

Society of University Surgeons

2014 Society of University Surgeons Presidential Address

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GOOD MORNING, AND WELCOME to the 9th annual Academic Surgical Congress, and the 75th meeting of the Society of University Surgeons (SUS). During the past year, I began considering the role of the Society of University Surgeons in our matrix as university surgeons and our joint meeting with the Association for Academic Surgery (AAS). How could the Academic Surgical Congress (ASC) have grown so rapidly during a short period of time? What value do the SUS, the AAS, and the ASC bring to each of you sitting in the audience today? As you sit here in this auditorium, on occasion checking in with the rest of your life on your smart phone, you may be asking the question “why am I here?” Why have I traveled hundreds of miles, put my schedule on pause, arranged for coverage of my patients, traveled away from my family and friends, and generally put my life on hold to attend this meeting?

It is an important question. Clearly the students, residents, and faculty in attendance find value in this meeting. And, if we could identify the most important reasons for this enthusiasm for the ASC, we may be able to elevate our game to an even greater level—a tenant that everyone sitting in this room certainly would uphold. We must make this meeting, and our organizations, the most valuable opportunity and experience possible for our membership. To understand why we attend this meeting, we can start by examining postmeeting surveys.

After last year’s meeting, participants were surveyed, and one specific question focused on the

reasons people chose to attend the 8th Annual ASC. Two-thirds stated they attended to present a paper or lecture and nearly as many stated they attended to participate in the scientific sessions of the meeting. The next most common reason was to see friends and colleagues. Few came to learn about new operative techniques or to see new innovations with our supporting vendors. Participants chose several reasons for attending the ASC last year, but I want to highlight the top three reasons—especially the concepts that we attended the ASC to *present to others*, to *participate with others*, and to *see others*.

The ASC is big now. This year we have, as of January 27, 1,255 registrants. This represents a nearly 20% increase in registration over last year. We come from all over the country to attend this meeting. More than 100 of us come from California. More than 50 attended from Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Massachusetts and New York are both represented by almost 40 participants each. And we come from all over the world. I would like to extend a special welcome to the our friends from other countries, especially the one person who came from each of the countries of Brazil, Grenada, Hungary, Italy, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Switzerland, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Those who attend this meeting have a variety of educational backgrounds. I would like to highlight the more than 200 participants with the additional advanced degrees of MPH, PhD, and MBA. And, this year we have 14 undergraduate students, 24 graduate students, 50 postdocs, and 162 medical students. For those that have completed their education and training, we have nearly every surgical specialty and several nonsurgical disciplines represented here in San Diego.

So here we are—1,255 people from all over the world with different backgrounds, goals, and viewpoints in this building at this time in the great city of San Diego. So I ask the question, “Why do we come to this meeting?”

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I propose the hypothesis that we come to this meeting and spend these days together in order to connect. Connection is the essential activity for our humanity as individuals and as an organization under the big house of surgery. This morning, I am going to spend some time discussing the science of connection, talk about how the SUS is connected to its past, and end with some discussion about how our connections might influence the future for our organization and its mission.

If you think that connection is not where it is for us—let me give you some facts that demonstrate how we value connection. Currently it is estimated that 7.1 billion mobile devices are currently in use in the world—this is larger than the entire world population. By 2017 there may be as many as 10 billion devices—this will be 1.4 devices for every man, woman, and child. When the Vatican announced the name of the new pope last year, twitter experienced a spike in tweets to 130,000 per second.

Not convinced that connection is important to us? Of all of the influences in our lives, one dominant force is the Internet, and the site that dominates the internet is Facebook. Some have equated Facebook to a religion, and the numbers speak for themselves. If Facebook was a religion, it would be the third largest in the world. Citizens in this country spend 84,000,000,000 minutes per month participating in religious activities and 56,000,000,000 minutes on Facebook. Some interesting facts about Facebook that stood out to me: it has 1.2 billion users; every 20 minutes, 1 million links are shared, 1.5 million event invites are sent, 2.7 million messages sent; and over the past New Years Eve, 750 million photos were posted. Is it an accident that the top site in the internet is dedicated entirely to our social lives and allows us to connect with anyone in the world with access to a computer?

Technology has completely revolutionized how we are able to connect with one another. Take, for example, the professional networking site LinkedIn, which gives you the ability to map professional connections and influence in your professional sphere. These social maps created in LinkedIn are color coded to represent different affiliations and groups, like previous employers, college classmates, and in which industries you've worked. You can use the map created for you on LinkedIn to view and measure your professional impact or to create opportunities for others. The map feature in LinkedIn allows you to adjust and control your connections simply by rearranging your connection maps and in turn rearranging your professional world.

So my hypothesis is that we are here at this meeting and in this room to connect with others. We would like to forge new relationships to advance our science and research, to have fellowship with like-minded surgeons, to measure the temperature on our own career, to receive feedback on our progress and dreams, and overall to simply commiserate. With this background, I would like you to take the next 90 seconds to initiate a new connection. Please stand up and introduce yourselves to someone next to you that you do not know and connect.

During the next few minutes, I am going to present some science to you that suggests that we are born hard-wired to connect. It is generally believed that homo sapiens became the most influential species on earth due to our unique ability to engage in abstract thought. But, in fact, our ability to connect and interact socially may be the most important factor that has influenced our dominance. All great ideas and projects require teamwork. The human brain has a neural network solely devoted to allowing us to work together as a team, read minds and anticipate the needs of others, and maintain the relationships required for success.

Humans are the product of millions upon millions of evolutionary changes manifested by mutations that provided survival advantage. These adaptations are selected for because they promote our survival and reproduction. Evolution has also impacted our modern brains to help intensify the bonds we feel toward others and helps us to coordinate and cooperate together. Through time, our brains have become highly selected to connect to each other. It is this ability to connect that distinguishes us and has led to our success as a species. You might assume that the most successful among us are those with the greatest analytical skills, but in fact the most successful may be those with the greatest social intelligence.

Some of our evolutionary success may be explained by brain size. Among animals, humans have relatively large brains, weighing about 1,300 grams—this is similar to the size of a dolphin brain. An elephant brain weighs about 4,200 grams, and some whales have brains as large as 9,000 grams. Even though we might not have the largest brains, humans do have the greatest number of neurons and neuronal connections. And what might be a better measurement of brain function or superiority is the concept of encephalization or the amount by which a brain deviates from what would be expected based on body size. Humans are at the top of the heap when it comes to encephalization.

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