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Member-Reported Benefits of Three Alabama Educator-Focused Professional Organizations

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Abstract

Professional organizations can play an important role in the lives and work of educators. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Alabama educators' experiences with membership in statewide professional organizations and to determine what benefits, if any, members feel their organizations provide them. Four main benefits that respondents identified were community, broadening of knowledge and practice, leadership opportunities, and personal growth.

Keywords: *professional organizations, Alabama educators, membership benefits, professional community, professional development, professional belongings*

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Introduction

In recent years, many educational institutions in the United States have had to reduce their budgets, including budgets specifically related to instruction and academic programs (Flannery, 2022; Nietzel & Ambrose, 2024). For education professionals desiring to learn, network, and contribute to their fields, this can be a frustrating reality, especially if such cuts limit their ability to increase their professional knowledge and presence. In addition, for educator-focused professional organizations trying to recruit and retain members, a decrease in institutional funds allotted to professional development activities can pose a potential existential crisis, as many organizations rely on membership fees and conference attendance for their financial stability (Soito & Jankowski, 2023).

Professional organizations can be important in the lives and work of educators. To better market themselves to recruit and retain members, these organizations, particularly small state or regional ones, need to have a clear understanding of what their members consider to be the benefits of membership. Education professionals themselves would also benefit from an awareness of what educator-focused organizations might be able to provide for them, both professionally and personally. The purpose of the current study was to

explore Alabama educators' experiences with membership in statewide professional organizations and to determine what benefits, if any, members feel their organizations provide.

Literature Review

Professional organizations "play a significant role in modern society and in individuals' lives," according to Ki and Wang (2016, p. 1). These organizations, which are typically nonprofit and geared toward a specific type of professional or professional field, may be large or small and may serve a number of functions for their members. Some large national parent organizations have smaller state or regional chapters or affiliate organizations, which describes the organizations examined in the current study. Professional organizations, particularly small ones, may serve an important role, not just for the members themselves, but for the professional field as a whole, as a kind of ambassadorship to those who may be unfamiliar with the profession (Greenwood et al., 2002), helping to "advance the field" (Bauman, 2008, p. 173). Distinguishing themselves from other organizations and emphasizing the unique benefits of their organization are important parts of the group's work, as well, especially so that potential recruits and current members understand the real value they receive as members (Soito & Jankowski, 2023).

Joining and Participating in Professional Organizations

The literature indicates that word of mouth and an environment supportive of professional organizations are both effective means by which individuals learn about and join organizations. Individuals who were personally encouraged to join an organization, for example, were more likely to become involved (Smith, 1994). Walsh and Daddario (2015) also found that 70% of their study's participants learned of their organization through a colleague or employer, indicating that personal invitations were very common. The authors even posit that these "social links may expedite the assimilation process for new members," helping them to begin participating in the organization right away (Walsh & Daddario, 2015, p. 121). In addition, the environment in which one works is also a clear factor in learning about and potentially joining a professional organization. Bauman (2008) observed that if individuals work in a supportive work culture where membership in professional organizations is common and valued, they are more likely to join the organization as well. Graduate students enrolled in programs that emphasize the importance and value of professional organizations are more interested in joining an organization, as well (Bauman, 2008). Research also indicates that joining a professional organization can assist graduate students with skill development and possible leadership opportunities (Wetcho et al., 2022). One's motivation for joining an organization might go beyond a personal invitation or the supportive work or academic environment, though. Cline et al. (2019) point out that becoming a member could also lead to future personal and professional opportunities and advise that individuals should select organizations with this potential in mind.

Once individuals join a professional organization, they can begin to explore opportunities for personal participation and further involvement. The size of an organization can make a difference in the opportunities members might have to be an active participant. In a literature review focused on what determines a person's willingness to participate in an organization, Smith (1994) found that there was more participation in an organization within smaller communities. Further, Soito and Jankowski (2023) argued that individuals may have more of an impact within smaller organizations, such as those at state or regional levels. Becoming more involved helps the individual personally and can lead to other leadership and service opportunities within the organization (Cline et al., 2019).

