ACE Membership: A Benchmark Study

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Abstract

This study continues inquiry into the reasons people join and retain membership in voluntary professional organizations. Expanding on a study of historical membership data (1991-2004) provided by the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE), 555 individuals who were dues-paying ACE members in 2006 were sent online surveys. Methodology was based on Dillman's Tailored Design Method. Sixty-four percent of the population responded. Analysis indicated that members were a fairly homogeneous group in terms of employment classification and regional membership status. Average membership tenure was 3.34 years, with 27% of members reporting a lapse in membership. Respondents valued and were satisfied with organizational communication, professional development opportunities, publications, networking, and annual meetings. However, they expressed dissatisfaction with some organizational components, including special interest groups, "cliquishness," lack of diversity, features of the annual meeting, and judging in the awards program. The findings support existing literature about workplace organizational loyalty and commitment and the extended application of such studies to voluntary organizations.

So What?

Organizations survive and thrive because they offer valuable networking opportunities, provide useful or needed information, and build loyalty among their members. Like other voluntary organizations, ACE must continue to adapt to the changing needs of its members if it is to build on its 95-year history of serving applied communicators. This research examines results of an online survey of ACE members, offering a picture of the value members derive from the organization and their attitudes toward it, as well as a demographic sketch of the organization's membership.

Research

Individuals join organizations—and remain in them—for many reasons. Minimal research exists with regard to professional agricultural communications organizations and their members' reasons for affiliation, participation, and retention. Such research must be extrapolated from research in sociology and applied psychology, primarily from studies centered on relationships between employers and their employees. An earlier study of historical membership data provided by ACE Headquarters attempted to expand our knowledge on the subject (White, 2005), and this study explored the matter further through data gathered with an online survey of ACE members.

Need Fulfillment and Motivation

All human behavior is driven by the desire to satisfy needs, which may be defined as "a person's conscious wants, desires, or motives" (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, p. 2046); the more needs a relationship satisfies, the more likely an individual is to value that relationship and to want to continue it (DuBrin, 2002). Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that humans' powerful and fundamental need to belong contributes to formation and maintenance of social relationships, even in the face of actual or perceived discrimination (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006).

Participation in organizations to fulfill needs can include attending meetings and communicating with other members (Catchings, 2004). Today's organizations emphasize communication. Members expect to be well informed about the organization; they also expect to take part in decision-making (Mai & Akerson, 2003).

According to the theory of planned behavior, individuals base decisions on information moderated by intention, which is determined by their attitudes and norms and by the amount of control they believe they possess over a situation. Functionalism, on the other hand, maintains that behavior results from evaluation of the benefits of such behavior (Greenslade & White, 2005). Both theories help predict participation in voluntary activities.

Individual Attributes and Organizational Cultures

Individuals do not have identical needs, so organizations cannot treat all their members identically. For example, people may differ in their need to know or in their desire to learn (Cacioppo, Kao, Petty, & Rodriguez, 1986; Tharenou, 2001). Etzioni (1964, 1968) noted that in our complex society, individuals belong to many groups, with the nature of their memberships determined by organizational characteristics and by individuals' attributes. Thus, individual psychological traits and motivations are important determinants of a person's level of organizational commitment. Singer

and Singer (2001) suggest that individuals' participation or continued commitment depends more on their individual characteristics than on what an organization provides.

All organizations have a distinct culture with characteristic structures and belief systems (Pepper, 1995), including symbols that members recognize and for which they construct shared meanings (Conrad, 1990). Organizations use these symbols (for example, the organization's name, seal, colors, etc.) to communicate with members (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) and to involve members financially, temporally, and emotionally (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rusbult, 1983). An individual's "buy-in" depends on his or her history, perceptions of self-efficacy, goal-directedness, expectations of peers, and degree of understanding of the organization (Maehr & Braskamp).

Organizational cultures help members meet their needs (Conrad, 1990) based on members' individual psychology, their individual need-fulfillment strategies, and their response to organizational cultures (deMan & Ephraim, 2001; Greene, Morrison, & Tischler, 1980; Mullin & Hogg, 1999; Pandey, 1979; Pelled & Xin, 1997; Solomon, Sneed, & Serow, 1979; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Because American culture favors "self-enhancement," Americans gravitate toward personal-improvement activities (Kitayama, Matsumoto, Markus, & Norasakkunkit, 1997), such as membership in voluntary professional organizations that enhance professional knowledge, skills, and contacts. Individual reactions to such self-enhancement opportunities may, however, be influenced just as much by individuals' opinions of themselves as by their culture (Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004).

