

Final report of the 2023 Presidential Task force on the Future of the SCS Annual Meeting

December 15, 2023

Introduction

Creation and purpose of this Task Force

During the summer of 2022, SCS President Matthew Santirocco discussed the nature and composition of a Task Force on the Future of the SCS Annual Meeting (TF), which would include members of the Board of Directors and a number of SCS members at large. In a meeting of the Board on November 12, 2022, he led a general discussion of these issues with a view to developing a charge for such a TF and a rough timetable for its work. According to this timetable, the TF would be appointed and charged, and its existence announced to the SCS membership, by President Santirocco in the final weeks of his term in December 2022. The TF would conduct its business entirely within calendar year 2023 during the term of President Matthew Roller, to whom it would present a final report in time for distribution to the Board at the end of his term; and the Board would follow up on the recommendations of the TF under 2024 President Alison Keith and her successors. In terms of the charge, the Board also discussed at its meeting on Nov. 12, 2022 the need for the TF to consider a very large number of factors, including: the why, how, where, and when of the meeting; the Society's three strategic principles of Advocacy, Growth, and Inclusion, as adopted by the SCS Board in January 2019; the imperative of Sustainability, as articulated by President Matthew Santirocco throughout his presidency; and finally the ideals of Equity, Access, and Justice, as emerged from the Board's discussion of the TF's mission. There was also a consensus that the TF should consult broadly with those involved in SCS governance and its general membership, and that it should allow itself to contemplate ideal, "blue sky" scenarios before confronting logistical realities, which would ultimately be part of its work in developing viable ideas for the future. Finally, the TF was urged not to design a new template for the Annual Meeting, but to articulate a number of options for the Board to evaluate and act upon.

Consultation between President Santirocco and various Board members, as well as with possible TF members, continued during the following weeks. At the next Board meeting on December 29, 2022, President Santirocco thanked Board members for their advice and informed them that his Presidential Address would include an announcement that the TF would be composed of members from a variety of institution types and geographical regions, and that it would begin work soon after the conclusion of the 2023 Annual Meeting.¹ On January 8, 2023, the final day

¹ The original members of the TF were: Denise Demetriou (UC San Diego), Joseph Farrell (Penn), Yurie Hong (Gustavus Adolphus), Brooke McArdle (NYU), Sarah Nooter (Chicago), Victoria Pagán (Florida), Dan-el Padilla Peralta (Princeton), Chiara Sulprizio (Vanderbilt); ex officio Helen Cullyer (Executive Director, SCS), Matthew Roller (President Elect/President, SCS), Matthew Santirocco (President/Immediate Past President, SCS). In addition, incoming President Elect Alison Keith agreed to join the TF upon the completion of her research leave at the end of

of that meeting, incoming President Roller thanked Immediate Past President Santirocco for his service, including the charging and convening of the Annual Meeting Task Force.

How the TF approached its work

After the 2023 Annual Meeting ended and the new teaching term was underway, the TF held its initial, organizational meeting on February 3, 2023 with a view to meeting once each month thereafter until it had completed its work. To facilitate progress between these monthly meetings, the TF made extensive use of Google Drive to share documents both for reference and for collaborative production.

The period from the beginning of February through the end of June was devoted to gathering data and opinion regarding the Annual Meeting, informing TF members about some of the financial and operational realities involved, and developing a set of questions and inferences that would enable productive discussions leading to useful recommendations. The February meeting itself was largely devoted to setting this process in motion. Over the following three months the TF made rapid progress in developing an analytical framework to inform its work (March), using this framework to identify the most important areas of focus (April), and moving from the identification of issues to developing both general and specific ways of addressing them. Building on these results, the TF devoted part of its June meeting to creating a plan for drafting its report to the Board. It also discussed ways of continuing throughout the year to obtain input from as wide a spectrum of the SCS membership as possible.

Consultation with stakeholders, whether by soliciting responses to a [questionnaire](#) or holding Zoom meetings with representatives of SCS divisions and committees or affiliated groups, as well as by inviting input from any individual member who wished to make their views heard, began immediately after the February meeting and continued even as this report was being written. As a result, the TF continually revised assumptions and questions on the basis of incoming data, feedback, and discussion. For example, in the wake of certain technical difficulties related to the hybrid nature of the New Orleans meeting, the TF began its work in accordance with a general skepticism about the hybrid modality expressed by most Board members in the final January meeting. By midsummer, however, vigorous, principled pushback against this point of view led the TF to consider its position anew. The recommendations that we make later in this report are very different from what they would have been if we had not continued to pay attention to public discussions, whether addressed specifically to the TF or more generally to the SCS leadership as a whole. There is no need to enumerate all the ways in which our recommendations developed, but it is worth articulating a general inference from our experience: *The Annual Meeting should not be regarded as a ritual, but as a series of events that are related organically both to one another and also to the ever-changing environment in which*

AY 2023. Over the course of the year, Yurie Hong, Brooke McArdle, and Sarah Nooter had to step down and were replaced by Elizabeth Manwell (Kalamazoo College) and Alicia Matz (Boston University).

they occur. The more the TF considered the nature of the Annual Meeting, the more we realized that trying to “fix it” would be pointless. In fact, fixity may well be the main thing that ails it. Accordingly, this report will recommend a much more flexible approach to the Annual Meeting than SCS has been used to in the past. This approach will in turn require more imagination, flexibility, and attentiveness from the Board than it has been used to in the past.

