




## 2019 SSAT Presidential Address: the Path Forward

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In his 1967 SSAT Presidential Address, Dr. Robert Turrell spoke about the launching of a new surgical organization oriented to the problems of the alimentary tract based on a research and educational foundation in 1960, The Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract (SSAT).<sup>1</sup> The founding members of SSAT consisted of authors who had contributed papers to six issues of the *Surgical Clinics of North America* edited by Dr. Turrell, and the authors of the chapters in his 1959 textbook *Diseases of the Colon and Anorectum*.<sup>2–8</sup> I had the good fortune to train at Los Angeles County – USC Medical Center under one of the founding members, Arthur Donovan, who contributed to Turrell’s textbook. Art Donovan was Chairman of Surgery at USC from 1979 to 1990, and I gave the eulogy at his funeral a month ago. Just to give you a sense of where Arthur Donovan sits in the history of American Surgery. His Chief of Surgery at Boston City Hospital was Gardner Child, and his junior resident was Basil Pruitt, who died last month. Drs. Gardner, Donovan, and Pruitt were all SSAT members.

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I have only worked under two Department Chairs, and my second good fortune was that my second Chair at USC was Tom DeMeester. Tom encouraged the USC GI surgeons to join the SSAT, and Tom’s signature is on my 1995 SSAT membership certificate during the year of his presidency. I do not know who appointed me to on my first SSAT Committee, but I believe it was Carlos Pellegrini, SSAT President in 2000, who appointed me to the Public Policy Committee. That committee was one of the first venues that I learned about the comradery of the SSAT, how it worked, and made lasting friendships with those from the Committee. As President, Jeff Matthews, appointed me to the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, another great learning experience where I met KMarie Reid, Matt Walsh, and Rohan Jeyarajah. The efforts of the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force were documented in a paper which included some important recommendations, many that the SSAT has already completed, and others that are in still in process.<sup>9</sup> While the Society still has a long way to go, the Diversity and Inclusion Liaison Committee created an SSAT Vision and Values Statement:

The Society will adopt a culture that honors the value of inclusion with an integrated approach to address the needs of a diverse membership and surgical workforce. Moreover, the Society will develop and sponsor education and research to achieve culturally competent care and eliminate health care disparities in alimentary tract surgery.

Two friends I want to thank are two former SSAT Presidents, Fabrizio Michelassi and Selwyn Vickers. Often, we discuss the difference between mentorship and sponsorship. Fabrizio has been one of my sponsors for as long as I can remember. He invited me to be my first named visiting professorship in 2008, the Benjamin S. Park, M.D. Memorial Lecture at Cornell. He has been one of my references when I have applied for various positions, and when I was selected as the SSAT representative to the American College Board of Governors, it was his hand that guided my selection to become

Chair of the ACS Board of Governors. Selwyn has been a friend, colleague, and trusted advisor. We have been on Boards and Executive Committees of various societies, and it is special that, even as busy as he is as Dean, he made the point to be here for my presidential address.

When selected as President-elect, I immediately started thinking about today, when I would have the chance to give this Presidential Address. For those of you who have the privilege to be elected President of a Society, you know that hardly a day goes by that you don't think about what you are going to talk about. I thought it would be about the important progress the SSAT has been making in Diversity and Inclusion. I even came up with a title for my talk: *The Arc Bends Towards Justice*, after hearing the acceptance speech of Doug Jones when he was elected to the U.S. Senate from Alabama. Diversity and Inclusion remain quite important SSAT values, and our speaker for the Cameron oration, Mark Nivet, will do a much better job speaking about that topic than I could. The strategic planning process the Board of Trustees has undertaken over the last year changed by mind, and decided to focus on the Path Forward for the SSAT.

In his Presidential address last year, *Whereof What's Past Is Prologue*, Stan Ashley pointed out that subspecialization, an increasing focus on clinical research, the size of DDW, among others—challenge the SSAT to better to define our identity as we plan for and prioritize for the future.<sup>10</sup> He engaged the SSAT Board in aspirational visioning through a strategic planning process to set the SSAT for future success. We first started with a survey of our leaders, held a Webinar to refine the results, and then met for a two-day strategic planning session in Chicago.

The first questions we wrestled with were:

1. What is unique about SSAT?
2. Who are our constituents?
3. Who will be our constituents in the future?

The SWOT analysis from the survey was quite useful, and in retrospective, told us everything we needed to know about the goals we eventually decided upon. The group thought the association with Digestive Disease Week is our greatest strength due to the multidisciplinary nature of the meeting, and our broad representation of subspecialists in gastrointestinal surgery provides collaborative opportunities for our members. However, to provide leadership for the next generation of GI surgeons, we must better engage our members and be sensitive to their concerns. They will likely face financial pressure, practice changes, and reduced opportunities for professional development. The SSAT needs to create a clear identity that builds member value in order to sustain membership and remain relevant. This process made us ask ourselves what the future of SSAT is, should SSAT continue to exist, and to determine what our core mission should be. Membership is still strong but has fallen slightly. While SSAT members will likely remain members of other subspecialty GI societies, the SSAT has an important role to play because of the relationship with DDW and the multidisciplinary nature of SSAT. The core of our membership is the academic GI surgeon, but the SSAT should also engage general surgeons and community surgeons with an interest in gastrointestinal surgery. There was quite intense debate about our future, and whether we should shift our focus more towards community GI surgeons. A consensus emerged that while our core constituents remain academic surgeons, we should reach out to GI surgeons working in community hospitals. Digestive Disease Week offers a unique opportunity for our members to interact with our gastrointestinal colleague over clinical and scientific topics. The annual SSAT resident and career development awards distinguish our Society as one committed to the development of academic surgeons (Table 1). A common refrain from the retreat was that the SSAT had more scientific offerings than the other GI surgical subspecialty society meetings. We should embrace this reality that SSAT is the *Academic GI Surgical Society*.

**Table 1** SSAT career development award recipients

Barbara Bass (1987)	Jeffrey Drebin (1998)	David Bentrem (2009)
Steven Raper (1988)	Edward Whang (1999)	Peter Nichol (2010)
Stanley Ashley (1989)	Florencia Que (1999)	Gregory Kennedy (2011)
Richard Turnage (1990)	Ronald DeMatteo (2000)	Jason Sicklick (2012)
Tien Ko (1991)	Michael Mur (2001)	Jason Wertheim (2013)
Jeffrey Matthews (1991)	Ming Pan (2002)	Jaylen Grams (2014)
Neil Seymour (1992)	David Shibata (2003)	Evie Carchman (2015)
John Ferrara (1993)	Robert Martin (2004)	David Liska (2016)
Richard Hodin (1994)	Timothy Pritts	Colin Martin (2017)
J. Augusto Bastidas (1995)	Rosa Hwang (2006)	Benjamin Shogan (2018)
Steve Summers (1996)	Nicholas Zyromski (2007)	Evan Glazer (2019)
Jonathan Fryer (1997)	KMarie Reid (2008)	

The future will likely be different, and the SSAT focus on providing more value than just the annual meeting to our members. The accompanying manuscript describes strategic plan developed by the SSAT Board of Trustees to best position us for the future, including goals, specific aims, and Board initiatives.

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