Identification and Commitment

The greater a member's identification with, investment in, and commitment to an organization, the more positive are his or her perceptions of it (Collier, 2001). Organizational identification may focus on members' careers or occupations and comprises cognitive, affective, evaluative, and behavioral dimensions (van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004), but overall organizational identification prevents member alienation and reduces turnover (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000).

A member's investment or engagement in an organization includes affective components, and such engagement grows with positive perceptions of meaningfulness (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Identification as a professional includes organizational loyalty to an employer and commitment to a larger peer group of other professionals (Brierley, 1996). Such commitments are psychological rather than structural and are based on subjective meanings; the greater a person's organizational commitment,

the greater his or her occupational commitment, and vice versa (Aranya & Jacobson, 1975).

Retaining one's membership in voluntary professional organizations may depend on both affective commitment and organizational satisfaction. Emotional ties to an organization may be enhanced by the personal relationships built in smaller divisions of a large organization (Eby, Freeman, Rush, & Lance, 1999; Randall & O'Driscoll, 1997), with initial socialization of new members building satisfaction; such socialization may be made easier if there are smaller subgroups within the organization (Helman & McMillin, 2001).

For a voluntary professional organization to thrive, members and recruits must embrace its purpose, values, leadership, and mission. Members must believe that an organization meets professional and personal needs; such belief, identification, and investment in the organization should produce loyalty in current members and increase recruitment of new members (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003).

Fuller, Barnett, Hester, and Relyea (2003) suggest that perceptions of organizational concern, which are based on social exchange and reciprocity concepts, and organization-based self-esteem, which is based on feelings of worth as a member, may influence loyalty to a group, as does a member's agreement with the group's values (Finagan, 2000). Most people seem to prefer association with others like themselves (Ray & Hall, 1995). But regardless of group makeup, responsive leadership and organizational willingness to change structures and procedures build member commitment (Turniansky & Hare, 1998).

Members' commitment to and decision to remain involved with a particular organization surely reflect their underlying satisfaction with the organization. According to Asadi-Lari, Tamburini, and Gray (2004), satisfaction may be defined as "the extent of an individual's experience compared with his or her expectations," with the caveat that there is no "standard approach to measuring satisfaction" with an organization (p. 4). Although researchers have attempted to construct empirical methods for verifying need fulfillment, exploration of the topic must also take into account members' perceptions about whether their needs are in fact being met by a particular organizational feature (Baard et al., 2004).

Distance Decay

Geographic proximity may predict involvement with activities and organizations. The closer an individual is to an activity, the more likely he or she is to become involved or stay involved with it. In most cases, as

proximity decreases, relatedness also decreases. This phenomenon is known as "distance decay" (Hagerstrand, 1952; Wheeler & Stutz, 1971).

Fotheringham (1981) viewed distance decay as a behavioral measurement of distance as it affects interaction, although such relationships may not necessarily be strictly linear. The idea has been used to identify the spatial locus of so-called central places (Olsson, 1970), although factors other than mere proximity may overcome any disadvantage of location and resulting distance.

Previous Study of ACE Historical Membership Data

A previous study of historical membership data provided by ACE Headquarters (White, 2005) analyzed 1,441 valid records from 1991 through 2004. Results indicated that while membership in the organization had increased, the rate of increase had not been constant. Fifty-four percent of those joining ACE at any time during this 14-year period remained members in 2004, but 86% had allowed their membership lapse at some time. Membership retention was found to be statistically significantly correlated ($p = .00$) with organizational involvement, as measured by holding a position of leadership in a special interest group (SIG), serving on a committee, holding an organizational office, or receiving an award. However, 68% of all members had no organizational involvement as measured by these indicators.

Membership retention was found not to be correlated with members' home base, but was found to be statistically significantly correlated ($p = .00$) with the location of the annual meeting and with members' institutional affiliation (employment at a land-grant institution).

