA/ICCA Board touring Ripp-Vale Farms in Black Earth, WI. Every summer, members of the boards of directors travel to Madison, WI, for an in-person meeting and a tour of local agricultural and research sites that investigate questions in agronomic, crop, soil, or environmental science. Photo courtesy of Sara Uttech.

What is the general time commitment for each of these positions?

As far as board positions go, these leaders generally spend about five hours a month on roles and responsibilities, with an hour and a half board meeting every other month. You spend this time reading the meeting agendas and documents and talking to your division, section, community, or representative group—asking them if they want anything brought up at these meetings. You are also reminding your division, section, or community about upcoming events, award deadlines, and programs, such as engaging with your group on the [Member Hub](#).

A president likely spends 10 hours a month on average because they are planning more for their board meeting, and they are serving in different capacities on different committees and as liaisons to external Societies.

The time commitment for serving as a community leader, section chair, or division chair primarily centers around CANVAS. There is definitely a lot of work leading up to CANVAS: There are heavier lifts during the session setup process in the spring, session scheduling process in the summer, and judging and execution for the fall. There is no good “time estimate” surrounding these roles because it really depends on how active the community, section, or division is. How many abstracts were submitted? How many invited sessions will there be? How many student competition sessions are happening? But on the whole, there may be less of a time commitment for the whole year compared

with other elected leadership positions.

“Serving on the CSSA Board has shown me how much our Societies do behind the scenes to support members, strengthen our profession, and ensure the success of the crop science community.”

—Laura Lindsey, C03—Crop Ecology, Management & Quality Board Representative

What kind of experience do I need in order to serve as an elected leader?

To be a community leader, section chair, division chair, or board member representative, we ask you to be an active member of a community or division. So maybe you have been presenting papers in a division at CANVAS. Maybe you have helped moderate a session or a symposium, or you have done some other things in that division. I would also draw a dotted line to our journals.

There are some pathways to leadership via the editorial boards, too.

To be a president of one of our Societies, there are a few different pathways in. But a lot of the experience you need to serve as a Society president comes from connecting with our journals. So maybe you have been really active with *Crop Science* or *Agronomy Journal*, serving on the editorial board as, say, an associate editor—and you have definitely done your share of peer review.



CSSA Board touring the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility. Photo by Heidi Falk.

Maybe you have risen through the ranks, and you have served as editor or editor-in-chief. Being a Society president is a natural next step.

Is there anything about the election process that is new to this year that you would like to highlight?

“As an SSSA member since my master's studies, serving on the board has been a rewarding opportunity to give back to an organization that has shaped my professional journey. It has not only broadened my understanding of the Societies—it has also allowed me to support issues I care deeply about, particularly expanding opportunities for graduate students and early-career members.”

—Ganga Hettiarachchi, SSSA Fundamental Soil Science Group

This is new this year—we are hosting all of our volunteering opportunities on one webpage, in one portal on the [Member Hub](#). In the past, I would email the community leaders, section chairs, and division chairs, and ask them who had expressed interest in running and who the leaders were choosing to go on the ballots. And they would come back to me with two names that they would have brought up at their business meeting at CANVAS.

Now, with every opportunity on one page, we are both helping those current division/section chairs and community leaders gather names while also promoting transparency about the roles that are available. We want to create a transparent election process to encourage everyone to volunteer.

Are there any common misconceptions about serving as an elected leader that you want to clarify?

I think the biggest misconception is that you have to know everything there is to know and be ready to go on Day 1 when you take office.

These positions are multi-year terms, so you will get training on every one of them. Instead of jumping right into things, you start out as either a *vice* leader, *vice* chair or *chair-elect*, or as a *president-elect*. And that is on purpose because that first year you serve, you are getting your bearings, so to speak. You are learning the position in that “vice” role or that “-elect” role. The next year you serve, *then* you serve as that division chair, as that section chair, or as that president. By then you have that one year of experience, so you can hit the ground running. Also, your past chair or past president will still be there for one last year to help the new leaders in their positions.

