

Influence of Involvement, Institutional Affiliation, and Geographic Location on Membership Retention in Voluntary Professional Organizations

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Abstract

The reasons people join voluntary professional organizations and continue membership is largely an unexplored area of research. This study sought to find some answers in membership data from the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) from 1991 to 2004. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and, in some cases, simple linear regression were calculated for a variety of variables for 1,441 valid records. The findings suggest that a relationship exists between organization involvement and members' identification with and sense of commitment to ACE, leading to continued membership. Findings also suggest that geography makes no difference in member retention. Results were unclear concerning the impact of employer affiliation on continued membership. Further research into individual member characteristics and the collection of more data are recommended.

Introduction

Individuals join organizations for a variety of reasons; reasons for affiliation, participation, and membership continuance in voluntary professional organizations remain largely unexplored. Research from sociology and applied psychology, primarily exploring the employer-employee relationship, must be extrapolated to attempt to explain similar phenomena in voluntary organizations.

Need Fulfillment and Motivation

Most research supports the idea that all human behavior is driven by the desire to satisfy needs and that the more needs a relationship satisfies, the more likely an individual is to value that relationship and to want to continue it. Human needs may be classified into lower-order (deficiency or hygiene) needs and higher-order (growth or motivational) needs (DuBrin,

2002). Belonging might be classed as a lower-order or more basic need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) found such a need to be powerful and fundamental, contributing to forming social relationships. Individuals may be both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to join voluntary organizations in efforts to satisfy the need to belong, as well as various other needs.

The theory of planned behavior posits that individuals base decisions on information as moderated by intention (determined by attitudes, norms, and perceived control), while the functional approach posits that behavior results from evaluation of the benefits to be derived therefrom (Greenslade & White, 2005). Both theories play a part in predicting levels of participation in voluntary activities.

Organizational participation in search of need fulfillment may entail attendance at meetings and member communication (Catchings, 2004). Organizations increasingly must emphasize communication because most employees (members) expect not only to be well-informed about the organization and its activities but also to be part of the dialogue of decision-making (Mai & Akerson, 2003).

Individual Attributes and Organizational Cultures

Because individuals do not have the same needs, organizations cannot expect to treat all members the same. For example, individuals vary in their needs for cognition or in their motivation to learn (Cacioppo, Kao, Petty, & Rodriguez, 1986; Tharenou, 2001). Some research suggests that individuals' escalation or maintenance of commitment may depend more on individual characteristics than on outcomes (Singer & Singer, 2001).

Etzioni (1964, 1968) notes that modern society and its organizations are complex and that individuals maintain membership in many different organizations. The specific nature of those memberships is determined by the characteristics of the organization and by the attributes of the individual. Individual psychological traits and motivations affect the degree to which an individual will commit to an organization, as do the characteristics of the organization itself.

All organizations maintain their own distinct cultures, comprising unique structures and belief systems (Pepper, 1995), including shared meaning expressed through recognized symbolic forms (Conrad, 1990). Organizations use such symbolic forms to communicate their beliefs to their members formally and informally (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). They seek to involve members financially, temporally, and emotionally by creating investment in the organization's maintenance and growth (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rusbult, 1983). The extent to which any individual buys into an organization depends on such factors as individual historical antecedents,

perceptions of self-efficacy, goal-directedness, peer expectations, and level of cognition about an organization's purposes and programs (Maehr & Braskamp).

Organizational cultures provide structures that allow members to fulfill needs (Conrad). Organization members' individual psychology plays a role in determining their need-fulfillment strategies and their subsequent response to organizational cultures (deMan & Ephraim, 2001; Pandey, 1979; Solomon, Sneed, & Serow, 1979; Mullin & Hogg, 1999; van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004; Greene, Morrison, & Tischler, 1980; Pelled & Xin, 1997). National cultures of members differ in their collective constructions of the individual self; the American situation favors self-enhancement, so Americans tend toward personal-improvement activities (Kitayama, Matsumoto, Markus, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Such cultural emphasis contributes to Americans' involvement with voluntary professional organizations as vehicles to enhance their professional knowledge, skills, and contacts.