Membership Benefits

The literature cites numerous benefits for members of professional organizations. Continuous professional learning is important for career growth and development, and one study that surveyed professional

organizations associated with academic libraries identified learning and development as a benefit of these organizations (Soito & Jankowski, 2023). Bauman (2008) found that having access to scholarly materials, such as association journals, newsletters, and other professional resources, is an enormous benefit for members. In addition, organizational conferences can provide numerous benefits for members. Bauman (2008) indicated that 80% of members surveyed demonstrated interest in attending conferences and workshops, confirming that professional development opportunities are highly sought after. Conference attendees can learn new methods and applications, stay up to date on trends in the field (Busby et al., 2019), share resources, improve confidence levels by presenting (Mata et al., 2010), and develop new ideas (Bauman, 2008).

Another benefit of conference attendance is the development of relationships (Mata et al., 2010). Getting to interact with other professionals who presumably have similar fields, values, and knowledge can be "inspiring and invigorating" (Mata et al., 2010, p. 451). Because a traditional function of professional organizations is to provide opportunities for networking among their members, many studies have found that members list networking as a major benefit of their membership (Bauman, 2008; Ki & Wang, 2016; Mata et al., 2010). A study by Walsh and Daddario (2015) revealed that organization members found career development and networking opportunities to be major benefits of their membership, which might be particularly important benefits for early professionals. They further noted that networking within an association might help female professionals who may be limited in professional contacts if they work within a hierarchical environment (Walsh & Daddario, 2015).

Loneliness and Belonging

Closely related to the idea of networking is the rise of personal loneliness in the United States and the importance of belonging. In 2023, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy issued a formal health advisory to the American people arguing that America is experiencing an "epidemic of loneliness" and noted that half of American adults have recently experienced loneliness (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 1, 4). One specific recommendation in the Surgeon General's report is for individuals to "participate in social and community groups such as fitness, religious, hobby, *professional* [emphasis added], and community service organizations to foster a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose" (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 66). Professional organizations, then, can be useful for more than just traditional professional development and job networking, but may also serve an important purpose for personal wellbeing and belonging (Hertel, 2019; Kachchhap & Horo, 2021). This assumption is backed up by the literature that indicates professionals may maintain their membership as a result of "intangible desires to maintain connections or feel a sense of belonging to the profession" (Soito & Jankowski, 2023, p. 372).

While the literature does describe general professional organization membership benefits, it puts less emphasis on the topic as it specifically relates to educators and educator-focused organizations, and there is very little research that even mentions the state of Alabama and its educator-focused professional organizations. As such, the present study sought to address this gap in the literature.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore Alabama educators' experiences with membership in statewide professional organizations and to determine what benefits, if any, members feel their organizations provide them. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do Alabama educators describe their membership experiences in statewide professional organizations?

2. What are some of the professional and personal benefits that Alabama educators identify from their membership in statewide professional organizations?

Methods

Three small educator-focused professional organizations in the state of Alabama were identified as targets in this study. I was already familiar with the Alabama Student Success Organization (ALSSO) and the Association of College English Teachers of Alabama (ACETA) as an individual member and conference attendee. I was also familiar with the Alabama Mathematical Association of Two Year Colleges (AlaMATYC) as a result of collaborative work with some of those members. Personal communication with the presidents of these organizations and a brief check of the organization websites indicated similarity in membership size and focus on educators (N. Easterling, personal communication, September 11, 2023; P. Horn, personal communication, September 8, 2023; H. Nix, personal communication, September 8, 2023).

Participants

The survey garnered 28 responses in total. Of those, 27 (96.4%) respondents were currently educators in the state of Alabama, with one individual (3.6%) not currently an educator (indicating that the respondent might have been retired, as the respondent listed "mathematics" as their teaching field). Demographic information for the respondents is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Information for Participants*

	Number	Percentage
Currently an educator in Alabama?		
Yes	27	96.4%
No	1	3.6%
Member of which Alabama organizations*?		
Alabama Student Success Organization (ALSSO)	17	60.7%
Association of College English Teachers of Alabama (ACETA)	10	35.7%
Alabama Mathematical Association of Two Year Colleges (AlaMATYC)	9	32.1%
*8 respondents selected more than one organization		
Gender		
Female	22	79%
Male	6	21%
Age		
20-29	0	0%
30-39	7	25%
40-49	9	32.1%
50-59	7	25%
60-69	5	17.9%
70-79	0	0%
80+	0	0%

	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	0	0%
Not Hispanic or Latino	28	100%
Race		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0%
Asian	0	0%
Black or African American	1	3.6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0%
White	27	96.4%
Highest level of education		
Bachelor's degree	0	0%
Master's degree	18	64.3%
Post-Master's degree/certification	2	7.1%
Doctoral or other terminal degree	8	28.6%
Teaching field*		
English	17	61%
Mathematics	9	32%
Music	1	4%
Religion	1	4%
Admin/other*	2	7%
Institution		
Public K–12	0	0%
Private K–12	0	0%
Public 2–year	25	89.3%
Private 2–year	0	0%
Public 4–year	3	10.7%
Private 4–year	0	0%

Note: *One respondent listed English, music, and religion as the teaching fields. Two respondents listed administration or other as the teaching field.