To return to the TF’s order of business throughout the year, July’s meeting involved not a single session of the entire TF, as usual, but two small breakout sessions, which served to facilitate in-depth discussion of the following pair of questions, with specific reference to our own analysis and to the input we received from our diverse stakeholders:

What are the three most important things SCS can do for its members that require some form of in-person annual meeting? And what are the three most important things SCS can do for its members that do not require an in-person annual meeting, or any meeting whatsoever?

What is the single biggest improvement that SCS could make in the annual meeting? And what is the single biggest improvement SCS could make in member services that would be worth diverting resources currently devoted to the annual meeting?

After digesting the results of the July break-out sessions, including recent input from stakeholders, the entire TF settled on four major rubrics to address in this report, namely (1) Justice, (2) the Purpose of the Annual Meeting, and (3) the Formal and (4) Financial aspects of the Annual Meeting. Members volunteered to take part in writing initial treatments of each rubric for discussion and revision by the entire TF. This process of revision took place largely on Google Drive between meetings, but it was punctuated by focused working sessions in September, October, November, and December. The initial drafting of more general sections of the report (1–4, in keeping with the four rubrics listed above) were the responsibility of different TF members, but the revision of the entire report was carried out by the whole group.

1. Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

The TF remained attentive to the concerns expressed by members of the SCS Board and by many stakeholders about Justice. In its discussions, the TF quickly came to understand this concern according to a “triple bottom line” approach with three aspects: Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice. The three aspects are intimately connected, and attention to one necessarily impacts the others.

Access to the meeting is fundamentally a matter of Social Justice. When meetings are held in locations where local or state politics are not equally welcoming to all gender identities and expressions or to other aspects of identity, then members may not feel safe to attend or may elect not to attend in solidarity with members who feel threatened or unwelcome. In the wake of the Supreme Court Dobbs decision, meetings may be held in states that restrict women’s access to

necessary health care procedures in the case of an emergency. These points illustrate how Social Justice is connected to issues of health.

Access to the Annual Meeting for members of differing health status is a matter of Justice more generally. This is certainly true of members who have specific disabilities or other health issues that make it physically impossible to attend any in-person meeting, or effectively so. Even more generally, the traditional date of the Annual Meeting falls when the likelihood of contracting seasonal flus and other respiratory ailments is greatest. In the past this risk was essentially discounted, but since the arrival of the COVID pandemic it has been clear that holding the Annual Meeting in early January in a large convention hotel puts all of our members at increased risk. In these ways, the traditional date and format of the annual meeting are not conducive to Social Justice.

For some members with disabilities, access may be limited primarily because it costs them more to travel and find suitable accommodations away from home. This illustrates the relationship between issues of health and Economic Justice. But access can also be limited by individual financial constraints alone. An increasing number of members are unable to afford the costs of travel and lodging to attend the Annual Meeting.² Even though SCS attempts to provide funds to offset those costs, the need is greater than the SCS budget can meet. Under current SCS financial policy, both in general and with respect to the Annual Meeting in particular, there will always be significant numbers of members for whom the meeting is cost-prohibitive.

The economic impact of climate change has been felt both by members and by SCS as a whole. Climate events have nearly ruined two recent annual meetings, and in fact did ruin them for significant numbers of would-be attendees. As disruptive climate events become more frequent at all times of year, they will continue to threaten the success of any in-person meeting. Furthermore, climate issues are not restricted to “acts of God” or to Economic Justice. They are at the heart of Environmental Justice, as well. Many members, even if they can afford the cost involved, already find that traveling to meetings puts too high a tax on the environment.

To repeat, these are not matters of logistics; they are matters of Social, Economic, and Environmental justice. Attending to them not as a number of independent, inconvenient obligations or accommodations, but as aspects of access that can be evaluated in terms of Justice will affect the character of the meeting in a positive way. To acquiesce in excluding members of diverse gender identities and expressions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, health or ability status, or economic circumstances as unfortunate but unavoidable is to narrow the meeting’s capacity to represent our membership and its perspective on the society in which we live and work. Increasing Access to the meeting for all our members will, to put it simply, make any meeting, whatever form it takes, a better one.

² For a breakdown of typical costs of attendance, see section 4, p. 13.

For all these reasons, virtual meetings or meetings with a comprehensive hybrid option are necessary in order to provide access to all members and to meet the requirements of Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice. Taking a “triple bottom line” approach can also help us think through the location and the timing of in-person meetings. We will look at the same issues from a more traditional financial perspective later in this report, but we close this section with the following observation: To advocate for any kind of meeting on the basis of any one issue (Social, Economic, or Environmental) is to miss the potential to harness the voices of members with *common*, not *competing* concerns. Sound decisions for one aspect of Justice can be sound decisions more broadly.

2. Purpose of the Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting landing page of the SCS website reads as follows:

Every winter, the Society for Classical Studies holds a joint meeting with the Archaeological Institute of America. In addition to the presentation of individual papers and panels, features of the annual meeting include the Placement Service, for institutions advertising positions and candidates seeking them; an exhibit hall for browsing and purchasing the latest books from a variety of publishers; roundtable discussion sessions; dramatic performances by the Committee on Ancient and Modern Performance; meetings and receptions of affiliated groups; and much more.

This is not a statement of purpose, but a laundry list of activities. Even as such it has become obsolete in view of the prominence it gives to (e.g.) the Placement Service.³ Focusing on what has traditionally happened at the Annual Meeting is an obstacle to making changes that are needed and overdue. Refocusing attention to the goals and purposes of the Annual Meeting is necessary if the meeting is to reflect and meet the SCS’s current needs and priorities.

