

doi: 10.5191/jiaee.2014.21201

Members' Perceived Benefits and Values of the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education

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Abstract

The Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) was established to strengthen and advance the knowledge base of agricultural and extension education worldwide. The purpose of this study was to determine perceived benefits of AIAEE membership. The objectives were to assess AIAEE members' perceived organizational benefits; rank the top five perceived benefits; and, assign monetary values to the top five perceived benefits. AIAEE members (N = 161) responded to an online questionnaire. Respondents' perceived organizational benefits included innovative ideas, professional knowledge, collaboration, opportunities to publish in the JIAEE (Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education), and the importance of recognition awards. Their top five benefits were ranked as (a) journal, (b) conference, (c) networking, (d) professional development, and (e) communications. Lastly, they assigned monetary values to their AIAEE membership benefits. Values were highest for the journal (M = \$25.06), followed by the conference (M = \$21.94), and communications (M = \$9.63). The AIAEE can recruit and retain members more effectively by continually evaluating members' perceived benefits and values derived from membership. The AIAEE should create recruitment and retention plans based on members' benefits and values, highlighting the most valuable and/or important benefits, and seek to strengthen lesser-valued benefits. As the AIAEE's membership base changes, so too might change individual member's perceived benefits and values, causing organizational shifts and/or priorities. For example, future AIAEE members may demand more social media interaction, instead of current communication mediums (i.e., journal, listserv, etc.).

Keywords: Membership Benefits, Values, Conference, Publications, Networking

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by Hatch Act (TEX08934) and State of Texas funds; it was produced through the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, College Station, Texas.

Introduction

The Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) was established in 1984 to strengthen and advance the knowledge base of agricultural and extension education worldwide. AIAEE membership includes university educators, graduate students, extension agents, and members from agribusinesses, international agencies, foundations and financial institutions. The association's objectives, contained within AIAEE's Constitution (<https://www.aiaee.org/index.php/constitution>, September 2009), are to

1. Initiate, maintain, and improve communication and liaison with those responsible for aspects of development in agricultural and extension education;
2. Foster acquaintance, fellowship, and understanding among members and to serve as a vehicle for exchange of ideas, philosophy, and professional materials to establish international agricultural and extension education as a profession;
3. Articulate more clearly the role of agricultural and extension education in agricultural development;
4. Cooperate with other organizations and groups; and,
5. Further the profession of education through international agricultural and extension education.

Members may join the AIAEE for many reasons; membership benefits may include increased knowledge, networks, and partnerships through organizational contacts. All dues-paying members receive a subscription to the AIAEE journal, e-mail listserv notices, voting rights, and opportunities to present research abstracts,

posters, and/or workshops at the annual conference.

Conceptual Framework

Why do professionals and graduate students choose to participate and remain active in professional organizations? Research on affiliation, retention, and selection of membership in professional international agricultural organizations is minimal. In 2007, the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE), commissioned a study (White & Wingenbach, 2007) on membership benefits in professional organizations, in the broader scope of agriculture, which was helpful in establishing this study's framework.

Need Fulfillment and Motivation

Individual needs for membership in professional organizations differ on personal ideals and motivation. An individual's desire to satisfy such needs is to fulfill "a person's conscious wants, desires, or motives" (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, p. 2046). Social relationships and the need for communication with others are factors affecting professional organization membership (Catchings, 2004); social relationships are formed and maintained as a human's basic need to belong to a larger group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

Individuals choose to be involved and remain involved in professional organizations for many reasons (White & Wingenbach, 2007); active participation may increase one's motivation to join an organization. Professional organization benefits can include the ability to attend meetings or conferences, possibilities to publish research, or opportunities for leadership roles. Members in professional organizations typically depend on timely

communication and the ability to participate in the decision-making process of electing officers and conducting business (Mai & Akerson, 2003).