Instrumentation

I explored Alabama educators' experiences with membership in statewide professional organizations using a simple qualitative design with an anonymous online survey created using Google Forms. This survey included seven multiple-choice demographic questions, two short-answer demographic questions (for respondents to fill in their gender and teaching field), and six fully open-ended questions relating to their experiences as members of the professional organizations. See the Appendix for a copy of the survey.

Data Collection

Before distributing the survey and collecting data, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval.

I contacted members of the executive boards of all three organizations and obtained permission to survey their members. The organization presidents themselves sent the survey to their respective members: 63

ACETA members, 53 AlaMATYC members, and 86 ALSSO members, for a total of 202 individuals. Of those, 28 participated, indicating a fairly low response rate of 14%. At least eight respondents were members of more than one organization, so they received the survey twice but responded only once. In addition, due to varying days that the organization presidents sent the survey to their members, some members had little more than a week to complete the survey before the deadline, which might help to explain the low response rate.

Data Analysis

Responses were transferred to Google Sheets for initial reading and analysis. The majority of the demographic questions were multiple-choice, and responses to those questions were sorted by frequency. Two demographic questions were short-answer questions, and those data were also sorted by category and frequency. All questions and responses were then printed for rereading and color-coding similar answers. I then coded the six open-ended questions utilizing Cresswell's (2015) six-step approach for qualitative analysis, counting the data for frequencies and developing the themes that emerged.

Results

Respondents were asked to identify how many years they had been a member of their organization(s). The average length of membership was 8.4 years. When asked about how they originally learned about or became involved with their organization(s), 57% mentioned a colleague or friend, 21% mentioned a direct supervisor or advisor, 14% mentioned learning about the state organization from the larger parent organization and/or associated national conference, and 7% mentioned learning about it from a publicity email. In total, 79% of respondents indicated that they originally learned about or became involved with the organization as a direct result of another person—a colleague, friend, direct supervisor, or advisor—telling them about it.

When asked to describe their personal involvement with their organization(s), 96% of respondents identified attending conferences, 25% presented a paper or session at a conference, 43% served as a member of the organization's leadership team, and 18% said they read organization emails or attended webinars or meetings.

Professional Impacts and Benefits

Respondents were asked how being a member of their organization(s) impacted them professionally. Nearly three quarters of the respondents (71%) indicated that the professional development and learning opportunities were a major positive impact for them. One respondent shared that being a member had "broadened my knowledge … [and] provided invaluable practices and content that I could use immediately in my time as an educator." Many seemed to benefit from being able to learn about other instructional techniques, with one respondent saying, "It's allowed me to see what my peers are doing—and to hear about all the new ideas other instructors have." Another respondent also cited being able to stay "current on the newest information in the field" as a major benefit.

Almost half of respondents (46%) identified the opportunity to network, collaborate, and develop professional relationships as a major membership benefit that related to their professional lives. One respondent shared, "I have developed many professional relationships across the state, which I value so much. I don't believe I would have had these types of relationships without [the organization]."

Other respondents (18%) identified leadership, whether being a leader in the organization or the development of leadership skills in general as a result of their membership, as a major benefit. Additionally, another 18% of respondents also took professional inspiration from their involvement in the organizations, with one respondent stating that member involvement had "given me research ideas," another respondent sharing that they were now "more active as a creative writer," and another respondent even feeling "inspired by the work of others."

Interestingly, at least 36% of respondents mentioned that they found positive professional benefits in learning from others "across the state," whether using that specific phrase or a clearly related variation of it (such as "within the state"). This repetition of exact (or very similar) phrasing from so many respondents appeared most often in the context of learning or interacting with others who did not work in their geographic locale.