The purpose of the previous study was to develop benchmark data to better understand ACE membership. The previous study did not gather individual ACE members' personal characteristics or their perceptions of ACE's organizational aspects. The current study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are ACE members' personal characteristics (gender, employment, and region of residence)?
2. What are ACE members' organizational profiles in terms of years of ACE membership, lapses in membership, participation in the organization, and participation in the ACE mentoring program?
3. What organizational aspects are most satisfying to ACE members?
4. What organizational aspects are most dissatisfying to ACE members?
5. In monetary terms, what value do ACE members place on each of the organization's benefits, as apportioned from the annual ACE dues?

6. What are members' perceptions of ACE regarding leadership, SIGs, annual meetings, committees, workshops outside the annual meeting, outreach, and personal member services?

Methods

The population of interest for this census study was all dues-paying ACE members with viable e-mail addresses in 2006. The membership roster was supplied by ACE Headquarters in early April 2006. From this list, the population was determined to be 555 ACE members.

Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2000) was modified for this study. A Web site consisting of an information and consent page and the survey page was created to complete the study. The online method was chosen for survey delivery based on its ability to garner a rapid response at minimal expense (Ladner, Wingenbach, & Raven, 2002). Five contacts were made with the membership between April and May 2006.

ACE members were contacted via e-mail. A survey pre-notice was sent to the population ($N = 555$) three days prior to the actual survey, giving respondents the choice to opt out of the survey (28 members opted out). This reduced the target population ($N = 527$). Web surveys yield responses sooner than do postal mail surveys (Fraze, Hardin, Brashears, Haygood, & Smith, 2003), so a compressed time schedule was used for successive follow-up notices. All e-mail notices were sent as personalized e-mails explaining the study's purpose and included a survey hyperlink, the respondent's unique password, and the researcher's contact information.

Three follow-up notices were sent to nonrespondents after the initial notice. The second follow-up reminded nonrespondents to complete the survey and offered them the option of completing a paper version. This notice also gave members the option of not receiving more notices about participating in the study. No members asked to receive paper copies of the instrument in lieu of filling it out online. Data collection processes produced a response rate of 64% ($n = 336$), which is comparable to Dillman's expectations for e-mail survey response rates. Findings should be generalized only to the respondent group ($n = 336$).

The research instrument contained three sections. The first section allowed respondents to type responses into text boxes to indicate the top three most satisfying and dissatisfying organizational aspects of ACE membership. This section also asked respondents to list the top five benefits of ACE membership and assign dollar values to each. The second section allowed participants to record their perceptions of selected ACE attributes by answering 31 statements, using 4-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*... 4 = *strongly agree*), about ACE leadership, SIGs, annual meetings, committees,

workshops outside the annual meeting, outreach, and personal member services. Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) was applied to the perception scales; the subscales alpha coefficients ranged from .36 to .81. Although the "workshops outside the annual meeting" perception scale had a low (.36) alpha coefficient, no inferential statistics were applied to the data set, as this was a census study. The third section allowed respondents to record their demographic information.

Demographic data were analyzed using percentages and frequencies. Descriptive statistics were used for all other sections of the instrument.

Results

ACE members ($n = 336$) completed an online survey in April 2006. The respondent group comprised 64% of the target population ($N = 527$). The survey established benchmark data about ACE members by determining members' personal characteristics, such as gender, employment classification, and regional membership status (Table 1). The respondent group was about evenly split between males and females. A majority (81%) of respondents indicated employment at a land-grant institution. The largest group (33%) hailed from the North Central region, followed by the Southern region (32%) (Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of ACE Member Respondents* (n = 336)

Variable	Categories	f	%
What is your gender?	Female	169	50.3
	Male	162	48.2
Are you employed at a land-grant institution?	Yes	273	81.3
	No	60	17.9
In which ACE region do you reside?	North Central	112	33.3
	Southern	107	31.8
	Western	63	18.8
	Northeast	30	8.9
	DC/USDA	11	3.3
	International	11	3.3

Note. Frequencies may not total 336 because of missing data.

Research

To establish an organizational profile of ACE membership, respondents recorded their years of ACE membership, indicated whether they had ever allowed their membership to lapse, described their participation in the organization (e.g., especially SIG listserv discussions and conference calls), and indicated whether they had participated in the ACE mentoring program. Table 2 shows that nearly 23% of respondents have been ACE members for 6 to 10 years, while just over 17% have been members for less than 2 years and just over 17% have been members for more than 20 years. Additional analysis revealed an average of 3.34 years as an ACE member ($SD = 1.70$) with a range of 1 to 6 years. For those members who have been in the organization more than 20 years, length of membership ranged from 21 to 60 years ($M = 33.73$, $SD = 9.99$).