To understand what priorities the Annual Meeting currently reflects, the TF analyzed the most recent meeting in January 2023 by tagging each individual event on the program according to its type (meeting, exhibition, reception, etc.), purpose (discussion, entertainment, governance, etc.) format (hybrid, in-person, or virtual), and sponsor (SCS, affiliated group, etc.). A finding that drove a good deal of TF discussion is illustrated by the following chart, which summarizes the analysis of events according to purpose:

³ For an illuminating point of comparison, see the Annual Meeting landing page of the American Historical Association (<https://www.historians.org/annual-meeting>).

1. Event Purpose (11)	#	%	hours	%
Papers	82	54%	206	54%
Governance	38	25%	63	16%
Revenue	2	1%	50	13%
Socializing	15	10%	23	6%
Member Services	5	3%	21	5%
Discussion	4	3%	7	2%
Entertainment	3	2%	4	1%
Cultural	1	1%	3	1%
Information	1	1%	3	1%
Awards	1	1%	2	1%
Career Development	1	1%	2	1%
Total	153	100%	383	100%

The most striking thing about this chart is that Career Development, in terms of hours devoted to it, comes in dead last among the eleven purposes that the TF tracked. Even if one admits that other activities such as giving a paper or even attending a reception have their roles to play in Career Development, those are certainly not their sole or even primary purposes. Moreover, with the effective disappearance of interviewing and other career-oriented activities formerly sponsored by the Placement Service — which were historically SCS’s main contribution to Career Development, and a very important one — there is now almost nothing on the program devoted solely or primarily to this purpose. But at this juncture, is there any higher purpose that the Society and its Annual Meeting can serve than to promote the careers of its members, and particularly of those in the earliest stages of their careers.

On the basis of its own analysis, then, and of its consultations with various SCS divisions and committees, affiliated groups, and individual colleagues, the TF believes that the Annual Meeting should be specifically and intentionally reimagined in order to serve the following purposes above all: Career Development and Mentoring; Intellectual Exchange; and Building Communities. What follows is a brief comment on each of these purposes.

Career Development and Mentoring

In TF discussions, Career Development was very often linked to Mentoring, and so in this report we treat both purposes as closely related. As is documented above, the number of hours currently devoted specifically to them at the SCS Annual Meeting is vanishingly small. The TF strongly recommends that the SCS highlight Career Development and Mentoring as the main purposes of the Annual Meeting and call attention to existing efforts in this area. In addition, SCS should offer more Career Development and Mentoring opportunities as a way of supporting its members

and bolstering its commitment to Advocacy, Growth, and Inclusion. Some ideas to consider that capitalize on the existing format of the Annual Meeting to increase the number of opportunities for Career Development and Mentoring are:

- Subsidies to facilitate on-site interactions among presiders and presenters on paper panels.
- Speed-mentoring sessions, perhaps field-specific, either between individual mentors and mentees, or as drop-in sessions.
- Dedicated booths at the Exhibit Hall, where MA and PhD granting institutions can advertise their activities and programs and where para-academic and non-academic entities can recruit employees. Both of these types of exhibitors (and others) can help in the professionalization of undergraduate and graduate students and other scholars.
- An SCS-wide mentorship program where individual mentees are paired with mentors for a year, with the expectation that the pair will meet several times during that year.

Intellectual Exchange

This purpose is currently served in different ways by paper panels, seminars, workshops, round-tables, awards, social interactions, and the book exhibit. Of these activities, paper panels are by far the dominant form on the program listing. It remains important that first-time attendees, graduate students, and scholars who have not yet developed an extensive professional network (see point 3 below) have the chance to benefit from an open call for papers. At the same time, a menu of different offerings with intellectual content will come closer to fulfilling the Society's missions of Growth and Inclusion. To this point, several members of the TF and other stakeholders offered the opinion that reading papers is not the most effective way of engaging an audience, and they expressed a preference for pre-circulating papers so as to devote the majority of meeting time to broadly participatory discussion. Finally, developing new ways for more people to participate officially in the program should bolster overall attendance and offer a livelier experience for all concerned.

Building Communities

All the constituencies who took up our call to offer comments on the Annual Meeting, as well as all the members of the TF, see the Annual Meeting as an opportunity to create and build communities of different sorts. Creating the space, both physically and metaphorically, for members to come together as a community defined by SCS as a whole, some part of it, any of the affiliated groups, or other groupings would entail recruiting new members, and especially those in the earliest stages of their careers, who themselves need support in becoming parts of new communities.

To achieve these purposes, SCS should also explore the various incentives it already provides or could provide for its members to attend the Annual Meeting and indeed to remain members of the Society. In accordance with the "triple bottom line" approach endorsed above, these include

ensuring Equity, Access, and Inclusion for its members (e.g., more varied locations for holding in-person meetings; the necessity of offering hybrid meetings; more child care; etc.); support for individual members to attend (stipends); and reminders of what services the SCS offers for its members (research, teaching, and service awards; Education Committee; Professional Matters; Publications; etc.). Finally, identifying which groups of members tend to either let their membership lapse or do not attend the Annual Meeting might help refine incentives to attend the meeting or at least to keep memberships current. A cursory look suggests that some of these members are: mid-career scholars; members who experience discrimination and harassment; members without research funds; members located in states in which the SCS/AIA chooses to avoid holding its meetings; members whose paper proposals have not found favor with the Program Committee.