Individual Attributes and Organizational Cultures

Some organizations work hard to recruit new members and retain current members within their groups, therefore addressing an individual member's needs is important to organizational growth. Individuals' perceptions, need fulfillment, and organizational characteristics drive membership (Masterson & Stamper, 2003), while the reason individuals participate or stay in an organization depends more on the individual, rather than on what the organization provides each member (Singer & Singer, 2001). Individuals' needs are different and unique; organizations should not treat all members equally (White & Wingenbach, 2007).

Organizational cultures have basic structures, shared assumptions, values and belief systems (Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010). The culture of an organization often gravitates toward members' interests and incorporates need fulfillment strategies (White, 2005). Many members join and become active in professional organizations for personal improvement activities, which is why some organizations provide networking and knowledge sharing sessions, and professional skill building activities to increase voluntary membership (White & Wingenbach, 2007). Additionally, an organization must have a clear identity and attributes including goals, values, culture, and performance (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). By properly identifying the organization, members will have a better understanding and more realistic expectations of their organization.

Identification and Commitment

Professional development among university faculty and extension professionals is essential for career advancement. Professional organization membership offers valuable networking opportunities and builds loyalty among members (White & Wingenbach, 2007). Individuals choosing professional organization membership should embrace their organization's purpose, values, leadership, and mission. Members must believe that the organization meets their professional and personal needs, which typically produces loyalty and recruitment of new members (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003). Many professional organizations conduct annual conferences that provide venues where graduate students and academic faculty can enhance their knowledge. Conferences serve a variety of professional needs, including scholarly exchange of ideas, professional development, employment-related activities, and student recruitment (Broder, Bergstrom, & Kriesel, 1994).

Hebel (2007) stated "American universities that have long been involved in research and service work abroad are taking a more deliberate and comprehensive approach to where and how they invest their time, money, and talent" (p. 1). International agricultural development is important for the agricultural industry, yet while colleges of agriculture have made internationalizing agriculture important (Alsup & Eggington, 2001), the potential to use a valuable internationalization tool—study abroad—falls short with undergraduates studying international agricultural policies, products, peoples, and cultures (Wingenbach et al., 2003). The authors concluded a lack of international knowledge stemmed from limited international experiences and thus a value system that does not embrace globalization. While other studies have

suggested students have limited knowledge and experience of international opportunities, they were interested in such activities (Irani, Place, Lundy, & Friedel, 2004). High interest levels in international activities related strongly to participation in professional organizations.

Graduate student membership in professional organizations can help students develop leadership, communication and team-building skills, while networking with other professionals (Wachenheim, 2007). Graduate students' membership in professional organizations increases member retention in organizations (Lawver & Lee, 1990). Some graduate students chose not to join professional organizations because they did not grasp the importance of participation or were too busy; however, membership cost was the number one reason students did not join professional organizations (Desmond, 1997). Desmond concluded these factors could be overcome if students were sponsored financially and they were more likely to join if made aware of professional organizations through workshops or peers.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine perceived benefits of membership in the AIAEE. The research objectives were to:

1. Determine members' agreement levels with perceived benefits of the AIAEE;
2. Identify the top five self-reported AIAEE membership benefits; and,
3. Assign monetary values to the top five self-reported AIAEE membership benefits.

Methods

A descriptive design (Tuckman, 1999) was used to answer the purpose and objectives of this study. The population of

interest ($N = 297$) for this census study was all AIAEE dues-paying members with viable e-mail addresses in spring 2009. There were two types of AIAEE members: graduate students and professionals. The sample ($n = 161$) was self-selected by AIAEE members who chose to respond to this study.

AIAEE members' perspectives were measured using a modified instrument (White & Wingenbach, 2007) that was reviewed by a panel of experts for reliability and validity. Modifications were made to the title and all identifying factors from the original to the modified instrument. The research instrument was applicable for this study because it allowed record of participants' perceptions of organizational benefits (e.g., AIAEE and the *JIAEE*), similar to the organizational benefits measured in the Association for Communication Excellence (White & Wingenbach, 2007).

