



2024-2025 WSSA Standing Committee Report

Committee Name and Code: Professional Development and Membership Committee (F4)

Committee Chair: Cara McCauley

Committee Members (includes sub-committee members): Pete Eure, Sandeep Rana, Dilpreet Riar, John Hinz, Lovreet Shergill, Steve Li, Aniruddha Maity, **Annu Kumari (new member starting in 2025)**

Board of Directors Liaison: Lauren Lazaro

Committee members rotating off: None

Recommended members to replace those rotating off:

None

Summary of past year's activities including:

- Committee goals
 - Evaluate ways to encourage participation of more graduate students in WSSA meetings.
 - Execute the WSSA Travel Enrichment Experience and Graduate Student Travel Award
 - Encourage more students to apply for both awards
- Committee accomplishments (impact of activities on membership, publications, policy, education, other, etc.)

The first goal for this committee is to select the winners Travel Enrichment Experience (TEE) awards. One student from each society was selected in the 2024 TEE class. We received 35 applications for this award. All of the students put tremendous effort in putting together the application packets and it was very difficult for the committee to select the top students. The committee partners with the GSO to confirm the list of hosts; it is critical that the GSO continue to take on this component of the TEE award process. The top five students for TEE 2024 program were:

| 2024 WSSA TEE Award | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------------|--|
| Name | University | Region | Host |
| Cristiana Rankrape | Southern Illinois University Carbondale | NCWSS | Carroll Moseley, Syngenta |
| Hannah Johnson | Michigan State University | NCWSS | Clete Youmans & Greg Stapleton with BASF, Dyersburg, TN |
| Aleah Butler-Jones | Cornell University | NEWSS | Andrew McKenzie-Gopsill at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in Charlottetown, PE |
| Navdeep Godara | Virginia Tech | SWSS | David Simpson & Dilpreet Riar, Corteva Agriscience in Indianapolis, IN |
| Luisa Baccin | Oregon State University | WSWS | Lauren Lazaro, Blue River Technology |

The team will continue with the program outreach efforts to each regional society, particularly in using the GSO connections to advertise on social media so that we get good response and applicant pool from each regional society.

The second responsibility for the committee is to select the winners for WSSA Graduate Student travel awards. Like TEE program, there was a great response from graduate students regarding this program. The committee received 24 applications for this award, but we received only 2 applications from NEWSS and only 1 from WSWS. This was unexpected and the committee will work with regional GSOs to try to improve on the geographic breadth of applicants. The top six students for 2025 WSSA Graduate Student Travel Award were:

| 2025 WSSA Graduate Student Travel Award Winners | | | |
|--|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Name | University | Region | Degree |
| Preetaman Bajwa | Cornell University | NEWSS | PhD |
| Suzannah Hale | Virginia Tech | SWSS | MS |
| Devanshi Het Desai | Montana State University | WSWS | MS |
| Sara Kirby | Mississippi State University | SWSS | MS |
| Nisith Nishank Purohit | Auburn University | SWSS | PhD |
| Patrice Sison | University of Maine | NEWSS | MS |

At the 2024 WSSA Annual Meeting, we partnered with the GSO and Joe Omielan to provide a free opportunity for a professional headshot. This event was very successful and we received overwhelmingly great feedback. If supported by the BOD, we would like to help facilitate this event every other WSSA meeting.

- WSSA funds requested if any?
 - **To continue to increase student attendance at WSSA, we are requesting funds to expand the number of Graduate Student Travel Award from 6 to 8. This will help get students from underrepresented labs exposed to their first WSSA meeting experience.**
 - **Financial support (\$150) to give a gift card to Joe Omielan if he is willing to do the headshot event again at the 2026 annual meeting.**

- Current state of the committee's projects or activities?
 - Travel Enrichment Experience and Graduate Student Travel award programs are going well. The committee is working on ways to continue increased participation from students, increase awareness of opportunity in NEWSS and WSWS to increase applicants from those regions. We will partner with the regional GSOs to target these audience.
 - Partnering with Lauren Lazaro and Lee VanWychen to develop a contract position to help support Professional Development and Membership activities. One focus for this position will be to organize and facilitate a Mentoring Program for WSSA members. The goal of this Mentoring Program is to help increase both student and professional engagement within the society. The plan is to also have this position organize quarterly webinars to bring the Mentor/Mentee pairs together throughout the year.

- Any new information posted on the WSSA website?
 - The information regarding winners of WSSA Travel Enrichment Experience (TEE) awards was posted on WSSA website.
 - The information regarding the winners of WSSA graduate student travel awards will also be posted on WSSA website.
 - Information regarding applications for 2025 TEE awards will be posted on website in March.

Summary of plans for next year (changes in goals, key initiatives, plan of action, etc.):

The WSSA Professional Development and Membership Committee met on 02/14/25 for our committee meeting held virtually on Teams. Pete Eure, Steve Li, John Hinz, Annu Kumari, Aniruddha Maity, and Cara McCauley were in attendance. Sandeep Rana, Dilpreet Riar, Lauren Lazaro, and Lovreet Shergill were absent. We reviewed our past decision on how to best utilize the two awards and we as a committee are satisfied with the updates made in 2024 outlined below, plus some additional updates.

1. TEE award: the award should be given **primarily on merit** with the goal of selecting a student from each region. The selection process will include dividing the applicants first by region with the goal of identifying the top student from each region using merit-based criteria. We will not account for student need or degree type. We will streamline application by no longer requiring transcripts and only asking for current GPA. Transcript information makes the application very long and transcripts from different universities are difficult to discern. The committee agreed that a positive reference letter from their advisor outweighs transcript information.

2. Grad Travel Award: the award should be given **primarily on financial need and diverse research not typically represented at WSSA**. The selection process will be focused on the goal of identifying the students with the greatest need (with a representative spread of award winners by degree type based on applicant pool). This is consistent with wording in the existing application ("These awards are provided by WSSA to graduate students to encourage their involvement in the society's annual meeting early in their degree programs, and to broaden the attendance of graduate students from nontraditional weed science research programs"). We will continue to streamline the application by not requiring transcripts and limiting application to 2 pages.

Future Ideas:

- Work with contactor to facilitate Mentoring Program and Quarterly webinars
- Work with Joe Omielan to do headshot event at 2026 annual meeting

Recommendations for Board or Membership action:

1. Support the execution of Professional Headshots at the 2026 WSSA Meeting. This will be the second time trying this offering for members. We will need to work closely with Eric Gustafson, Joe Omielan, and GSO (and perhaps the contract position could help as well). It went well in 2024 and I hope we can continue to organize this offering for WSSA attendees in future.
2. Consider increasing number of Graduate Student Travel awards from 6 to 8 to continue to increase student attendance and participation in the meeting.
3. Support contract position and assist with posting, hiring, onboarding, etc. It is preferred for this contact position to report to someone on the BOD, but work closely with PDM committee chair and committee.