Participation in goal-setting may influence performance of (and, in voluntary professional organizations, participation in) activities that lead toward the goals set. However, Yearta, Maitlis, and Briner (1995) urge caution in using goal setting to motivate members of complex organizations, suggesting that reducing the lengths of goal-setting periods and frequently evaluating progress toward goals improves motivational results.

Identification and Commitment

Review of the literature suggests more positive perceptions of organizations by their members depend on increased levels of member identification, investment, and commitment (Collier, 2001). Organization identification may have multiple foci (one's own career, organization, occupation) and different dimensions (cognitive, affective, evaluative, and behavioral) (van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). Van Knippenberg and van Shie (2000) found employees' identification with work groups to be stronger than their identification with their employing organization as a whole and to be more predictive of their behavior and of their attitudes toward their organization. Organizational identification prevents worker (member) alienation and reduces turnover.

Differential individual needs for affiliation do not seem to predict group identification, although the tendency to prefer to associate with those most like oneself appears to be a basic human need (Ray & Hall, 1995). Employees (members) may exhibit different degrees of integration and commitment to the group (Turniansky & Hare, 1998). Building commitment involves

responsive leadership and organizational willingness to change structures and procedures.

Persons who see themselves or who are seen as professionals may characterize their job commitments as composed of organizational commitments to their employer and professional commitments to their larger peer group of other professionals (Brierley, 1996). Organizational and professional commitments are psychological phenomena rather than structural phenomena and are based on subjective meanings; personal characteristics increase both types of commitment, and the two types are positively correlated with each other (the higher a person's organizational commitment, the higher his/her occupational commitment and conversely) (Aranya & Jacobson, 1975).

Continuing membership in voluntary professional organizations may depend on affective commitment and on member satisfaction with the organization. Emotional ties to the organization may be built upon the personal ties encouraged in smaller organizational subgroups (Randall & O'Driscoll, 1997; Eby, Freeman, Rush, & Lance, 1999). Overall satisfaction with a group influences an individual's commitment to that group; one component of such satisfaction is initial socialization of new members into the group, which may be facilitated by existence of smaller subgroups within the larger group (Hellman & McMillin, 2001).

Fuller, Barnett, Hester, and Relyea (2003) suggest that an individual's organizational commitment is influenced by his/her perception of how much the organization cares about him/her, based on social exchange theory and ideas about reciprocity, and by his/her organization-based self-esteem, based on perceptions of his/her worth as a member of the organization. Organizational citizenship behaviors are defined as actions that help an organization but that may not be formally rewarded by it (Feather & Rauter, 2004). However, such unrecognized behaviors still may contribute to building an individual's skills and perceived self-efficacy and to developing in him/her increased levels of affective commitment toward and identification with the organization. An individual's commitment to an organization also is influenced by perception of that organization's values and how much they agree with his/her own beliefs (Finagan, 2000).

Commitment to a group may be enhanced by an individual's investment or engagement in that group. Investment may have an affective component, and engagement in work depends to a large part on perceptions of that work's meaningfulness (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). If a voluntary professional organization is to survive and grow, members and potential members must identify with the organization's purpose, values, and leadership and must invest in its mission. Such identification and investment

depend on members' perception that the organization meets their professional and personal needs and should be manifested in increased growth through recruitment and in members' continued affiliation with the organization (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003).

Distance Decay

Geographic proximity has long been regarded as a predictor of an individual's involvement with activities and organizations; the closer an individual is to an activity, the more likely he/she is to become and stay involved with it. Geographers have posited an adaptation of Newton's law of universal gravitation (attraction between two bodies decreases proportionally to the square of the distance between them) stating that proximity increases relatedness (distance decay) (Hagerstrand, 1970; Wheeler & Stutz, 1970).