3. Form of the Annual Meeting

Any consideration of how best to convene an Annual Meeting must take into account what form the meeting might best take. By “form” we might attend to the following considerations:

Technological Format

What kind of technological infrastructure is needed and what are the attendant costs?

- Fully virtual meetings are in many ways the easiest, most accessible, most economical option, but they lack important elements that an in-person meeting affords;
- In-person meetings allow for serendipitous encounters, making, renewing, and fostering personal connections and are more amenable to performances, local events, etc.; but they are less accessible;⁴
- Hybrid meetings preserve and combine many (though not all) benefits of virtual and in-person meetings, but costs and tech requirements are substantial when they are done well.

Many societies appear to be embracing parallel tracks, where organizers select whether an event will be virtual, in-person, or hybrid (e.g., the [International Congress on Medieval Studies](#)).

Kinds of Sessions

Currently the majority of sessions involve the reading of academic papers. Consideration should be given to two questions: (1) Do the sessions work toward fulfilling the main purposes of the Annual Meeting (see section 2 above), and (2) What kind of sessions are most appropriate for and will have the greatest impact given a choice of technological formats (e.g., might all business meetings be better held virtually, so that in-person time can be reserved for events that work better face-to-face)?

⁴ See above, section 1, p. 5.

The kinds of sessions currently found at the Annual Meeting include: paper sessions; the plenary session (awards and presidential address); workshops; panel discussions; roundtable discussions; lightning talks; seminars; business meetings of SCS committees and affiliated groups; receptions; and the exhibit Hall. Both the particular kinds of session on offer and the representation of each type on the program remain quite stable from year to year, apparently defining the universe of possibilities available.

There are, of course, other kinds of events that might be held at the Annual Meeting. Some of these include Career Development and Mentoring events; maker spaces; hands-on tech sessions; how-to sessions; and pre-meeting events of various sorts. This is hardly a complete list of the possibilities. In addition, it would be possible to offer more of some popular kinds of event than we do now, such as performances, seminars, workshops, and site-specific events. It would even be possible to program more than one plenary session, with one devoted to presidential addresses and awards, but others devoted to issues of timely interest in the discipline or in society. It is obvious, of course, that we cannot simply expand the program ad infinitum. To offer a more varied program would almost certainly entail taking a more dynamic approach to programming in which the balance between different kinds of sessions would vary from meeting to meeting in response to the interest of attendees (and potential attendees) and to the needs of the moment. We acknowledge that this dynamic approach would require not only more attention from the Board than it typically pays to programming, but would probably entail a rethinking of the remit and perhaps the structure of the Program Division. This is an issue that cannot be dealt with comprehensively in this report.

Time of Year

When the timing of the Annual Meeting was last studied, it was determined that the first week of January still served the membership best. Since that time the planet has begun to feel the effects of climate change more acutely. In the past decade, meetings have been disrupted both by climatic events and by resurgences of COVID-19 (exacerbated by the time of year).⁵ Since climate events are likely to become more frequent, might there be other times of year when we could anticipate traveling with fewer disruptions (e.g., APSA meets in late August or early September; AAR-SBL meets the weekend before American Thanksgiving)? Any change in time of year would necessitate close communication with our colleagues at regional (e.g., CAMWS, CAAS, CANE, etc.), international (e.g., CAC), and other (e.g., ACL) societies, whose annual meetings fall outside of the winter, and at times that might be more attractive to the SCS. Rescheduling the meeting might also be an obstacle to holding a joint Annual Meeting with AIA. (Further to this last point, see paragraph (e) below.)

Venue

⁵ See above, section 1, p. 3.

The SCS values holding the Annual Meeting in a variety of cities, mainly in the Eastern, Central, and Western US and occasionally in the Southern US or in Canada, as a way of serving its membership. Given the size of the meeting and the desire to locate meetings in places that afford relatively easy access, options are limited to a fairly small number of cities that have the necessary facilities. The TF has identified venue as an ongoing pressure point in at least four ways:

- We have already addressed the Social Justice issues involved in meeting in states and cities that have passed laws prejudicial to some of our members and to the principles of the Society.⁶ We can expect that this will be a concern for the foreseeable future.
- Doing business with specific hotels or hotel chains may result in conflict with core values of the Society and the Annual Meeting. This is a problem already being faced by similar organizations. For example, at [the most recent meeting of the American Political Science Association](#) a significant portion of the membership did not want to cross the hotel workers' picket line.
- Holding meetings in convention hotels limits the number and variety of venues available to us (such as what cities we might choose to meet in, as discussed above) and dictates costs (e.g., of catering, technology, etc.) that might be ameliorated by moving to a different type of facility.
- Traveling to any large meeting unavoidably entails high carbon costs.

Other professional societies have likewise been interrogating the convention hotel as the default venue for their meetings (see, for example, [this recent report](#)). Some potential alternative models to consider include:

- exploring a different sort of host for the Annual Meeting (e.g., a university)
- employing hub-and-spoke or distributed models, where many smaller conferences would take place simultaneously in regional venues (e.g., the upcoming [North American Victorian Studies Association meeting](#))
- using asynchronous methods of sharing scholarship and building relationships (e.g., paper annotation, recorded presentations).
- sponsoring seminars or multi-disciplinary summits offered throughout the year, whether virtual or hybrid.