Ninety-one (27%) members reported allowing their memberships to lapse since first becoming ACE members (Table 2). The most frequently cited reasons for these lapses were a change in career/employment and/or simply forgetting to renew the membership. Respondents participated actively in SIG-initiated listserv discussions (62%) and SIG-initiated conference calls (57%). Seventy-nine percent received funding from their employers to attend the ACE annual meeting. The vast majority (88%) of respondents did not participate in the ACE mentorship program; of those who did participate, 21 served as a mentor and 10 as a protégé. Respondents were asked to identify which top three organizational aspects of their ACE membership were most satisfying. Respondents cited professional development opportunities, networking, annual meetings, publications, and awards programs as the most satisfying aspects of ACE membership (Table 3).

In similar fashion, respondents listed which three organizational aspects were most dissatisfying about their ACE memberships. Respondents identified annual meetings, cliques, awards programs, communication, and a lack of local or regional activities as the most dissatisfying aspects of ACE membership (Table 3). Other areas of dissatisfaction included the cost of dues, professional development/workshop opportunities, publications, SIGs, and a lack of diversity in ACE membership.

Respondents were asked to consider their annual ACE membership dues ($100), list the top five benefits gained from their memberships, and assign dollar values to each benefit to equal an amount of the annual dues. Some respondents chose to use the term "priceless" instead of an actual dollar amount; in those cases, the maximum amount ($100) was assigned to that specific benefit. Twelve additional benefits were listed by at least 10 different respondents.

Table 4 shows that respondents most frequently ($f = 132$) listed networking, with an average value of $43.56 ($SD = 30.91$). The ACE annual

Table 2. *Organizational Profile of ACE Member Respondents* (n = 336)

Variable	Categories	f	%
How many years have you been a member of ACE?	6-10 yrs	76	22.6
	< 2 yrs	58	17.3
	3-5 yrs	58	17.3
	> 20 yrs	58	17.3
	11-15 yrs	46	13.7
	16-20 yrs	32	9.5
Since becoming an ACE member, have you ever had a membership lapse, and then rejoined later?	No	240	71.4
	Yes	91	27.1
Have you ever participated in a SIG-initiated listserv discussion?	Yes	208	61.9
	No	126	37.5
Have you ever participated in a SIG-initiated conference call?	No	191	56.8
	Yes	141	42.0
Does your employer financially support your attendance at the ACE annual meetings?	Yes	266	79.2
	No	60	17.9
Have you ever participated in the ACE mentorship program?	No	297	88.4
	Yes	38	11.3
If "yes," were you a:	Mentor	21	6.3
	Protégé	10	3.0
	Both	1	.3

Note. Frequencies may not total 336 because of missing data.

Research

Table 3. *Satisfying and Dissatisfying Organizational Aspects of ACE Membership* (n = 336)

Category	Aspects	f
Most satisfying aspects:	Professional development	298
	Networking	282
	Annual meetings	114
	Publications	57
	Awards programs	47
Most dissatisfying aspects:	Annual meetings	83
	Member cliques	69
	Awards programs	52
	Communication	52
	No local or regional activities	42
	Expensive dues	29
	Professional development/workshop opportunities	25
	Publications	20
	SIGs	19
	Lack of diversity in ACE membership	6

conference was listed by 15% of the respondents (*f* = 101) and was valued at $37.52 (*SD* = 25.59). Special interest groups (SIGs) were listed by 14.5% respondents, with an average value of $27.66 (*SD* = 19.52). The Critique and Awards program (*f* = 83) was the benefit listed fourth most often, with a value of $25.95 (*SD* = 21.03). The fifth most frequently mentioned benefit was the *Journal of Applied Communications* (*f* = 57), which had an average value of $26.40 (*SD* = 23.71) (Table 4).

To answer the final research question, respondents indicated their levels of agreement/disa greement (Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree...*4 = *strongly agree*) with 31 statements about ACE leadership, SIGs, annual meetings, committees, workshops outside the annual meeting, outreach, and personal member services. Each subscale contained equal numbers of positively and negatively worded statements to avoid pattern response sets.