Personal Impacts and Benefits

Respondents were then asked how being a member of their organization(s) impacted them personally. A full 71% of respondents cited friendship, community, and connectedness as major personal benefits of their membership. As one respondent put it, "Some of the professional relationships I have gained have also become true friendships." Another respondent shared, "I'm part of a larger community—one in which I feel supported and encouraged." In that same vein, one respondent said, "You learn that others are going through similar things that you are going through, so you do not feel that you are all alone!"

Half of respondents (50%) identified various areas of personal growth they felt were benefits of their membership. One respondent, for instance, stated, "I have developed personal skills related to leadership," while another cited an "improved … mindset." One said that membership had "enriched my life." Several used the words "uplifted," "encouraged," "enthusiastic," and "inspired" to describe how their personal lives were positively impacted by their membership in the organization(s).

Negative Drawbacks

Respondents were finally given an option to address whether they felt they had been provided no personal or professional benefits or if there had been some negative drawbacks related to their membership. Interestingly, the only responses to this optional question were not related to the organizations themselves.

One respondent stated, "I am occasionally frustrated when my college offers little to no encouragement or recognition for the work our organization does …. I would likely be involved even if the college did not support my costs." Another respondent shared, "The only negative drawback that I have experienced is just that it is hard to get new members to be involved at higher levels of the organization. I understand it completely as I know we all work and have multiple classes, but having new insights is important. It is important that we adapt and be forward-thinking in order to stay relevant."

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore Alabama educators' experiences with membership in statewide professional organizations and to determine what benefits, if any, the members feel their organizations provide to them. All 28 respondents (100%) from three different Alabama educator-focused organizations strongly indicated that they found positive professional and personal benefits from their membership. These respondents had an average membership in their organizations of 8.4 years, indicating that most of the respondents have long-standing relationships with them. This long-term member knowledge is a benefit to the organizations themselves in terms of organizational memory (Corbett et al., 2017; Feiz et al., 2019; Hooghe, 2003; Rotolo, 2000), which can help with stability and long-range planning.

The respondents' answers revealed four main benefits to membership in these three Alabama educator-focused organizations.

Community

The first benefit was community. The majority of respondents cited the opportunities they had to network, collaborate, develop friendships, and feel like they belonged to a community as positive benefits. This finding is in line with research on networking and belonging and confirms previous findings (Mata et al., 2010; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023; Soito & Jankowski, 2023; Walsh & Daddario, 2015). One aspect of community that is not as common in the existing research, though, is the idea that professionals can develop personal friendships as a result of their membership, so the current study does contribute this finding as an additional potential benefit of membership.

Broadening of Knowledge and Practice

The second benefit was the broadening of knowledge and practice. Most respondents were able to learn new things, stay current on innovations and best practices in their field, get advice from peers, and see what these peers from across the state were doing. This idea of "across the state" was an important part of many of these answers (36%) and appeared to indicate some members' interest in learning from other professionals in different geographic locations within the state of Alabama. Of the respondents, 96% said that they interacted with their organizations through annual conference attendance, a typical professional development opportunity for many organizations and one that is obviously very common for respondents to the current study. This theme of professional learning and development, particularly through conference attendance, supports previous research findings about the benefits of professional organization membership (Bauman, 2008; Mata et al., 2010; Soito & Jankowski, 2023; Wetcho et al., 2022).

Leadership Opportunities

In addition, leadership opportunities were a benefit for some respondents, whether through their own institutions as a result of their organizational involvement, through the organizations themselves, or as a stepping stone to the parent organization of the state chapter. Of the respondents, 43%, in fact, noted that they had served (either currently or in the past) as a member of their organization's leadership team. Though some studies mention leadership opportunities as a benefit (Bradley, 2020; Cline et al., 2019), the existing literature does not discuss it as often as other benefits, so this finding is a relatively new addition to add to the current body of knowledge.

Personal Growth

The last major benefit was personal growth. Many respondents said that they received general life enrichment, improved mindset, inspiration, and renewed enthusiasm from their participation as a member in the organizations. These findings add credence to the idea that personal inspiration and enrichment can come from organizational membership (Mata et al., 2010) and may indicate further opportunities for members to find personal satisfaction from a traditionally professionally focused group that additionally provides individual benefits outside of the profession.

Limitations

One clear limitation of this study was that it was demographically skewed, with the majority of respondents identifying as White (96.4%), female (79%), teaching in the field of English (61%), and working at a public two-year college (89.3%). The study also focused on only three educator-focused organizations in the state of Alabama and had a fairly low response rate, making it difficult to generalize the results.