The "Joint" Annual Meeting

There are both benefits and constraints involved in meeting annually in conjunction with the AIA. Many members would mourn the loss of the partnership. At the same time, the constraints and compromises involved in running a *joint* Annual Meeting recurred in every session of the

⁶ See section 1 above.

TF. Thinking deeply and intentionally about both aspects of this relationship, both for the organization and its membership, would encourage experimentation. Some examples:

- meeting with AIA every other year, and using off-years to explore other models for the Annual Meeting;
- initiating other partnerships (either including the AIA or not) that might offer additional multi-disciplinary possibilities (e.g., ASOR, SBL, AAR, etc.) and/or greater leverage in negotiating hotel contracts (e.g., MLA, AHA).

4. Finances

In keeping with the Task Force’s endorsement of a “triple bottom line” approach to our work, under this rubric we will pay attention to the Social and Environmental aspects of Annual Meeting finances. We begin, however, with the impact of the Annual Meeting on the SCS balance sheet before we move on to consider its financial impact on individual members as well before finally turning to broader societal and environmental issues.

The impact of the Annual Meeting on SCS finances

As a not-for-profit organization, SCS attempts to balance its budget each year and to avoid a surplus or a deficit of revenues against expenses. In practice, revenues and expenses are seldom balanced exactly, and in recent years deficits have been the norm. Between 2016 and 2022 (the most recent year for which definitive information is available), the average size of the SCS budget as measured by expenses has been about \$1.3M per year. Ideally, these expenses would have been balanced against \$1.3M in revenues. However, during these same years, we have regularly run a deficit, meaning that we have had to pay for expenses by drawing on endowment funds. That is perfectly acceptable when markets are thriving; but the past few years have been turbulent, and investment earnings have not always been sufficient to meet expenses. On those occasions, it has been necessary to take not just from the yearly return on investments, but from the principal as well, thus reducing the value of the investments. This may be allowable once in a while, but as a matter of course, it is obviously not sustainable.

About a quarter of what SCS spends each year goes towards the Annual Meeting. This figure is derived from SCS audited financial statements as summarized in the document “Joint Annual Meeting High Level Financials,” which is contained in [Appendix 1](#) of this report. For the sake of simplicity, the following chart illustrates the main points:

Annual Meeting "balance sheet," 2016–2022		
1	Average SCS direct costs	\$ 330,056.29
2	Average SCS share of gross revenue	\$ 355,357.86
3	Average SCS revenue minus direct costs	\$ 25,301.57
4	Average SCS indirect costs	\$ 120,269.00
5	Average SCS total costs (direct + indirect)	\$ 450,325.29
6	Average contribution from operating budget	\$ 94,967.43

The chart shows in line 1 that SCS’s share of the cost of running the Annual Meeting has averaged \$330,000 per year between 2016 and 2022.⁷ This amounts to a significant fraction – a quarter – of the entire \$1.3M SCS budget. When one considers in addition that it is money spent on a four-day event that amounts to a speculative business venture that is much more unpredictable in its financial outcome than anything else SCS does, it becomes clear how risky an undertaking it is; and, to repeat, in terms of expenditures it amounts to one-fourth of the total SCS budget.

Expenses do not tell the whole story, of course. The chart does not include detailed accounting of revenues from the Annual Meeting, which would be very complex.⁸ Instead, in line 2 it gives the SCS share of the gross revenues from the meeting, and in line 3 it shows the difference between that share of revenues and the direct costs borne by SCS.⁹ Since our share of revenues is somewhat larger than the direct costs to us, it would appear so far that the Annual Meeting is a money maker for SCS to the tune of about \$25,000 per year. But again, that is not the entire story. This apparent surplus is much smaller than the indirect cost of running the meeting (line 4), which is calculated at 31% of salaries and benefits for SCS staff plus general operating expenses pertaining to the SCS office. The salaries involved are mainly those of the Director of Meetings and the Executive Director, who spend a substantial amount of their time on the meeting. These indirect costs amount to about \$120,000 per year.¹⁰ That is almost five times the average SCS net share of revenues from the meeting, which is just over \$25,000. Together, direct plus indirect costs (line 5) add up to over \$450,000, which is (line 6) almost \$95,000 more than our share of the total revenue (line 2) that we derive from the meeting. That amount is charged to the SCS operating budget.¹¹ The upshot is that revenues from the meeting do not cover what it costs to run it. Since the indirect costs mainly involve salaries and overhead, one could say that they are expenses that SCS would incur anyway; but a more realistic way of looking at it would be to say that the amount of time the SCS staff spends on the meeting is very expensive in terms

⁷ See line 21, “Total direct costs” in [Appendix 1](#).

⁸ For a sense of the complexity involved, see “AM Budget 82823,” tab 1, “P&L” in [Appendix 2](#).

⁹ See line 23, “Total net for SCS” in [Appendix 1](#).

¹⁰ See line 29, “Total indirect” in [Appendix 1](#).

¹¹ See line 31, “Funds contributed from SCS operating” in [Appendix 1](#).

of *opportunity cost* — of things that they cannot do because running the Annual Meeting is so demanding. This is especially true of the Executive Director, who in recent years has had to spend enormous amounts of time — more than is covered by the indirect cost estimate — dealing with unanticipated contingencies such as last-minute changes from in-person to virtual or hybrid formats, insurance claims and refunds caused by inclement weather, and so on.