Fotheringham (1952) notes the importance of the distance decay concept to urban and economic geography; it has been viewed as a "behavioral measure of the relationship between distance and interaction," although such relationships may not necessarily be strictly linear ones. Debate exists about the explanatory and predictive utility of distance decay formulations, and the idea has found its greatest application in seeking to identify the spatial locus of so-called central places (Olsson, 1970). It also stands to reason that other motivating factors might be sufficient to overcome any disadvantage of location and resulting distance, although no research was found bearing directly on this point.

Purpose of the Study

This research sought to discover to what extent participation in special interest groups and service on committees or as an organization officer influences member identification and investment, as evidenced by continued membership in the organization. It also sought to identify whether a relationship exists between location of an organization's meetings and member retention. Research questions addressed by this study may be broken into four categories:

Descriptive analysis of membership patterns

- Has membership in ACE increased over the past 10 years?
- Of the members who have joined ACE over the past 10 years, how many are still members?
- Of the members who joined in the last 10 years but who are no longer members, how many dropped out of the organization after just one year?

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- Of the members who joined in the last 10 years but who are no longer members, how many dropped out of the organization after two years?
- Of the members who joined in the last 10 years, are there a number who have maintained only intermittent membership, and, if so, is there any pattern to such intermittency?

Influence of organizational structures as manifested in membership retention

- Does membership retention correlate with service on organization committees?
- Does membership retention correlate with service as an officer in the organization?
- Does membership retention correlate with leadership of a special interest group?

Influence of geography on membership retention (distance decay)

- Does membership retention correlate with geographic location of a member's home base?
- Does membership retention correlate with location of the annual meeting?
- Does membership retention correlate with location of the regional meetings?
- Does membership retention correlate with location of the special interest group workshops?

Historical influence of institutional affiliation on membership retention

Does membership retention correlate with a member's institutional affiliation, i.e., are members employed at land-grant institutions more or less likely to stay members than those employed at other types of institutions?

Methods

Data analyzed for this study consisted of five spreadsheet files provided by the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE), headquartered in Gainesville, Fla. Altogether, these files contained data about ACE members from 1991 through 2005, detailing each member's name, address, employer, and job title; year joined and level of membership maintained; participation on committees and as an officer or special interest group (SIG) leader; awards received; and whether the member had paid dues for each one of the years covered. Other fields also were present in each file, for example, whether the member elected certain arrangements for paying dues or contributing to special funds. The files yielded 1,441 valid records.

Descriptive statistics showing frequencies and, in some cases, measures of central tendency were calculated for variables. Variables to operationalize the constructs of members' time in the organization, intermittency of membership, membership retention, members' organizational involvement, and proximity to national meetings were computed from variables in the original dataset. Selected variables were analyzed using bivariate correlation and, in a few cases, simple linear regression to attempt to answer the study's research questions. No other inferential statistical procedures were used, since most data were categorical and not suitable for further types of analysis.

Discussions with former officers of ACE and with representatives of the organization's Membership Committee about the parameters of the data included in the files originally provided have raised questions about data accuracy and inclusiveness. Because this research is largely exploratory and no literature was found directly addressing the research questions asked by this study, it was decided to proceed with analysis of the data provided, recognizing the limited generalizability of any findings. However, future studies that seek to address like research questions should be concerned with the collection of more inclusive and more accurate data.

Discussion of Findings

Membership Trends: Need Fulfillment and Motivation

The 1,441 valid records represented 1,441 individuals who had been members of ACE during any of the 14 years from 1991 through 2004. Data for 2005 were eliminated because it was discovered that many persons who intended to continue as members had not in fact paid their 2005 dues at the time the datasets were transmitted for analysis.

Examination of membership figures for the 10-year period 1994 through 2004 (eliminating 1996 data, 85 records missing data for this year) indicates that ACE membership did increase, but rates of increase were not the same across years. For example, membership peaked in 1998 at 726 members, then fluctuated thereafter between a high of 698 (2001) and a low of 624 (2003). Mean membership from 1994 to the peak year of 1998 was 566 members, and the mean membership for the subsequent six years (1999-2004) was 667, showing an increasing average-trend. The data available were insufficient to discern whether there was something unique about the year 1998 (although anecdotal evidence suggests dues increases in years subsequent to 1998 may have played a part in membership decreases) or to reveal factors that may have influenced the slight decrease after 1998 and subsequent stabilization thereafter.