Because the organization presidents distributed the survey to potential respondents, some respondents were given little more than a week to complete the survey. More individuals might have completed the survey had

they had more time to do so. In addition, because this was an anonymous survey, there was no opportunity for follow-up with additional questions.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Despite the survey's low response rate, the results yielded a number of practical implications and recommendations for practice, which may be able to help small educator-focused organizations maximize opportunities to recruit and retain members and provide quality membership benefits.

A major finding of the study is that a full 79% of respondents said that they found out about the organization directly from someone they knew, indicating that one of the most effective ways to increase membership and participation is direct word of mouth. This finding supports other studies that indicate that a majority of members learn about their organizations from people they know (Smith, 1994; Walsh & Daddario, 2015). Organizations might consider asking their current members to reach out to friends and colleagues to encourage them to attend an organization-sponsored event or to consider joining the organization. Encouraging institutional memberships, whereby an institution pays one discounted price for multiple employees to be members of the organization, is another way to boost membership and participation, as individuals may be more interested in joining an organization to which their colleagues belong and whose work their institution supports (Bauman, 2008).

Opportunities for events where members can both learn and network are vital for small statewide organizations, based on both the existing research and the results of this study. Nearly all respondents (96%) attended their organization's annual conference, and at least 36% enjoyed learning from others at the conference who did not live or work in their geographic locale. Organizations could capitalize on this information by providing as many opportunities as possible for members from a variety of colleges and locales to interact with each other. Professional organizations should also clearly state on their websites and other promotional materials the multiple benefits they offer their members, such as professional learning and networking, and, based on the results of this study, they may also want to emphasize the non-tangible benefits they can provide, such as community, friendship, belonging, leadership opportunities, and personal growth.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that members of three educator-focused professional organizations in Alabama found a number of professional and personal benefits from their membership, which included community, broadening of knowledge and practice, leadership opportunities, and personal growth. Despite the low response rate and difficulty of generalizing the results to other organizations or locations, educator-focused professional organizations wanting to recruit and retain members more effectively may want to consider the implications of the perceived benefits and find ways to clearly articulate such benefits to current and potential members.

Further research is needed to continue to identify additional perceived membership benefits for educators and how organizations might incorporate those. Future studies might try to replicate this study with a larger sample size or in a different area of the country, explore whether service on an organization's board might help encourage continued participation within that organization, question why educators might have a preference for learning from others outside of their geographical location, or study the impacts of friendships from professional organizations on educators' lives and work.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

Part 1: Personal and Institutional Characteristics

1. Are you currently an educator in the state of Alabama?
   a. Yes
   b. No
2. Are you currently a member of one or more of the following Alabama organizations? (select all that apply)
   a. Alabama Student Success Organization (ALSSO)
   b. Association of College English Teachers of Alabama (ACETA)
   c. Alabama Mathematical Association of Two Year Colleges (AlaMATYC)
   d. I am not a member of any of these organizations
3. Please identify your gender.
4. Please select your age range.
   a. 21-29
   b. 30-39
   c. 40-49
   d. 50-59
   e. 60-69
   f. 70-79
   g. 80+
5. Please select your ethnicity (IPEDS designations)
   a. Hispanic or Latino
   b. Not Hispanic or Latino
6. Please select your race (one or more) (IPEDS designations)
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   e. White
7. What is your highest level of postsecondary education?
   a. Bachelor's degree
   b. Master's degree
   c. Post-Master's degree/certification (e.g., Ed.S. or Education Specialist degree)
   d. Doctoral or other terminal degree
8. What is your teaching field?
9. Which of the following best describes your employing institution?
   a. Public K-12 institution
   b. Private K-12 institution
   c. Public 2-year institution
   d. Private 2-year institution
   e. Public 4-year institution
   f. Private 4-year institution
   g. Other

Part 2: Experiences with Statewide Professional Organizations

1. How many years have you been a member of your organization(s)?
2. Please describe how you originally learned about and/or became involved with your organization(s).

3. Please describe your personal involvement with your organization(s) (e.g., attending conferences, serving on a committee, etc.).
4. How has being a member of your organization(s) impacted you professionally?
5. How has being a member of your organization(s) impacted you personally?
6. If you feel that being a member of your organization(s) has provided you with no personal or professional benefits or that there have been some negative drawbacks related to your membership, please explain.