In short, the Annual Meeting is not a cash cow. It does not make money. It costs money to run. It is worth noting here that most organizations like SCS do make money on their annual meetings. SCS does not — and although the TF did not have access to AIA financial statements, the same is almost certainly true of them, as well — because the cost of registering for the Joint Annual Meeting is set at a level only slightly higher than registration for a meeting of just one organization the size of SCS or AIA. Obviously, the Joint Annual Meeting is double that size, and as such it requires almost twice as much meeting space and so on as a smaller meeting would.¹² It is not easy to see how the meeting could ever be run even on a break-even basis without substantially raising registration fees and/or meeting in places where the cost of running the meeting would be substantially lower than it is in the venues we have been using. Could virtual meetings help?¹³ Would fully hybrid meetings inevitably be even more costly to run? What we cannot do is pass these costs on to attendees, who are increasingly lacking in funds to pay registration, hotel, travel, and other costs. Speaking of which...

The impact of the Annual Meeting on the personal finances of SCS members

The Annual Meeting impacts the finances not only of the SCS but also of its members. The financial costs incurred by individual members attending the meeting can be broken down as in the following estimate:

¹² This is a very important structural issue in our partnership with AIA and one about which the two partners have not always seen eye to eye. AIA has often pushed for higher registration rates — not unrealistically, from a single bottom line point of view — while SCS has been reluctant to charge unacceptably high prices to its members. [The registration rates charged by SBL and AAR for their much larger joint meeting](#) give an idea of the levels that might be necessary, although, unlike SCS and AIA, those organizations bear the significant additional expense of meeting in a convention center. This is an issue that cannot be dealt with comprehensively in this report, but it is one about which the Board should be fully informed as it discusses the future of the Annual Meeting.

¹³ Possibly, if SCS gained experience in pricing large virtual events appropriately and became more successful at selling digital sponsorship and advertising opportunities. The fully virtual meeting held in 2021 was cheaper to run than a typical in-person meeting, but it produced lower revenues and a lower SCS net share; perhaps for this reason it also required a more substantial contribution from operating funds than any of the previous five meetings. Still, it may be possible that fully virtual meetings would become more cost effective as SCS gains experience in offering them.

Airfare (R/T from North American cities):	\$600
Hotel (3 nights including taxes):	\$558
Ground transportation:	\$100
Meals (based on federal per diem, 4 days):	\$296
Registration (student in-person, higher for others):	\$75
Total:	\$1,629

This is very expensive by any measure, and all the more so in view of the reality of dwindling research and travel funds even for tenure-track faculty, the large number of students who attend the meeting, and the increasing number of precariously employed faculty among our members. Furthermore, in the example shown, SCS itself collects only \$75, less than 5% of the total cost to the member.¹⁴ This revenue comes in the form of registration rates, which are admittedly low in comparison to what some similar organizations charge for their annual meetings. But SCS rates have already risen in recent years quite dramatically, and cost effectiveness for SCS cannot and should not be bought at the price of passing on ever higher costs to our attendees.¹⁵ Finally, it should be noted that a significant number of people do not renew their membership except in years when they plan to attend the Annual Meeting. For such individuals, SCS membership fees amount to little more than an additional cost of attendance.

With these points in mind, consider the following thought experiment. As was noted above, SCS collects about \$350K in revenues from the Annual Meeting, and loses money paying for it. Meanwhile, according to the figures given immediately above, it costs a typical member more than \$1600 to attend the meeting. Out of this sum, SCS collects a \$75.00 registration fee while various third parties (airlines, hotels, restaurants) divide the remaining \$1,554. If a thousand SCS members attend the meeting (a number on the low end of expectations¹⁶), the amount of money they would collectively pay these various third parties amounts to more than \$1.5M — an amount that is greater than the SCS yearly budget of \$1.3M as a whole! So, on this venture, third parties collect more than three times what we do, and our members pay for all of it.

Suppose we did something different. What if our members collectively contributed the same \$1.5M dollars each year not to travel and lodging expenses, but to a project, or several projects, run by SCS entirely for their benefit? What if they contributed only half that much? That would still amount to twice the revenue that we now collect on the Annual Meeting. What would we do with it? What could we offer them?

¹⁴ This figure does not take account of the financial benefit to SCS of filling a certain number of rooms in the hotel, since this benefit is assumed in the budget for the meetings. In recent years, there has been a risk of not meeting this obligation, which would result in additional cost to SCS.

¹⁵ On registration rates see [Appendix 2](#), "AM budget," tab 2, "Reg rates."

¹⁶ See [Appendix 3](#), "Attendance 2016–2023."

Towards a just and coherent policy on Annual Meeting finances

Although SCS does not have a specific policy on financial goals for the meeting, the meeting has always been more likely to cost money than to make it. On top of this, many other factors have come into play in a way that makes the business of running a successful meeting — i.e. one that serves its many purposes while not costing more than SCS or its members can afford — much more challenging than before. These factors include unpredictable weather, inflationary pressures, a more volatile public health situation, and concomitant challenges affecting the hospitality industry. We must also reckon with a heightened concern on the part of our members about attending the Annual Meeting at all — whether for reasons of cost, general risk-averseness, or principled concerns about a variety of social, environmental, and political issues.¹⁷

For these reasons, the SCS Board must consider all options in discussing the future of the Annual Meeting. There is a good case to be made that the meeting in its current form is unsustainable; therefore, one of these options should be not to hold an Annual Meeting at all. Other options should include changes in the current form of the meeting that go beyond mere tinkering. Above all, the Annual Meeting should serve the Society's strategic goals of Advocacy, Growth, Inclusion and it should meet the needs of its members at a sustainable cost.