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Of the 1,034 members who joined the organization between 1994 and 2003, 558 of them (54%) were still on the membership rolls in 2004. Members who joined the organization during the 14-year period from 1991 through 2004 but who dropped out before 2004 after one year of membership numbered 365 (25.3% of total 14-year membership figures). Members of this same cohort who dropped out after two years of membership numbered 215 (14.9%). So, approximately 40% of those who joined ACE during the period from 1991 through 2003 remained members for just one or two years. Members have suggested that some individuals joined for just one or two years solely to present conference papers.

Each member's years of membership in the organization were calculated based on data recorded for the year joined; the year joined was subtracted from the year 2004 to yield a "time in the organization" variable. This variable ranged from one year (6.5%) to 64 years (.1%, 1 member), with mean time in the organization of 11.5 years and mode, seven years.

An intermittency score was calculated for each member as follows: beginning with 1992, membership score (0 = not a member, 1 = member, based on dues having been paid) for the year preceding the year under consideration was subtracted from the membership score for the year under consideration. So, for example, a person who was a member in 1992 but not in 1991 would receive a 1992 intermittency score of 1; a member in 1991 who did not pay dues for 1992 would receive an intermittency score of -1, and a member who joined the organization after 1992 would receive a 1992 intermittency score of 0, as would someone who was a member in both 1991 and 1992. Thirteen intermittency scores were calculated for each member (one for each of the years 1992 through 2004), then summed to form a composite intermittency score for each member. An individual who had maintained uninterrupted membership for the entire period would receive a score of 0; the higher the intermittency score, the more irregular the individual's pattern of membership. Median intermittency score was 2, as was the mode; all but 14.1% of members exhibited some degree of intermittency. They let their memberships lapse for one year, one or more times during their affiliation with ACE.

The increases in membership and the longevity of over half its members throughout the period under study suggest that this voluntary organization is fulfilling some of the needs of a plurality of its members. Just what those needs are and how the organization is filling them was beyond the scope of this study.

*Relationship of Organizational Involvement With Membership Retention:
Organizational Culture and Individual Identification and Commitment*

Retention Index. A membership retention index was calculated for each individual based on the ratio between the number of years (1991 through 2004) that an individual was registered as a member and the number of years that individual potentially could have been a member (based on years elapsed between the first year of membership and the year 2004). To illustrate, an individual who joined in 1991 and remained a member continuously through 2004 would have a membership index score of 1.00 (14/14), while an individual who joined the organization in 1998 and left it in 2000 would have a retention index of .33 (2 years of membership/6 years of potential membership). The retention index ranged from .00 (6.8%, attributable to missing data caused by elimination of year 2005) to 1.00 (531 members, 36.8%). The mean retention index was .62.

Involvement Score. Members were scored on four separate variables (0 = no, 1 = yes) as to whether they had ever (1) served on an organization committee, (2) served as an officer of the organization (including regional representative or board member), (3) served as head of a special interest group (SIG), and (4) received an award. Each member also was given a composite involvement score based on the sum of these four scores. Thus, an individual who had done none of these things would receive a composite involvement score of 0, while an individual who had done all of them would receive a score of 4. Scores between 0 and 4 indicate different combinations of involvement indicators for each individual. The following percentages were calculated: 12.5% of members had served as committee members; 17.3% had served as officers; 9.6% had served as SIG leaders; and 13.9% had received one or more awards.

Although totaling percentages for each of the individual involvement indicators results in 63.3%, most leadership roles in the organization probably were filled by the same small group of members. In fact, 68.1% of members had no involvement whatsoever in committees, organizational governance, or SIG leadership and had never won an award of any kind. Also, as composite involvement score increased, the percentage of members with that score decreased.

Correlations. Retention index was then correlated with individual involvement scores for committee membership, service as an officer and SIG leadership; the retention index was also correlated with the composite involvement score. All relationships were significant at the .00 level of confidence.