I always tell people who are thinking about running for a leadership position that you are not doing it alone. We have all kinds of resources, like the *Leadership Handbooks* that walk you through each Society's leadership roles. There is also me, and a whole staff here at ACSESS to support you in your role.



What are the benefits that I would gain from serving?

Definitely being able to network in your discipline. You are learning more about your colleagues in your field. You are learning how to communicate. You are learning how to work with others. You will also have the chance to advocate for your division, your section, or your community by helping to identify hot topics in those areas—if you are interested in serving, you are likely very passionate about your discipline and want to advance activity in your field. There are lots of tangible and intangible benefits of serving in these leadership positions.

What would you say to someone who is on the fence about volunteering for one of these positions?

Number one, I would tell them to read through the position description they are interested in in the *Leadership Handbook* (which you can find on the Member Hub). They are not real long; each one is a one-pager on what each role does. But they give you a good overview of the role and clarify some things.

Then, I would really encourage folks to attend their division, section, or community business meeting at CANVAS, if at all possible, because the business meetings are really the heartbeat of these groups. They are typically held on the last day of CANVAS, when everyone is starting to think about next year. Maybe you can bring up some things you envision for your group in that business meeting. If you cannot attend, you could instead email the division or section chair to reiterate the fact that you are interested in running for a position.

“Volunteering has allowed me to serve others through my science work. It has also helped me connect with people who share my interests in agronomy and soil science. It has helped me build friendships over the years, and I enjoy seeing them at our CANVAS meetings. Another benefit is gaining a deeper understanding of how our science organization works and developing sessions that can benefit our colleagues and Societies. I also learn so much from other scientists, and volunteering has helped me advance my thinking in many areas of our sciences.”

—Jodie McVane, ASA Land Management & Conservation Board Representative

And definitely talk to the current, -elect, or past division chairs, section chairs, presidents, or board members, so they can give you an idea about what the workload is and what the benefits are. I am also always happy to answer questions—so if people want to know more about a position, you can email me at suttech@sciencesocieties.org ([send message](#)).

Why should people volunteer before the priority deadline of October 23 instead of waiting for the final deadline of November 30?

Following CANVAS, the current elected leaders for each group will meet to look over all of the potential candidates to see who will be put on the ballot in the spring. For example, if you are looking into serving as division chair, then the current chair, past chair, chair-elect, and board rep for that division will meet and go over your bio as well as the bios for all the other candidates that have come forward, and select two people

for the election.

Volunteering by October 23 prioritizes your interest with the division and section chairs in advance of the very important business meetings. These are rolling deadlines, meaning if they have enough good candidates by then, they could decide to close the submissions to new candidates. The early bird gets the worm!

Can I run for a position across the three different Societies? Or should I stick to running within one Society?

You can run for two positions, and that is across the three Societies. But I would recommend sticking to one. That is because if someone applies for a board rep position in both ASA and SSSA and wins both elections, that is a conflict of interest, so we will have to ask them to choose just one position between the two.

What is something important you want to emphasize that we have not touched on yet?

We really want to encourage women, people of color, and all career stages from early career to emeritus to think about running for office because we are a better Society when we have leadership that is diverse. It is amazing when we have many different voices discussing and analyzing things at the board level. All of those different perspectives make those decisions better.

Our members should apply and volunteer for these positions, and they should also look to the next generation and encourage them to volunteer, too. If you know of somebody who would either like to serve or whom you feel would be good at serving, especially with that diversity question in mind, encourage them to go for it.

Don't wait, volunteer to run now!

The [call for candidates is open](#): review the available positions for elected leaders, and volunteer to let division/section chairs and community leaders know you are interested in running for office. The priority deadline to volunteer for a position is Oct. 23, 2026, and the final deadline is Nov. 30, 2026.

[Review positions/ volunteer](#)

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