Table 5 shows that no respondents selected *strongly disagree* (0.0-1.50) or *strongly agree* (3.51-4.00) with regard to any of the 31 statements about ACE attributes. When respondents considered ACE leadership, they agreed

Table 4. *ACE Membership Benefits and Dollar Values Per Benefit* (n = 336)

Benefits			Dollar Values	
	f	%	M	SD
Networking	132	19.4	$43.56	30.91
Annual conference	101	14.8	$37.52	25.59
SIGs	99	14.5	$27.66	19.52
C&A program	83	12.2	$25.95	21.03
Journal of Applied Communications	57	8.4	$26.40	23.71
Listserv	53	7.8	$21.94	21.08
Signals	50	7.3	$16.08	19.39
Publications	32	4.7	$20.16	19.65
Workshops	25	3.7	$30.00	31.56
Workshops and conferences	22	3.2	$35.45	22.09
Professional development	15	2.2	$40.00	29.52
Membership (i.e., fellowship, contacts, needed for résumé)	13	1.9	$25.00	27.00
Totals	682	100.0	$30.80	25.85

Note. Benefits were assigned a monetary value ranging from $0 to $100.

that communications from ACE Headquarters were timely and relevant to their professional development and that being an ACE officer was not important to professional development. Concerning SIGs, respondents agreed that communications from SIG leaders were relevant to professional development, that SIG membership was an important reason for staying in ACE, and that being a SIG leader was not important to professional development.

Respondents agreed that fellowship at the ACE annual meeting was an important reason to stay in ACE, that innovative ideas from the ACE annual meeting were important, and that the location of the annual meeting did not affect their membership. Concerning ACE committees, respondents agreed that committee service was not an important reason for remaining in ACE (Table 5).

Respondents perceived workshop attendance outside the annual meeting as important to professional development, while workshop location did not affect ACE membership, and attending workshops was an important reason to stay in ACE. Respondents were in agreement with two outreach

attributes: Interaction with various electronic lists keeps them in ACE, and publishing in the JAC is not important to their professional development. Likewise, respondents were in agreement with two personal member services attributes: The ACE mentorship program is not important to their professional development, and opportunities to receive ACE awards are important reasons to stay in ACE (Table 5).

Table 5. *Respondents' Perceptions of ACE Attributes* (n = 336)

Attributes	M	SD
ACE leadership:		
Communications from ACE Headquarters are timely.	3.08	.57
ACE Headquarters' communications are relevant to my professional development.	2.90	.65
Being an ACE officer is not important to my professional development.	2.57	.80
Opportunities to be an ACE officer are important reasons to remain in ACE.	2.25	.78
State representatives are not important to ACE.	2.05	.78
Special interest groups (SIGs):		
Communications from SIG leaders are relevant to my professional development.	3.05	.59
SIG membership is an important reason for me to remain in ACE.	3.02	.73
Being a SIG leader is not important to my professional development.	2.52	.79
Opportunities to be a SIG leader are important reasons for me to remain in ACE.	2.33	.81
SIG membership is not important to my professional development.	1.99	.74
Communications from SIG leaders are not important.	1.68	.58
Annual meetings:		
The fellowship at the ACE annual meeting is important to my remaining in ACE.	3.19	.71
Innovative ideas from the ACE annual meeting are important for staying in ACE.	3.18	.70
Location of the annual meeting does not affect my ACE membership.	2.79	.79

Attributes	M	SD
ACE annual meeting attendance is not important to my professional development.	1.90	.74
Professional networking at the annual meeting is not a reason to stay in ACE.	1.68	.70
Committees:		
Opportunities to serve on an ACE committee are not important to remain in ACE.	2.57	.73
Being on an ACE committee is important to my professional development.	2.47	.73
Workshops (outside the annual meeting):		
Workshop attendance is important to my professional development.	2.79	.77
Workshop location does not affect my ACE membership.	2.72	.75
Attending workshops is important to my remaining in ACE.	2.66	.79
There are plenty of workshop opportunities.	2.26	.76
Outreach:		
Interaction with various electronic lists keeps me in ACE.	2.59	.69
Publishing in the JAC is not important to my professional development.	2.59	.80
I regularly check the ACE Web site for announcements.	2.25	.70
Contributing to the ACE *Signals* newsletter keeps me in ACE.	2.03	.64
Personal member services:		
The ACE mentorship program is not important to my professional development.	2.84	.66
Opportunities to receive ACE awards are important reasons to stay in ACE.	2.80	.82
I would like to learn more about the mentorship program.	2.45	.76
Opportunities for ACE awards are not important to my professional development.	2.18	.78
Opportunities to participate in the ACE mentorship program keep me in ACE.	1.95	.54