The first section of the research instrument provided a Likert-type four-point scale (*Strong Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree*), where participants recorded their agreement levels for the perceived benefits of (a) AIAEE annual conferences, (b) membership, (c) outreach, and (d) recognition. Twenty-two statements made up the first sub-section, related to the annual conference. A sample statement for the annual conference was "*attending annual conference is a priority for me;*" seven statements were negatively worded to avoid patterned response. The annual conference sub-scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of .80 from analyses of the response set.

The second sub-section, membership, was measured using 10 statements. Sample statements included "*membership dues are reasonable compared to other professional organizations*" and "*the opportunity to host the annual conference is not an important benefit.*"

Three of the statements were negatively worded; this sub-section had a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

The third sub-section, relating to outreach, was measured with 11 statements; three statements were negatively worded, which included "*opportunities to publish in the JIAEE are important to my professional development*" and "*I do not check the AIAEE website for announcements.*" This sub-section had a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

The final sub-section, recognition, included statements such as "*opportunities to hold office are important to remain a member*" and "*recognition awards are not important to me.*" This section contained six statements, three of which were negatively worded; it had a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

Another portion of the research instrument allowed participants to input and rank their top five perceived benefits of AIAEE membership. Respondents considered their annual membership dues (\$70, membership plus e-journal; \$110, membership plus print journal; life members were asked how they would distribute \$100 for all benefits) in reporting their benefits. The final section of the research instrument recorded participants' demographic information.

Online data collection methods were used to decrease response time and cost (Ladner, Wingenbach, & Raven, 2002). Participants were contacted, based on the membership roster of the AIAEE for 2009; the 2009 membership roster constituted the population of interest. Five personalized email contacts (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) were sent, every five days, to AIAEE members over four weeks. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the data.

Findings

AIAEE members ($n = 161$) completed an online survey in spring 2009. Respondents represented 54% of the target population ($N = 297$). The majority (65%) of respondents were male ($f = 105$), resided in the Americas (78%), had been AIAEE members for seven or less years (63%), and two-thirds of them had never allowed a lapse in their AIAEE membership (see Table 1).

The first objective was to determine members' agreement levels with perceived benefits of the AIAEE organization. Twenty-two statements derived from the literature (White & Wingenbach, 2007) were used to measure respondents' agreement (*Strong Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree*) for the perceived benefits from participation in the AIAEE annual conference. Respondents' agreement levels varied across all individual statements. A sample of statements (see Table 2) which participants agreed with are "*Professional knowledge gained at annual conference is important*" ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.52$), "*Professional networking is important to my remaining in the AIAEE*" ($M = 3.35, SD = 0.67$); while they disagreed with the statement, "*The opportunity to present at annual conference is **not** important to my professional development*" ($M = 1.81, SD = 0.73$).

For the perceived benefit of organizational membership, respondents reported that they agreed ($M = 2.51-3.50$) with nine of the statements and disagreed ($M = 1.51-2.50$) with the other four statements. One statement (see Table 2) that participants agreed with was "*Collaboration with other professionals is important*" ($M = 3.50, SD = 0.51$).

Table 1

Demographic Profile of AIAEE Member Respondents (n = 161)

Items	Categories	<i>f</i> ^a	%
What is your gender?	Male	105	65.2
	Female	56	34.8
How many years have you been a member?	0-3	69	42.9
	4-7	33	20.5
	8-11	25	15.5
	20+	12	7.5
	12-15	11	6.8
	16-19	4	2.5
In which AIAEE region do you reside?	Americas	125	77.6
	Africa	13	8.1
	Asia	11	6.8
	Europe	10	6.2
	Oceania	2	1.2
Have you ever let your membership lapse?	No	107	66.5
	Yes	54	33.5

Note. ^a Frequencies may not total 161 because of missing data.

