Science Societies

Meet your new working groups: The first Grassroots Awards

By Aaron Lee M. Daigh

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Born from member proposals and backed by Society support, four new SSSA Grassroots Working Groups are ready to make an impact. Their efforts span classrooms, campuses, communities, and field sites, all with a shared goal:

building a stronger and more connected future for soil science.

I am proud to announce your new SSSA Grassroots Working Groups today! We had eight teams submit proposals in July, the SSSA Board of Directors reviewed and ranked them in August, and four are moving forward this fall. They came from graduate students and from members with decades in this Society, from universities, federal agencies, national laboratories, and industry. As noted in my May column, each of the four new working groups will receive staff coordination, communications support, meeting platforms, and assistance in pursuing external funding. So, without further ado, here are our new working groups:

Teacher Trainings for K–12 Classrooms

Briana Wyatt at Texas A&M University is leading a working group to restart our K–12 teacher trainings, joined by Missy Holzer, who chairs the SSSA K–12 Outreach Committee, and Elizabeth Gillispie at Washington State University. The Committee ran these trainings for years and reached more than 100 teachers across the United States and Puerto Rico. Their plan now is one training on the Saturday before CANVAS every year for five years, starting in Portland and continuing through Columbus, Fort Lauderdale, Phoenix, and Minneapolis, with roughly 25 teachers each time. The curriculum already exists in English and Spanish at Soils4Teachers.org, so the work ahead is recruiting teachers and hosting the trainings. They are aiming at urban and Title I districts, where students see the least soil science and, in this Committee's experience, take to it as readily as anyone.

Scenes from a SSSA K–12 teacher education training workshop held in Chicago, IL at DePaul University on Sept. 24, 2022.

Building the CPSS Pipeline

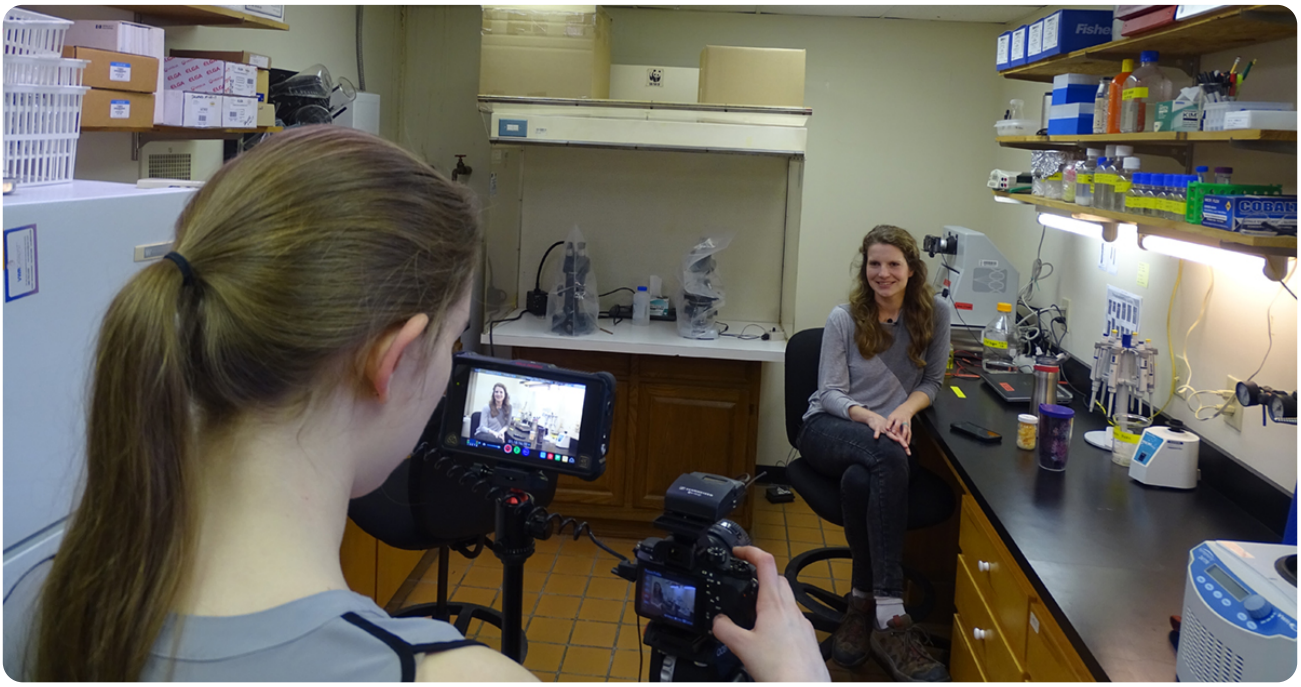
Jacob Berkowitz at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is leading a working group on the pipeline into our Certified Professional Soil Scientist (CPSS) program, with support from the Practicing Professional Soil Scientists Division. Civil engineering has done this for generations. A student meets licensed professional engineers throughout their coursework and arrives at graduation already pointed toward licensing. In soil science, our community has not made it as strong of a tradition and career pathway as our engineering colleagues. This working group will pick two to five university programs to pilot a certification pipeline, recruit faculty champions at each one, align coursework and the CPSS requirements, and use soil judging as the natural entry point. Five institutions is a small start, but the vision is to create a process and pipeline that another 50 more can lean on.