Note. Strongly disagree = 0.0-1.50; disagree = 1.51-2.50; agree = 2.51-3.50; strongly agree = 3.51-4.00.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the first study of ACE, increased membership and the longevity of more than half of its members suggested that the organization was meeting some of the members' needs (White, 2005). Results from this study indicate a fairly homogeneous group. The numbers of men and women were nearly equal, with the majority of members employed at land-grant institutions. Two-thirds of those responding come from just two regions (North Central and Southern), where the largest land-grant universities are now located. This homogeneity is not surprising, given ACE's origins and traditional mission within the land-grant system.

Such homogeneity supports previous research showing that, although individuals' needs may vary, common personal characteristics bind people together and increase organizational loyalty, with most people gravitating to organizations made up of people like themselves (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Etzioni, 1964; Ray & Hall, 1995; Singer & Singer, 2001; Tharenou, 2001). Such considerations should be addressed in any attempt to recruit new members from institutions and organizations not traditionally served by an organization.

Although the average organizational longevity of ACE members was just 3.34 years, nearly 25% of respondents had belonged to ACE for 6 to 10 years, about 33% for 5 or fewer years, and almost 40% for 11 or more years. These figures indicate a high level of member commitment and retention. Although only 27% said they had let their membership lapse at some time, an earlier ACE study (White, 2005) indicated that fully 86% of members had done so, a discrepancy whose explanation falls outside the scope of this study, but which warrants further investigation. Withdrawal of institutional support, personal financial difficulties, and job changes were reasons cited most often for lapses, further supporting previous research that professional identification includes both loyalty to an employer and commitment to a larger peer group of other professionals (Brierley, 1996).

The high participation levels of ACE members in SIG-initiated listserv discussions and conference calls indicated a high priority for small-group communication within the larger organization, supporting the literature's emphasis on the importance of communication for building involvement and retention (Catchings, 2004; Mai & Akerson, 2003).

The fact that few respondents had participated in ACE's mentorship program was disconcerting, given previous findings about the importance of initial socialization of new members in building organizational satisfaction (Helman & McMillin, 2001). Low levels of participation in ACE's mentorship program may be due to its recent introduction or to uncertainty on the

part of its organizers as to how best to implement it. Participation in and success of the ACE mentorship program should be investigated to assess its effectiveness.

Respondents' inclusion of professional development opportunities, publications, networking, and annual meetings as the most satisfying organizational features supports the literature. Professional organizations perform best when they satisfy professionals' unique career development needs and their common concerns, as well as meeting basic human needs for belonging and social interaction (Aranya & Jacobson, 1975; Baard et al., 2004; Brierley, 1996; DuBrin, 2002; Eby et al., 1999; Greenslade & White, 2005; Kitayama et al., 1997; Pepper, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Randall & O'Driscoll, 1997; Rusbult, 1983). The findings as to which activities were cited as satisfying were also congruent with research indicating the importance of member communication in fostering organizational loyalty and retention (Catchings, 2004; Mai & Akerson, 2003). Inclusion of awards on this list supported previous research linking personal self-esteem based on organizational activity to membership loyalty and retention (Finagan, 2000).

Some respondents indicated dissatisfaction with annual meetings, indicating that their costs were too high, they were too long, and locations were not convenient, supporting "distance decay" concepts that link geographic location and participation (Fotheringham, 1981; Hagerstrand, 1952; Wheeler & Stutz, 1971). Such concerns should be investigated further to determine the importance of the location of the annual meeting, an event at which almost all face-to-face networking and professional development opportunities in ACE take place. Additional research should be conducted to determine whether distance decay concepts, which were formulated "at a time when people traveled primarily by automobile or train" (White, 2005, p. 50) hold true today when most people fly to their destinations, replacing concerns about actual distance with those about ease of access.