We acknowledge that, if SCS did not run an in-person Annual Meeting, some people might see no point in remaining members of SCS. Another version of this same problem could result from ending our partnership with AIA. These are not easy issues to resolve. What seems clear is that any decision has to be made with a view not only to the financial health of SCS, but above all with reference to the question of what the Society is trying to accomplish and what is the value of that to our members. It is true that many of the operational aspects of the changes that we advocate can be delegated to this or that SCS division or committee, but the strategic implications of many individual changes, and certainly of them all taken together, is beyond the competence of any subunit. Indeed, these strategic implications are potentially existential ones. Only the Board can make such decisions. Moreover, since we envision a programming process for the future that is much more dynamic than the one we are used to, it is essential that the Board assume more responsibility for programming and be more involved in it in the future than it has in the past.

To sum up, the Annual Meeting comprises a very significant fraction of the SCS budget. In its current form, it costs the Society and its members money that might be put to other purposes. It is very much open to question whether this situation is sustainable. In planning for the future, it is imperative that the Board consider the cost, including the opportunity cost, of continuing to run an Annual Meeting of the kind it runs now, and that it weigh that cost against the meeting's effectiveness in realizing the Society's most important objectives. By the same token, any

¹⁷ In general, see above, section 1.

changes that the Board makes should themselves be evaluated in terms of sustainability and effectiveness.

5. Recommendations of this Task Force to the SCS Board of Directors

The data and analysis presented above lead us to the following recommendations. Some are obvious and urgently needed. Others are no less urgent, but involve choices for the Board. Similarly, some changes can and should be implemented immediately. Others will take time, whether because we are temporarily bound by previous commitments or because the necessary changes, by their nature, can not be made overnight. All of these recommendations are in agreement with our charge to study all aspects of the Annual Meeting and make recommendations to the Board, which will have the responsibility of implementation.

General recommendations

The Board must chart the future of the Annual Meeting with the following understandings:

- Only one option is not viable: to continue to run the Annual Meeting with no significant change. The Society, its members, and the profession urgently need a different meeting now and will have still different needs in the future;
- The most specific change we advocate is to abandon in-person meetings in favor of a comprehensively hybrid format. As we have explained, this is a simple matter of Justice. It must be done right, and that will be expensive to SCS; but it will be more affordable to our members, and a “triple bottom line” approach requires that we adjust the Society’s finances to suit our social and environmental conscience, not the other way around.
- All other options should be on the table, including that of radically changing the current form of the meeting, or even abandoning regular annual meetings in favor of other events if they will better serve our members’ needs, acknowledging that the hybrid format remain a *sine qua non* for all such events;
- All decisions regarding such options must proceed from a shared understanding of shared purposes. The main question is and must always be, what is SCS trying to accomplish?
- The Board must plan with constant reference to the SCS’s guiding principles of Advocacy, Growth, and Inclusion; to the acid test of Sustainability, which must be applied to any project we might undertake; and to a “triple bottom line” understanding of benefits and costs, not just in purely financial terms, but also those of Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice.

Specific recommendations

The Board should define the next five years (2025–2030) as an initial period of experimentation with all aspects of the Annual Meeting. Because of pre-existing circumstances, there will be two distinct phases.

During the first phase, in 2025 and 2026, we are contractually obligated to hold in-person meetings in Philadelphia and San Francisco. Both these meetings will conform to the usual three-day format of past meetings, but the Board must promote innovation within that structure to the fullest extent possible. We list here innovations that are mandatory and a few others as food for thought:

- Hybrid is a necessity. It cannot be deferred. Giving both in-person and virtual attendees every opportunity to get the most out of the meeting is a matter of Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice. In comparison to the recent experiment of New Orleans 2023 and the upcoming partially hybrid meeting of Chicago 2024, Philadelphia 2025 will be a true innovation, a proof of concept, and a starting point for the design of any future meetings. No matter how successful or how challenging that meeting proves to be, San Francisco 2026 must build on what we learned the previous year to be even better.
- A new approach to programming is also essential. Currently, a great deal of time and effort is spent on the reading of papers by one person to audiences of modest size. Much less time is purposefully devoted to Career Development and Mentoring, Social Interaction, Advocacy, and other goals that are important to our members and to the health of the profession. In the Philadelphia meeting in January 2025, this balance must change decisively.
- Of the goals listed above, Career Development and Mentoring is arguably the most essential area of professional activity. The existing format of the Annual Meeting does little to highlight this goal. Career Development and Mentoring must become unmistakably the main reasons to meet in the first place. Many other necessary and salubrious innovations will flow from this one alone. Models for emphasizing Mentorship exist in the work of (e.g.) the [WCC Mentorship Team](#) and the [AAARC Mentorship Program](#) as well as in the editorial Mentoring sessions run by the editors of *TAPA* at recent Annual Meetings. However, the existence of some Mentoring activities sponsored by affiliated groups and semi-independent components of SCS should not prevent us from imagining and running a far-reaching program of new Mentoring activities.
- The reading of individual papers is the least dynamic and least collaborative form of programming. Several alternative formats have been tried and have proved popular, but little has been done to make them a regular, let alone a dominant part of the program. Such formats include, e.g.: seminars devoted to pre-circulated, unpublished papers; sessions based on pre-recorded papers devoted mainly to discussion;¹⁸ debates addressing major issues in the field; in-depth discussions of important recent publications. We acknowledge that for many members, reading a paper is the only way to secure funding from one's home institution to attend the Annual Meeting. We suggest that it is the

¹⁸ This form of paper session is used successfully by [Antiquity in Media Studies](#) in their annual meeting. Advantages of the form, in addition to increasing time for discussion, include the possibility of accommodating three papers in a one-hour session and that of listing all those who sign up as official participants in one or more sessions, which might make more attendees eligible for institutional funding.

responsibility of SCS not merely to acquiesce in this but to find ways of recognizing the contributions of more attendees than there is room for on the program as readers of individual papers and to help them make the case to their employers that our Annual Meeting is moving into the more collaborative future that so many administrators urge humanists to embrace.