Photo by Joe Dickie. Courtesy of Flickr/USDA-NRCS North Dakota. CC BY-SA 2.0.

The Soil Story Project

Elizabeth Gillispie is also leading a working group to build a lasting record of who does this work and why it matters, joined by Gaurav Jha at Kansas State University, Briana Wyatt again, and Jamie Nix at headquarters. The Soil Story Project will produce short videos and photo essays on a regular schedule, grouped by theme, featuring researchers, farmers, extension professionals, conservation practitioners, and high school students whose work depends on healthy soils, and they will partner with our student groups, so that the people featured span career stages, institutions, disciplines, and communities. Each piece will serve as a classroom resource on its own, and together, they will build an archive that teachers, reporters, and prospective students can search. The group will also run storytelling workshops for members and an annual competition at CANVAS recognizing excellence in video, photography,

writing, and multimedia. Science communication is a skill nearly all of us are expected to have, but very few of us were trained in. So, this working group treats their work as something we can teach and reward rather than something a person either has or does not.



The Soil Story Project aims to document the people behind soil research, education, conservation, and communication. This photo is from a video shoot of breeder, researcher, and CCA Christine Bradish.

A Centennial Retrospective and Field Tour, Soil 2027

Maxine Levin, who chairs the Council on the History, Sociology, and Philosophy of Soil Science, is leading a working group to mark the centennial of the First International Congress of Soil Science, joined by Alfred Hartemink, Eric Brevik, Anna Paltseva, Jaclyn Fiola, Adam Devlin, and Ben Newcomb, with support from seven divisions and their chairs. That first Congress met in Washington, D.C. from June 13 to 22 in 1927, drew more than 300 delegates from 30 nations, and then took the delegates on a 30-day transcontinental field tour, which *CSA News* covered this past April. The plan for 2027 is a two-day retrospective conference in the D.C. area in June, followed by a cross-country tour built for students and early-career members, with senior scientists and vendors running demonstrations of remote-sensing equipment, XRF, noninvasive sensors, and drones out in the field. They will record demonstrations along the way and build a streaming library for programs where students get less exposure to soil science in the field. In July, I wrote about the distance opening up between our discipline and the very item we study. This working group puts students back on the 1927 route with a trowel in their hands!

Field notes in Georgia during transcontinental soils tour of the First International Congress of Soil Science, June 1927.

What our members wrote about

Our members want to tell other people's stories, they want to celebrate and share their passion, and they want to continue lifting up and building our community! The

story project is built around farmers, extension professionals, conservation practitioners, and high school students. The centennial group wants to document what the delegates of 1927 did and then put a new set of students on that same route. The K-12 teacher trainings and the CPSS pipeline are to train the trainers for the excitement and value this discipline brings to the world and to build a new generation of inspired, confident, and capable individuals to thrive in our community.

In the end, we could not take on four of the proposals this cycle, and I will purposefully let their ideas stay theirs since they are the ones who wrote them. However, I want to note that we are connecting each of those members with our existing committees and headquarters departments that already work closest to what they proposed. This way, their visions will still impact our operations, and they will help steer our efforts forward.

I want to thank the board for the enthusiasm they brought to reading and ranking all the proposals, and our headquarters staff for the work ahead in helping these working groups turn their vision into something real. For next month, we will take dive into the exciting research our community has been publishing in our journals so far this year as we take our own tour through my President's Research Picks and the questions our members are pursuing across our journals.

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