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Regression. As a second measure of the relationship between organizational involvement and continuing membership, the interval variable years in organization was regressed on each of the individual involvement indicators. All relationships were significant at the .00 level of confidence.

This data showed a statistically significant relationship between involvement in organization leadership activities and remaining a member. Although it is axiomatic that correlation is not causation, nonetheless these data indicate that the assumption of no relationship can be rejected; thus, a positive correlation may be said to exist between organizational involvement and member retention.

A certain segment of ACE members (36.8%) in the sample studied evidenced organizational commitment that may well have been in response to such factors as a more informal organizational structure which emphasized small groups (SIGs) and high levels of communication. Indeed, ACE officers stated that each member "must" join a SIG when he/she comes into the organization, and based on informal analysis of the organization's Web site, such special interest groups appear to be the predominant means of identification and involvement with and communication within the organization.

Indeed, staying in the organization was highly correlated with involvement in the organization, either as an organization officer, a member of a committee, leader of a SIG, or as recipient of an award. These relationships were positive and significant at the .00 level of confidence. Additionally, the time a person had been a member of the organization, as calculated by subtracting his/her "date joined" as recorded in the database from the year 2004, was significantly positively correlated with involvement scores. Obviously, some relationship exists between being involved and staying in the organization.

However, despite the strong positive correlation, the actual numbers of persons who had been strongly involved were quite small. Based on the data available, 68.1% of members had never held an office, served on a committee, been a SIG leader, or received an award. This seems to point to the same group of persons (32.9% of the membership) being heavily involved at all levels.

Review of the literature points out that analysis of the effects of organizational structures and communication styles on member affiliation, participation, and retention cannot be regarded as complete without considering the characteristics of individual members (deMan & Ephraim; Pandey; Solomon, Sneed, & Serow). Such analysis of individuals and the resulting identification of the personal characteristics and motivations behind involvement is missing from this study. Similarly, this study did not address the

impact on member identification and organizational integration of communication via the Internet (the principal way SIG members stay in touch with each other during the 12 months between annual meetings); for example, does McLuhan's idea of "cool" media play a part in allowing SIG members to feel involved in the organization simply by passively reading posts to SIG listservs, without feeling the need to seek more active outlets such as service as officers, committee members, or SIG leaders themselves (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995)?

Influence of Geographic Location on Membership Retention: Distance Decay

Region/Retention Correlations. During the period 1991-2004, ACE members lived in each of the 50 states and on every continent except Antarctica. ACE is divided into seven regions (ACE Annual Directory), six of them based on geography (Region 7, "Retired/Life," was excluded from calculations as it was found that no members in the original dataset had been classified into this region). Members were differentially distributed throughout these regions. Because of its lesser variability, region was selected as the geographic comparison variable rather than state/country of residence. Membership retention index was correlated with member's home base region, and the relationship was found to be nonsignificant (Pearson correlation coefficient = .006, $p = .829$). Thus, it may be concluded that there is no relationship between where a member is based and his/her staying a member of the organization.

Annual Meeting Location, Proximity Scores. The ACE annual meeting typically rotates among the regions. Proximity-to-annual-meeting scores were calculated for each individual for each year he/she was a member, as follows: member's home base in same region as annual meeting = 2, member's home base in region contiguous to region of annual meeting = 1, member's home base not in same region nor contiguous to region of annual meeting = 0. For years in which he/she was not a member, the member was assigned a proximity score of 0. Then, a composite proximity score was calculated for each member by summing his/her 14 individual proximity scores. Proximity scores ranged from 0 (6.7% of members) to 16 (3.4% of members), with data nearly normally distributed (mean = 6.3, median = 6, mode = 6).

Proximity Score/Retention Index Correlations. Proximity score was then correlated with membership retention index. The correlation was found to be statistically significant at the .00 level (Pearson correlation coefficient = .385, $p = .000$). These results suggest that there exists a positive relationship between an individual's proximity to the location of the annual meeting and

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his/her staying in the organization, that is, the closer an individual's home base is to the annual meeting location, the more likely he/she is to stay a member.

