

## Committee Reports, Spring 2025 (September 2024 – April 2025)

**Committee:** Convention Committee

**Committee Chair:** Leigh Dillard, Shannin Schroeder, Kevin Stemmler

**Committee Members:** Nicole Adams, Matt Hlinak, Namon Kent, Autumn Koors-Foltz, Carmen Lok, Emad Mirmotahari (non-board affiliate), Katie Mudd, Michaelann Nelson, Donna Newsome, Tiffany Nolde, Lucy Perry, William Saccavino, Bradley Sides

### **Summary of Committee Activities:**

Shortly after the Fall Board meeting (10/1), the co-chairs participated in a Society Webinar discussing the details of the Pittsburgh Convention.

The co-chairs have continued to meet weekly among themselves since spring of 2024 in a “Convention Reporting Meeting” and added the CO staff to meetings in the fall. We’ve consulted with the committee on various decisions through either email or short Zoom meetings (22 November, 12 February) and have held numerous impromptu meetings related to the Convention with Board members, the CO, and external parties. We created a comprehensive schedule, continued to pin down speakers, expanded on the ideas of a LitFest, and made decisions about registration and events.

Convention paper submissions, roundtable proposals, and Research in the Round (RitR) topics were due on 30 October. We received 719 submissions—664 papers, 28 roundtables, and 12 Research in the Round first round proposals. After review, we accepted 527 papers (79%), 23 roundtables, and 8 RitR topics, giving an additional 2 the option to Revise and Resubmit. A second round of submissions for RitR, due 6 January, added 10 more acceptances for a total of 18.

From a broad perspective, the co-chairs have tried to embrace the “One of Ours” Convention theme not just as an inclusive label for our current members traveling to Convention but also as a way to identify those who are part of our expansive alumni network, one that includes past students as well as faculty/advisors. Look for the “One of Ours” label on speaker tags and books by alumni sold in the vendor space.

### *2025 Event Planning*

We’ve added a few new features to this year’s program: LitFest, expanded professional development sessions targeting advisors and alumni, and a vendor space beyond a partnership with a local bookstore or GMerch space. The two one-hour **LitFest** sessions (Friday, Saturday) feature a blend of local speakers and four who are “One of Ours”—Kassia Krone, Cameron Barnett, Billie Tadros, and E. Kerr—presenting on topics in their areas of speciality. These sessions are also an opportunity to integrate more speakers into the program, even in smaller sessions than the keynotes, or to interact with speakers in a second (more personal) space. We’ve also expanded the series of **Professional Development Sessions** beyond those presented in the past, tailored not just to students and Advisors but also to alumni members. These events celebrate the accomplishments of the Honor Societies, representing SKD, NEHS, and Sigma Tau Delta. We have four options on Thursday 9:30-10:45 a.m. and five on Thursday 4:45-6:00 p.m., opposite Research in the Round. These sessions give us an opportunity to bring in guests from the Pittsburgh community to speak to Convention attendees but are also an opportunity for us to highlight the good work our alumni are doing across various fields of interest. The dedicated **vendor space** will, in some ways, have a familiar look in that it will feature a local, independent bookstore—White Whale Bookstore—in the center of the room. City Books and City of Asylum Bookstore, two more indies from Pittsburgh, will also have tables in the space (complementing the offerings by White Whale), along with The Willa Cather

Foundation, MLA, and others. As usual, GMerch will have a separate space for official Society gear, regalia, and Convention t-shirts.

**Research in the Round (RitR)** continues to develop with the help of Student Leadership mentoring. We continue to support the two rounds of submission, allowing those whose papers were not accepted—or those who were perhaps not inducted until late fall—a chance to participate in the Convention. Given the room size, we have found 18 to be a good target number for Table Hosts. We added two new external judges for the first round of RitR submissions, which was a positive experience. Six SLs volunteered for the mentoring process: Matthew Chinique, Arita Elderkin, Sophia Jockell, Isaiah Russell, Kaylee Jo Stocks, and Kelly Taylor; and they spent February and early March working with their selected Table Hosts to assist them with revising/refining their questions and creating a single-page visual document (most designed in Canva) to represent their topic. Access these visuals [here](#).

Duquesne University is serving as a local host chapter for the Convention and has, in particular, provided a strong contingent of volunteers for the registration table. In return for at least 12 shifts worked at the registration table (or other locations at Convention), the co-chairs agreed to comp the registration for 6 host-chapter volunteers. This offer is limited to the host chapter.

**The Convention Travel Reimbursement**—approved by the board in fall of 2024 and initially budgeted for 5 recipients of up to \$1500—has been a promising first step for offering travel support to students. Through coordination with the CO, we’ve arranged to support five randomly selected students as follows:

name	travel	hotel	per diem	registration	personal total	notes
Chio, McKagen		\$728.00	\$260.00	\$120.00	\$1,108.00	travel paid by chapter
Klein, Ophelia	\$715.37	\$546.00	\$118.63	\$120.00	\$1,500.00	hotel Wednesday–Saturday
Knutson, John	\$620.00	\$728.00	\$152.00		\$1,500.00	registration paid by chapter
Redling, Renae	\$298.00	\$728.00	\$260.00	\$120.00	\$1,406.00	
Whitted, Trey	\$777.37	\$728.00		\$120.00	\$1,625.37	
allowances		182/night	80/day of event	\$120.00		Less \$15 R breakfast; less \$25 F/lunch
<b>totals</b>	\$777.37	\$728.00	\$0.00	\$120.00	\$7,139.37	
<b>budget</b>					<b>\$7,500.00</b>	
over/under					\$360.63	

Part of the remaining \$360 will be distributed in three \$100 gift cards at the Thursday morning student workshop. See “recommendations” below for additional information about carrying this travel support forward.