For the perceived benefit of outreach, respondents agreed ($M = 2.51-3.50$) with eight statements and disagreed ($M = 1.51-2.50$) with the other three statements. A sample of an agreement statement was, “*Published conference proceedings are important*” ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.64$).

For the last sub-section, relating to recognition, respondents agreed ($M = 2.51-3.50$) with two statements and disagreed ($M = 1.51-2.50$) with the other four statements (see Table 2). A sample statement from this section is “*Recognition awards are important*” ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.68$).

Table 2

Perceived Benefits of the AIAEE (n = 161)

Categories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Annual Conferences		
Professional knowledge gained at annual conference is important.	3.43	0.52
Professional networking is important to my remaining in the AIAEE.	3.35	0.67
Participation in annual conference is an activity that benefits my professional development.	3.34	0.58
The opportunity to present at annual conference is important to my professional development.	3.25	0.67
The opportunity to travel abroad for the annual conference is a professional benefit.	3.22	0.73
Location of the annual conference does not affect my membership.	3.22	0.74
Social networking is important to my AIAEE membership.	3.19	0.65
Location of the annual conference impacts my attendance.	3.19	0.81
Attending annual conference is a priority to me.	3.04	0.75
Conference field trips are important to my professional development.	2.90	0.73
Local cultural activities at annual conference are important to my professional development.	2.85	0.75
Conference field trips are not important to my professional development.	2.75	0.87
Attending annual conference is important for professional job opportunities.	2.72	0.78
The opportunity for spouses/guests to attend the annual conference is important.	2.54	0.78
The opportunity for spouses/guests to attend the annual conference is not important.	2.45	0.86
Attending annual conference is not important for professional job opportunities.	2.14	0.77
The opportunity to travel abroad for the annual conference is a personal benefit.	2.04	0.68
Annual conference attendance is not important to my professional development.	1.84	0.73
The opportunity to present at annual conference is not important to my professional development.	1.81	0.73
Membership		
Collaboration with other professionals is important.	3.50	0.51
Innovative ideas gained at annual conference are important.	3.41	0.52
My membership is based on professional reasons.	3.33	0.56
Membership dues are reasonable compared to other professional organizations.	3.15	0.54
Membership dues are a good value in relationship to the benefits received.	3.10	0.56
My membership is based on personal reasons.	3.06	0.67
Voting rights are an important membership benefit.	2.92	0.71
I choose to be a member because of the breadth of diversity in the AIAEE.	2.61	0.68
The opportunity to host the annual conference is not an important benefit.	2.52	0.83

The opportunity to host the annual conference is an important benefit.	2.46	0.86
Voting rights are not an important membership benefit.	1.98	0.74
Membership dues are not a good value in relationship to the benefits received.	1.82	0.51
Collaboration with other professionals is not important.	1.54	0.51
Outreach		
Published conference proceedings are important.	3.30	0.64
Opportunities to publish in the Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education are important to my professional development.	3.28	0.69
Newsletters are an important benefit.	3.21	0.63
I use the journal for professional development.	3.20	0.60
I do not check the AIAEE website for announcements.	3.02	0.48
The AIAEE listserv provides useful information.	2.94	0.56
I check the AIAEE website for announcements.	2.92	0.59
I use the journal for professional reference.	2.75	0.71
Communication from AIAEE leadership is timely.	2.18	0.72
I do not use the journal for professional development.	1.84	0.61
Opportunities to publish in the <i>Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education</i> are not important to my professional development.	1.69	0.67
Recognition		
Recognition awards are important.	3.03	0.68
Recognition awards are not important.	2.77	0.63
Being an officer is not important to my professional development.	2.48	0.81
Opportunities to hold office are important to remain a member.	2.34	0.78
Committee leadership is not important to my professional development	2.10	0.69
Committee leadership is important to my professional development.	2.03	0.71

Note. Likert-type scale: 1.00-1.50 = *Strongly Disagree*, 1.51-2.50 = *Disagree*, 2.51-3.50 = *Agree*, 3.51-4.00 = *Strongly Agree*.

