Science Societies

SSSA's Strategic Plan: Journey to 2029

March 2, 2024



Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/alexlmx.

I like strategic planning exercises. Not everyone does, I know. There are different kinds of strategic plans, but overall, they have a lot in common. For one thing, they can be a lot of work. They capture a moment of aspiration shared by an organization's members—a moment that can evaporate all too quickly if not everyone is on board, if available resources change, if leadership changes, if energy dissipates. A lot can go differently from the plan that was imagined, and one can wonder why all the effort was expended to plan for a future that seemed so uncertain to begin with. Strategic plans hold lots of promise, but they are not particularly reliable predictors of the future. So why do so many organizations fuss with them?

Lots of reasons, of course. Here are some:

- **To bring people together to assess the status quo and to envision the future**
- **To encourage a collaborative movement forward where both vision and responsibility are shared**
- **To chart (or at least to outline) one route to a shared future**
- **To identify measurable outcomes that can direct effective programming**
- **To frame and start the most difficult tasks of prioritizing—choosing which activities and programs are most important for long-term goals, which ones might be reframed, and which ones might be dropped**

Effective strategic planning exercises *are* hard work, and they can be quite discomforting since they often imply that things are going to change, that we will need to take risks, and that difficult choices will be required. Effective strategic planning exercises are built on foundations of careful listening, honest assessments, and (if there can be such a thing) clear-eyed imagination.

I like that. Not that I am very good at listening, assessing, or imagining, but I *want* to be good at those things. And if I can practice those skills in the service of an organization that I really believe in, there will be an opportunity for both me and my organization to become better than we are today.

Guiding Our Activities for the Next Five Years

SSSA's latest strategic planning exercise was conducted in partnership with ASA and CSSA, but it reflected our Society's particular past, present, and future, of course. Our goal was to develop an outline that would guide the Society's activities for the next five years, from 2024 through the end of 2028. Starting in 2022, over the course of several months, we gathered information and perspectives from SSSA members and leaders to better understand who we are, how we are perceived, and what our members need from their professional home. Last summer, the SSSA board met for two days and developed a vision statement for SSSA as well as a set of four objectives for our future activities. At the Annual Meeting in St. Louis last fall, the SSSA board ratified and adopted the plan.

Our strategic plan is not a three-volume tome that documents all the data and discussions that we considered over the months that preceded the summer meeting. Instead, it succinctly presents who we aspire to be (our vision), what we aspire to accomplish (our objectives), and what changes we will work toward in the coming years (our outcomes). It's more of a framework than a formal plan, I'd say.

You can read the complete SSSA strategic plan here: soils.org/files/about-society/sssa-strategic-plan.pdf.

When you do, you will see that, for each of the four objectives, there are four desired outcomes we hope to realize. For example, the outcomes related to *membership* are:

- **Regular, direct outreach with schools and institutions, including 1862, 1890, and 1994 land grants**
- **Educational programming delivered throughout the year, not just at the Annual Meeting**
- **Joint programs with other scientific societies and related groups**
- **Membership expansion explored by market segment, geography, and other factors**

Putting the Plan into Action

Now our tasks—those of society leaders, our members, and the ACSESS staff—are to identify and prioritize the actions that will lead to those outcomes over the coming five years. We will do our best to coordinate new activities with the Society's continuing programs and in collaboration with our sister Societies. We aim to find the best ways and times to evaluate our actions and their effectiveness in moving us forward. I believe that each of the outcomes can and should be connected to the ideas and efforts of our members through member-populated committees and special task forces.

Some examples of SSSA membership initiatives that are likely to come to the forefront soon are:

- **Leadership visits with SSSA members and potential members at educational institutions and with stakeholders in soil science to promote the value of professional engagement with SSSA**
- **Collaboration with other scientific societies in workshops and symposia at the Annual Meeting or as webinars; co-sponsorship of special meetings; jointly produced special collections of articles in our journals, books, or magazines; and joint memberships**

- **Forward planning for special conferences to meet regional or topical needs**
- **Re-evaluation of SSSA committee structures and tasks**

What Can You Expect in the Coming Months?

The ACSESS staff are modestly structuring their departments to better support the desired outcomes set out by SSSA and the other Societies. This will include tailoring the activities that are specific to SSSA, e.g., policy activities that address non-agricultural issues, soil science workforce development that builds on our certification program and educational initiatives, collaboration with other scientific societies, and maintaining the high quality of SSSA journals. During the coming years, your SSSA leadership team will engage with both SSSA committees and joint committees of all three Societies to develop and follow through on our multi-year initiatives.

I invite you to contact me with your ideas about SSSA's new strategic plan. I will share them with the SSSA leadership teams (the presidents, the board of directors, the division chairs, or chairs of our committees) and ACSESS staff leadership, as appropriate. My hope for the SSSA strategic plan is that it will be a powerful catalyst for engaging each of our members, for drawing in new members, and promoting our message to the world that *Soils Are Awesome!*

Text © . The authors. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Except where otherwise noted, images are subject to copyright. Any reuse without express permission from the copyright owner is prohibited.