Also dissatisfying were special interest group organization, topics, and conduct; communication; awards program (judging was felt to be unfair); and the lack of regional or local activities, along with the limited availability of professional development/workshop activities outside the annual meeting. Such concerns highlight the importance of small groups within larger organizations and the continuing importance of member self-esteem and meeting proximity to participation; these factors have been identified as key to building commitment, and proximity was acknowledged as important in encouraging participation among members (Aranya & Jacobson, 1975; Brierley, 1996; Eby et al., 1999; Fotheringham, 1981; Fuller et al., 2003; Hagerstrand, 1952; Helman & McMillin, 2001; Kwan et al., 2004; Randall & O'Driscoll, 1997; Wheeler & Stutz, 1971). Further research should attempt

to pinpoint the precise reasons for ACE members' dissatisfaction with these organizational features, with a view to crafting organizational responses to them.

Many members mentioned dissatisfaction with "cliquishness" in ACE, while just 6 members expressed concern that ACE membership lacked diversity. The fact that "cliques" were cited as the second most prevalent cause of organizational dissatisfaction should concern ACE, in that certain structures, symbols, and practices may be consistently interfering with effective fulfillment of some members' needs (Asadi-Lari et al., 2004; Conrad, 1990; DuBrin, 2002; Finagan, 2000; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986; Pepper, 1995; Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003). Further research is needed to discover the roots of such perceptions about ACE.

Concerns about diversity were minimal but may express the idea that humans' powerful and fundamental need to belong contributes to formation and maintenance of social relationships, even in the face of actual or perceived discrimination (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Carvallo & Pelham, 2006). Nevertheless, in keeping with ACE goals of becoming more inclusive, this perception should be addressed.

The five benefits cited most frequently and valued most highly by ACE members in terms of their annual dues were networking, the annual conference, special interest groups, the C&A program, and the *Journal of Applied Communications*. These choices support previous research about the importance of communication and professional development to members of voluntary organizations (Catchings, 2004; DuBrin, 2002; Eby et al., 1999; Greenslade & White, 2005; Helman & McMillin, 2001; Randall & O'Driscoll, 1997). Members' citation of the Critique and Awards program supports the idea that individual self-esteem derived from organizational activities increases member commitment (Kwan et al., 2004).

Responses indicating member perceptions of key ACE features support the literature emphasizing the importance of communications from organization leadership and with fellow members as well as professional development opportunities provided by the organization (Catchings, 2004; Kitayama et al., 1997; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986; Mai & Akerson, 2003; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rusbult, 1983; Turniansky & Hare, 1998).

Responses also shed light on results from the earlier study of ACE records, which indicated that although serving as an ACE officer, SIG leader, or committee member was positively correlated with member retention, such positions were held by only one-third of the total membership (White, 2005). Respondents to this survey concurred that being an ACE officer or a SIG leader was not important to their professional development, although

SIG membership and the Critique and Awards program were important reasons to stay in ACE. These findings support previous studies about the importance of small-group involvement and organization-based self-esteem to membership retention (Fuller et al., 2003; Kwan et al., 2004; Singer & Singer, 2001).

Neither the location of the annual meeting nor of professional development outside the conference impacted commitment or retention, according to respondents, contradicting distance decay theory (Fotheringham, 1981; Hagerstrand, 1952; Wheeler & Stutz, 1971).

This study's findings largely support those of McGovney-Ingram, Irani, & Telg (2006), who also surveyed ACE members. These researchers found the organization's membership to be fairly homogeneous, with a demographic profile similar to those seen in other communication fields.

In general, members' responses support Collier's (2001) findings that the greater an individual's identification with, investment in, and commitment to an organization, the more positive his or her perceptions of it, with overall organizational identification preventing member alienation and reducing turnover (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000; Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003).

Results of this study support existing literature on workplace organizational loyalty and commitment and extend the application of such studies to voluntary associations. Study findings are applicable to ACE and suggest fruitful avenues for additional research about this organization, including advanced statistical analyses (e.g., construction of composite scales, correlations) on existing data from this survey. Such research can help shape ACE's future.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

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Keywords

voluntary professional organizations; membership; demographics; Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences; Dillman's Tailored Design Method; online surveys; need fulfillment; motivation; organizational cultures; identification; commitment; distance decay

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