- One of the perennially most popular features of the annual meeting is the Exhibit Hall. SCS must strongly exploit this popularity by reimagining the Exhibit Hall as the agora of the Annual Meeting. This has already begun to happen. In addition to both pre-arranged and serendipitous meetings between authors and publishers, the Exhibit Hall has come to be used as a venue for poster sessions, roundtable discussions, “maker spaces,” and other events that do not fit well within the paper session format. SCS should lean into this trend and ramp up the possibility of fostering interaction between attendees within the space of the Exhibit Hall.

These different forms of scholarly interaction obviously offer better opportunities to promote Career Development and Mentoring than the experience of taking part in individual paper sessions. In addition, these and other novel forms not specified here contribute directly to the “triple bottom line” by creating more opportunities for people to present, organize, share and communicate in ways that enrich the community AND allow for members to demonstrate their scholarly/professional engagement. For these reasons, in January 2025, the research-oriented part of the program must adapt to increase opportunities for professional development. This adaptation need not be conceived as a simple reduction, but rather as a form of rebalancing and potential growth, in that its goal should be to involve more people in taking a more active part in the program.

During the second phase, in 2027–2029, with no obligation to hold a large, in-person meeting in a convention hotel, the Board will be free to experiment even more boldly with initiatives other than a large in-person meeting. Here we offer just a few, fairly obvious possibilities:

- Meeting at different times of year;
- Running an exclusively on-line meeting that would go farther than the COVID-era meetings of 2021 and 2022 in an effort to optimize the experience of participants, with particular attention to informal and social aspects;
- Running a hybrid meeting with a small in-person component that could be held in a relatively inexpensive venue (e.g. different cities, smaller hotels, college campuses);
- Not running a single, omnibus meeting but instead running several smaller events at different times of year, some perhaps only online and others hybrid;
- Partnering with different organizations;

- To the previous point, the Board should consider running an even bigger meeting than we do now. One reason to do so would be to reflect more accurately the scope of our members' interests, whether chronologically, culturally, methodologically, or in other ways. Another might be to make our meeting more sustainable by partnering with a larger organization (MLA, SBL, AHA, vel sim.), to the extent that economies of scale would be to our advantage.

2030 and Beyond

After this initial five-year period of experimentation, the Board must avoid locking the organization into any rigid form of annual programming from which it would be difficult to extricate ourselves. The temptation to choose what seems to be the best among available options, and to do that every year, will probably be strong; but succumbing to that temptation will probably lead to the creation of another task force, not unlike this one, to solve that problem. Instead, as was noted above, the Board must regularly evaluate SCS programming with a view not to administrative convenience, and not just by issuing a new version of the Annual Meeting survey, but by actively investigating and debating what the Society, its members, and the profession need at that time. It is imperative that the Board accept and meet this responsibility. At the same time, its planning process be open, transparent, and inclusive of members and relevant components of SCS.

Finally, the time has come at last for the SCS Board to engage with the leadership of AIA regarding our critical examination of the future of the Annual Meeting. Sharing this report with them is a necessary first step, but further, joint discussions are just as necessary to determine what if any role our historical partnership has to play in the future of SCS. Any continuation of our partnership must be based not only on financial considerations but also on concrete reasons that align directly with the SCS core principles, sustainability, and the "triple bottom line." Short of such critical alignment, the partnership must be discontinued even if that would be difficult, risky, or painful. Alternatively, if a continuing partnership with AIA does seem to the Board to be in our best interest, then the Board ought to explore the possibility of entering into a more complete partnership with AIA. What form this would take lies outside the remit of this task force, but the possibilities obviously include some form of merger between the two organizations.

Conclusion

In closing, we must stress that the Annual Meeting comprises a very large part of our yearly budget and demands an enormous amount of attention and effort on the part of our members and our professional staff. For these reasons alone, any significant redesign and repurposing of the meeting inevitably raise certain existential questions. During the sesquicentennial celebration of 2019, we tried to peer into the future and to imagine how SCS and the profession might evolve. We cannot wait another 150 years to act. The time is now. Larger questions about the role and

viability of learned societies and other professional organizations obviously come into play here, as well. A useful way to begin grappling with such questions is to ask: Can SCS, in its current form, fulfill its stated priorities of Advocacy, Growth, and Inclusion? Can it remain Sustainable? And can it operate in a way that is financially, socially, and environmentally responsible to itself, its members, and the world? The urgency of such questions about the health and future of our profession is perhaps the strongest evidence of the need for meetings that foster debate, innovation, and community. It's time to hold meetings that let us get the job done.

Respectfully submitted,

Denise Demetriou

Joseph Farrell, convener

Alison Keith, ex officio

Elizabeth Manwell

Alicia Matz

Dan-el Padilla Peralta

Victoria Pagán

Matthew Roller, ex officio

Matthew Santirocco, ex officio

Chiara Sulprizio