



Updates on SOT Activities Regarding Diversity and Inclusion and the Decision to Go Virtual for the 2021 Annual Meeting and ToxExpo

By George P. Daston, PhD, 2020–2021 SOT President

This continues to be a year like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live, work, and socialize. Added to that has been the civil unrest in the United States and other parts of the world following the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, and a US presidential election that has highlighted the divisions in American society. As any SOT Past President can tell you, running an organization the size of SOT is a challenge even in normal times—and this year is anything but normal. I would like to use this message to provide updates on the [SOT commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equality](#) and the 2021 Annual Meeting and ToxExpo.

Diversity and Inclusion

In the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor earlier this year, SOT leadership decided to look at how we were doing in creating a diverse and inclusive organization. First, we gathered feedback from focus groups of Black and Latinx SOT members. We realize that diversity goes beyond these two groups but felt that these were people most likely to have been affected by profiling and violence. We also felt that the lessons learned would be applicable more broadly. Second, we held a town hall event that was open to all SOT members. Much of the feedback was positive: the focus group participants acknowledged the Society's decades-long commitment to diversity, and they felt that within SOT, they were judged on their science, not their ethnicity.

Despite doing a good job on diversity, participants felt that improvements can be made regarding inclusivity. Many expressed confusion about how one gets nominated for leadership positions in SOT, and some who had been in leadership positions felt that they were pigeonholed into certain Committees or were not listened to while in those leadership positions.

We are taking several steps to address these concerns. First, through upcoming improvements to the online SOT member community, ToXchange it will be easier for members to volunteer for Committees and other SOT service opportunities. Second, we are encouraging the Special Interest Groups to identify members for Committee service. Third, we have [shared a set of criteria](#) for how to gain the experience and skills necessary to become and be identified as a potential SOT leader. Regarding the concerns around inclusion, we also have committed to developing leadership training for incoming Committee Chairs and Co-Chairs.

2021 Annual Meeting and ToxExpo

In September, we [made the decision](#) to make the 2021 Annual Meeting and ToxExpo virtual after it became clear that it is not possible for a majority of the population to be vaccinated before March 2021. Without immunization, the Scientific Sessions at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando could accommodate a maximum of 2,500 attendees at a given time with minimal social distancing in place, or only 600 with six-foot distancing, and attendance by colleagues from IUTOX member societies would be nearly impossible given current travel restrictions. Between last March and now, an *ad hoc* task force has been looking into technological options for holding a virtual meeting and has identified a platform that will allow us to translate the SOT event and all its Scientific Sessions, exhibits, networking activities, social events, and other key elements of the meeting into a virtual environment that will let us connect in a way beyond just another video conference.

Although there are many details to finalize, you can expect Symposia, Workshops, and Continuing Education courses to include live question-and-answer periods (Q&As) and/or chat features, with real-time audience feedback. Exhibitors will have the opportunity to host sessions and produce content that can be shared in only a virtual format. Posters will include a short audio file where the poster presenter describes the findings, and we also will have dedicated times for live interaction with poster presenters. As for security, the posters will not be downloadable, and the SOT Annual Meeting policies—to which everyone agrees upon registration—have been updated to expressly “prohibit the capturing, copying, or taking screenshots of any aspect of the Virtual Annual Meeting without the consent of the presenter(s)/author(s)/exhibitor(s)/etc., including but not limited to slide presentations, video presentations, audio presentations, Q&As, chats, exhibits, posters, and abstracts.” I hope you’ve been able to continue to make progress in your research. Toxicology research is vital for maintaining public health, and I am proud of all of you for bravely soldiering on. We want you to present your work at the Annual Meeting, which is why we extended the [abstract submission](#) deadline to December 1—your active participation will make this year’s meeting a truly special event.

The meeting also will last longer than one week. In order for people in different time zones to participate, it will be possible to present content for only three to four hours per day. The good news is that in addition to semi-live content with Q&As and chats, most of the content will be viewable on-demand, so you can look at talks and posters at your convenience (and probably see much more than you would be able to at an in-person meeting). Start thinking about SOT being a month-long March event rather than a “one week in March” event.

Additionally, we will be charging for Annual Meeting attendance. There is a cost to the technology needed and the SOT staff’s production of the Annual Meeting. We need to recoup those costs to keep the Society’s budget balanced. We are still working out the costs of meeting

registration. For those of you who rolled over your meeting registration from 2020, we will consider that payment in full for 2021.

More information is currently on the website in a [frequently asked questions format](#). This will be updated on a regular basis.

I hope all of you and your families are safe and well. Like most of you, I miss seeing colleagues. The Virtual 2021 Annual Meeting will be the next best thing to being there in person. Please plan on [submitting an abstract](#) to the meeting and participating.