Reflections

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ASHS President

Reimagining ASHS

Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature’s inexorable imperative.

—H.G. Wells

As with most associations these days, ASHS is facing a great many changes and it is clear that we have to adapt. ASHS is attracting new members, but the number is not keeping pace with those not renewing, and our membership is gently declining. Although our publications are currently doing quite well, the publishing world is in tumult as associations try to find a financial model that works. Of course, we also need to consider the rapid pace of changing technology, demographics, and market forces.

ASHS has been changing over the years. It streamlined operations and staff, modified the conferences, and with Longwood Gardens, began Seed Your Future, a long-term project to increase the interest of youth in horticulture and enrollment in horticultural programs. Efficiency at the journals has improved such that manuscripts are given a thorough review, yet acceptance decisions are often made in three weeks or less, faster than just about any other journal these days. Newly launched this past year is the HortIM program—a peer-review system for academic and extension instructional materials.

However, as the pace of change accelerates, so does the need to adapt. Last fall, to address the long-term issues facing ASHS, we appointed three task forces to research and present reports to the board on reorganizing/rethinking ASHS: 1) Membership and Member Services, 2) Conferences and Other ASHS Events, and 3) Publications and Scientific Communications. Each task force was given a charge and asked to report back to the Board.

I. Membership and Member Services

ASHS is a successful organization with a long history of serving its members, industry, government, and educational institutions. The current ASHS structure with its committees, working groups, board of directors, and officers has served ASHS well over the years and provided members with value through its conferences,
publications, awards, and other activities. It is time to review membership benefits to determine if they still meet the needs of the membership.

Charge: Reimagine ASHS member services to prepare ASHS for the next 20 years. This committee should consider the value and importance of ASHS services and member benefits.

Members:

Dean Kopsell, University of Tennessee, Chair
Chris Currey, University of Iowa
Mary Meyer, University of Minnesota
Alex Rajewski, University of California, Riverside
Cindy Slone, ASHS
Chengyan Yue, University of Minnesota

II. Conferences and Other ASHS Events

The conference is ASHS’ most important event; not only providing a place for all members to get together, but also providing an outlet for students and faculty to officially present their work. The Society considers the event to be part of its mission, and, as such, it usually pays more in expenses than it returns in revenue. In 2016 the conference realized an $8,800 surplus, while in 2015, 2014, and 2013, the conference resulted in losses of about $17,500, $1,500, and $62,500, respectively. The cost of the event is justified if it provides value to our membership.

Charge: Reimagine the ASHS Conference to determine the structure that would best prepare ASHS for the next 20 years. Should the conference continue as is, be drastically changed, or become something in between?

Members:

Brian Pearson, University of Florida, Chair
Ajay Nair, Iowa State University
Dennis Ray, University of Arizona
Eric Runkle, Michigan State University
Carl Sams, University of Tennessee
Tracy Shawn, ASHS
Danielle Treadwell, University of Florida
III. Publications and Scientific Communications

The ASHS journals are important to the Society’s budget; in 2015 they comprised 54% of ASHS’ income. In 2016 the percentage was even higher at 64% of ASHS’ revenue. Submissions to the three ASHS journals reached an all-time high at the end of 2016—nearly 1300 manuscripts were submitted to the ASHS peer review system. However, overall subscriptions, both member and institutional, are declining. In addition, the world of publishing is dramatically changing, with increased pressure to make journal content open access and to provide instant online publication.

Charge: While the ASHS journals are certainly not in crisis and doing well, we need to come up with a sustainable plan for the future of the journals. What should that plan be to best prepare ASHS journals for the next 20 years?

Members:

Amy Wright, Auburn University, Chair
Neal De Vos, HortTechnology and JASHS
Ricardo Hernandez, North Carolina State University
Mike Neff, ASHS
Ron Robbins, HortScience
Marc van Iersel, University of Georgia

While we have convened three separate task forces, the reality is that all three of these topics are integrated. In particular, the financial implications of the publications task force will need to be considered by the board.

I want to say thank you very much to our dedicated members who served on the task forces. We selected smart, thoughtful, motivated ASHS members to serve on the task forces and not surprisingly, these are the very characteristics of people who tend to be especially busy with their projects and their home institutions. So, it is with gratitude that I thank the task force members.

I especially want to thank the task force chairs, Dean Kopsell, Brian Pearson, and Amy Wright, and the ASHS staff members Mike Neff, Tracy Shawn, and Cindy Slone, who supported each task force. Next time you see these folks please thank them for their efforts to make ASHS a better organization. The Membership and Conferences Task Forces have completed their work and we are presenting the Membership report in this issue of the ASHS Newsletter. The Conferences report will be presented in the next issue. The final report on Publications will be published later this year. The task forces have done a great job of blending short- and
long-term recommendations.
Finally, to all of the ASHS members, please read the reports and send me your comments. The ASHS Board of Directors has received the first two reports and begun to implement the recommendations. We need your thoughts. Thank you in advance for helping your professional society to react and adapt to the challenges ahead.