The second objective was to identify the top five self-reported AIAEE membership benefits. Respondents identified those benefits as the AIAEE *journal* ($f = 88$), *conference* ($f = 82$), *networking* ($f = 78$), *professional development* ($f = 56$), and *communications* ($f = 36$). Also mentioned, but less frequently, were *career opportunities*, *committees*, *cultural awareness*, *socializing*, and *travel*.

The third objective was to assign monetary values to the top five self-reported AIAEE membership benefits. Respondents

were asked to consider their annual membership dues (\$70, membership plus e-journal; \$110, membership plus print journal; life members were asked how they would distribute \$100 for all benefits) as a basis to assign U. S. dollar values to their top five perceived membership benefits. Respondents indicated average values (see Table 3) for the most frequently recorded benefits, including the AIAEE *journal* ($M = \$24.65$, $SD = 15.32$), *conference* ($M = \$20.95$, $SD = 12.50$), and *professional development* ($M = \$20.00$, $SD = 10.66$).

Table 3

Monetary Values for the Top Five Self-Reported AIAEE Membership Benefits

Membership Benefits	Monetary Values	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>JIAEE</i>	24.65	15.32
Conference	20.95	12.50
Professional	20.00	10.66
Networking	18.16	13.30
Communications	9.68	6.73

These findings were consistent with previous research; among the top five benefits ACE members identified were *networking* ($M = \$43.56$), *annual conference* ($M = \37.52), and *journal* ($M = \$26.40$) (White & Wingenbach, 2007).

Conclusion

Members may choose to join the AIAEE, or another professional organization (White, 2005) for a variety of reasons; to attract new members and retain recurring members, organizations should seek to understand and address individual's reasons for membership. The AIAEE could recruit new members by examining differences in current members' perceived benefit values, compared by selected demographics, to better promote individual membership benefits. For example, would young members perceive the *JIAEE* to have less monetary value than an interactive social media organizational outlet, if it existed? Research should be conducted to determine if significant differences exist in AIAEE members' perceived benefits, when compared by selected demographic variables. Also, the authors realize these data are aged (i.e., collection occurred in spring 2009), therefore a follow-up study of AIAEE members' perceived versus desired membership benefits is needed to help the AIAEE grow its membership base.

The AIAEE can recruit and retain members more effectively with increased attention to the perceived benefits derived from AIAEE membership. The AIAEE should publicize the value of gaining professional knowledge and innovative ideas at the AIAEE annual conference to encourage greater participation at their conferences. Collaboration was identified as an important benefit. This finding may have increased importance as many universities and development agencies experience budgetary reductions.

Opportunities to publish in the *JIAEE* and in the AIAEE annual conference proceedings were perceived as benefits. These results correspond to previous findings (White & Wingenbach, 2007) as to why members joined organizations for professional reasons. AIAEE leaders should promote publication opportunities beyond the current AIAEE outlets (i.e., *JIAEE* and AIAEE conference proceedings).

Respondents perceived AIAEE awards as important benefits for career advancement. Members did not view opportunities to hold office in the AIAEE as an important benefit. Additional research may help us better understand professional and/or personal benefits that would encourage or explain the lack of motivation for leadership roles within the AIAEE.

Methods for continued and improved networking could be further explored.

AIAEE leaders should exploit membership benefits that are most valued by AIAEE members by creating a proactive strategic plan to increase member recruitment, retention, satisfaction with this professional organization. AIAEE leaders could explore the advantages and disadvantages of combining the AIAEE with other like-minded professional organizations. Are there benefits, value, and/or political strength in joining forces with similar professional organizations in South America, Africa, Asia, and/or other geographic regions? Additional study of this possibility to significantly grow the AIAEE membership is needed in the near future.

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