Through the work of Kevin and Chris Lockwood, we’ve organized multiple partnerships to assist with funding speakers and awards at the 2025 Convention. We were able to obtain \$30,000+ in donations and sponsorships for this year’s event, which assists with Convention expenses.

- **Lambda Literary:** Lambda is donating several boxes of books from last year's Lammy Awards, partly for service projects and also to distribute to the Stemmler/Dennis LGBT& Award winners. In addition to receiving books and their checks, each winner will also receive an application for the Lambda Literary Emerging Writers Retreat. One of the LGBT& winners will be selected to attend the retreat. Donations from our members judging for this year’s Lammy Awards will help with expenses for LGBT& Awards and speakers. As an on-going partnership, we will need to find ways to include LGBT& speakers, programming, and awards in our annual conventions.
- **LULAC:** Thanks to this partnership, we are able to offer our first award to honor Hispanic/Latino/Latina work. We are also promoting LULAC Academy, part of their annual

Convention. LULAC is also co-sponsoring Natalie Diaz and Benjamin Alire Saenz's presentations. Moving forward with the partnership, we will be obligated to include LULAC sponsored programs, awards, and/or speakers in our annual conventions.

- **Willa Cather Foundation:** We established an additional award for work in Cather studies. Two representatives from the Cather Foundation will be attending the Convention and participating in panels and sessions. As several Society members having ties to the Foundation, we are truly celebrating "One of Ours." Future conventions need to advertise for Cather Award submissions, especially considering they are willing to publish our winning student's work in their prestigious journal.

### *2026 Event Planning*

In preparation for the 2026 Convention in New Orleans, we recruited and have been working with Michaelann Nelson to assist in her chairing efforts for that event. Southwestern Regent Sonia Mae Brown and Chloe Evans (an Advisor from Loyola University) will serve as co-chairs. Michaelann will undoubtedly have more updates to share with us about her planning at the Board meeting. The 2025 co-chairs continue their work in the background on a convention chair handbook, parts of which they have already shared with Michaelann, to be of service as she works on New Orleans details.

The committee also initiated action for the Executive Committee to induct Matt Hlinak and Chris Lockwood as members of the Society. This designation, which Board President Lexey Bartlett coordinated through the NIU chapter, will help Matt and Chris, who both hold degrees in English, represent the Society moving forward, not just in Convention-related negotiations but also in fostering new partnerships.

### **Recommendations or Resolutions:**

*We did not vote on this item at the Fall Board Meeting even though it appeared in our report...our error!*

Recognizing that our system for identifying past speakers as Honorary Members had lapsed in recent years, the Convention Committee recommends the Society extend honorary memberships to the following past Convention speakers (listed alphabetically since that's how they will be integrated into the existing list):

- |                                |                              |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ● Karen Auvinen (2021)         | ● Emily Pérez (2023)         |
| ● Nicky Beer (2023)            | ● Brenda Peynado (2023)      |
| ● Richard Blanco (2022)        | ● Carl Phillips (2024)       |
| ● Michael Branch (2021)        | ● Gary Soto (2015)           |
| ● Winifred Brown-Glaude (2023) | ● Leslie Marmon Silko (2015) |
| ● Wayne Miller (2023)          | ● Nic Stone (2022)           |
| ● Simon J. Ortiz (2015)        | ● Maryfrances Wagner (2024)  |

The Convention Committee also recommends that

- a) the list return to the Society's digital publications and appear on the website; and
- b) this task becomes one of the final responsibilities of the Convention Committee each year, allowing the organizers of convention to recommend recipients for this honor before their term has ended in the summer.

In light of the information above, **the Convention Committee moves to add the authors listed above to the Society's Honorary Member list.**

Additionally, we recommend seeking ways to expand the pilot version of the Convention Travel Reimbursement offering by pairing with sponsors willing to support this type of funding. In terms of logistics, we would advise future chairs to coordinate with the CO to generate a simple survey to request

information from each traveller and to set deadlines for flight bookings to save money. Those accepting this reimbursement should expect to arrive on the first day of Convention and stay through the Awards Ceremony.

Finally, we recommend creating a standard submission deadline in the final week of October, regardless of the date of Convention.

**Special Concerns:**

As has been an issue for more than a decade, the technologies we're using for the Convention are concerning. The co-chairs recommend a long-term re-evaluation of the applications used for this event (currently ExOrdo), with careful research into the platforms used by other large-scale humanities conventions and events—MLA, AWP, DragonCon, etc.—as potential options. In particular, the 2025 co-chairs are discouraged at the number of work-arounds required for (or inability to standardize) things like italicizing titles of books and labeling the separate roles of chair and moderator accurately. Likewise, the evaluation system on ExOrdo—requiring judges to download submissions to their own computer or device—is not ideal, particularly for those evaluators whose systems are throttled by vigorous university guidelines about external downloads. Similarly, we suggest that we look for a system that allows for conditional logic at the front end to streamline the submission process. That the current system is not ADA compliant is also an issue.

We suggest embedding more information in the registration form next year to capture data in a first contact rather than as a follow-up. This would include but is not limited to the following: demographic data, food preferences/allergies, chapter share/display/merchandise, et al. The external t-shirt ordering system implemented in 2025 also reduced the number of shirts sold dramatically, with even seasoned convention attendees missing the fine print for deadlines.