Composite proximity score also was correlated with intermittency score and was found to be negatively correlated at the .00 level of significance (Pearson correlation coefficient = $-.258$, $p = .000$), suggesting that the closer one is to the location of the annual meeting, the less intermittent his/her membership.

Regional Meetings, SIG Workshops. According to ACE headquarters personnel, no consistent, readily available data could be located with regard to location of regional meetings or SIG workshops for the 14-year period under investigation. Thus, relationship between member retention and location of regional meetings and relationship between member retention and location of SIG workshops were not addressed by this study.

Early 1950s research in fields like geography led to the somewhat-intuitive idea that proximity affects participation (distance decay), for example, that proximity of organizational events to members' home bases should increase continuation of involvement with an organization. ACE members in the database analyzed represent all 50 states (although one-quarter of the members come from just five states), Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico, and all of the continents except Antarctica. The organization is divided into six geographical regions (five in the United States and one international region), although the majority (66%) of members come from the North Central and Southern United States.

Analysis of geographic data about members' home bases showed no statistically significant correlation between their home region and retention of membership in the organization. Members' proximity to the location of the annual meeting, which is held at different places, was, however, significantly positively correlated with retention index score and was significantly negatively correlated with intermittency of membership. These results imply that it matters to members where the meetings are located.

However, the distance decay concept was formulated at a time when people did less cross-country travel, and debate exists about the explanatory and predictive utility of distance decay formulations (Olsson). It also stands to reason that other motivating factors might be sufficient to overcome any disadvantage of location and resulting distance, although no research was found bearing directly on this point. Perhaps what is needed is an updated formulation of the distance decay concept, taking into account not the absolute distance measured in miles but rather based on the idea of ease of access. For example, flying into Washington, D.C., from almost anywhere on

the globe is considerably easier than flying into Rapid City, S.D., or Moscow, Idaho; all these places have played host to the ACE annual meeting, and this study did not differentiate between ease of access to each of them.

Relationship of Members' Institutional Affiliation with Membership Retention

Institutional Affiliation. ACE members work at a variety of different jobs, but most of them work at land-grant universities/colleges and/or the state agencies affiliated with such institutions (Cooperative Extension, Experiment Station, etc.). Data were analyzed to discover members' institutional affiliations (land-grant/Extension, etc. = 1, all other = 0). The overwhelming majority (82.9%) of ACE members work at land-grant universities and affiliated agencies.

Correlation. Membership retention index was correlated with agency affiliation, and results were statistically significant at the .00 level (Pearson correlation coefficient = .103, $p = .000$). These results suggest that a positive relationship exists between working at a land-grant or for an agency like Extension and remaining a member of ACE. However, when member's time in the organization was regressed on agency affiliation, no relationship was found (F score = .021, $p = .884$). This contradiction should be investigated further.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research into individual characteristics and motivations of ACE members, as well as into the effects on membership retention of travel accessibility to annual meeting sites, is suggested. In addition, concerns were raised about the validity of inferences from data that some ACE officers and committee members felt was inaccurate. The pursuit of more accurate data, whether by discovery of more accurate records or collection of fresh, verifiably accurate data, is encouraged. However, research in agricultural education (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002; Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001) suggests that questions about generalizability can be satisfied if it can be shown that nonresponders were not significantly different from those who participated in a study. Although not strictly applicable here, it may be extrapolated that if the members omitted from the dataset were not significantly different from those included, then study results can safely be inferred to the population. In the case of the ACE data, there is not enough information to make such an inference, making this another consideration for further study.

Conclusion

Does organization involvement build members' identification with and sense of commitment to that organization, leading to continued membership

in it? Fourteen years of data from one professional organization suggests that such a relationship exists. Does geography matter in terms of retaining members? The same data suggests that where members live is not significant to their staying in the organization, but that where annual meetings are held might be. Does employer affiliation impact continued membership? The results were unclear. This study puts some flesh on the intuitive notion that it's good to provide small group fora to involve members and that holding meetings near where people live will keep them in the fold, but more definitive research remains to be done along the avenues suggested above.

About the Author

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