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## **Value of Membership in Professional Associations**

American Society for Public Administration: A Stellar Case in Point

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*The American Society for Public Administration was founded by individuals who believed that the new organization could help define, position, and advance the valuable field of public administration.*

## Introduction

How do non-profits, and specifically professional societies such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), sustain relevancy? How do we honor our past, while focusing upon the creation of value for the members of tomorrow? Are associations such as ours relevant to today's needs, to the expectations of tomorrow, and equipped to address the issues and trends of the future?

These are the questions the authors attempt to address. Our founders formed ASPA because they believed that the new organization could help to define, position, and perpetuate the field of public administration. In essence, there was "perceived value!" It was this perceived value that garnered interest at the highest levels of academia and practice. It was this perceived value, which grew the organization and its "offsprings."

Today many question the role, indeed the need, for associations and other volunteer and civic organizations. They bring into question the value these non-profits play in building community and civic society. Yes, today those committed to the volunteer sector of our society may participate differently than in the past. However, we contend that the role of the non-profit/association/volunteer sector is not diminished in its contribution to a civic society. However, it is **leadership** that will determine the sustainability of an organization. Leadership committed to: a constant scan of the environment within which their members interact; providing a vision with a focus on the possibilities; the creation of meaning and value; and, accountability through outcomes.

We trust we have made a "case in point!"

## I. Associations in America – Definition and Purpose

### What is the nonprofit sector?

Authors of the web site for BoardSource, experts in nonprofit governance, define the nonprofit sector as the collective name used to describe institutions and organizations in American society that are neither government nor business. Other names often used include the not-for-profit sector, the third sector, the independent sector, the philanthropic sector, the voluntary sector, or the social sector. Outside the United States, nonprofits are often called nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society organizations. BoardSource contends that these designations emphasize the characteristics that distinguish nonprofits: *voluntary* sector to acknowledge the importance of volunteers and voluntary action; *independent* sector to distinguish nonprofits from business and government; and, *the social sector* to underscore how the activities of nonprofits enhance the social fabric of our country.

### Nonprofit Associations – Types

Organizations that promote the business or professional interests of a community, an industry, or a profession generally qualify for tax-exemption under Section 501(c)(6) of the tax code. There are many kinds of trade, professional, and other membership associations representing thousands of personal, business and professional interest. These types of associations are generally referred to as **trade** and **professional** associations.

The American Society of Association Executives' (ASAE) Association Law Book defines these two types, as:

**Trade** — composed of individuals or firms concerned with a single product or service or those concerned with a number of related products or services.

**Professional** — composed of individuals who have acquired knowledge and experience that qualifies them as specialists in performing particular services. Occasionally, membership in a professional association is limited to those who have acquired some specified professional credential.

### Nonprofit Associations – Purpose

The specific purpose of an association is to “promote the interest, welfare, or common good of an industry, a profession, a field of interest or endeavor, or a group of members. To promote industry, provide education, foster professional conduct, gather and disseminate information, develop standards, etc.” (ASAE)

The phenomenon of individuals formally associating to support their common interest or profession has its roots in the ancient times of China, Greece and Rome, the craft guilds of medieval times, as well as the mercantile systems of colonial America. In more modern times, trade and professional associations have grown in number, stature, and effectiveness. The importance of the association movement to members, government, and society is unquestioned. “Associations today are truly powerful and enlightened members of the community working for goals common to all citizens.” (ASAE Law Book)

## II. How Associations Advance America

“Trade and professional associations are ruled by laws, as well as standards of ethics, fairness, equality, and commitment to **good citizenship in all of their endeavors.**” [Emphasis added] (Malcolm Baldrige, 1981). It is at the heart of an association’s mission to improve the quality or conditions of their members’ businesses or professions. Therefore in a broad sense, associations serve to improve the economic and social well being of our civic society when they improve the well-being of their members.

In a very tangible way, associations contribute to the development, economic growth, and social well-being of our society. For example, ASAE asserts the following:

■ The latest counts put the number of incorporated associations in the United States at more than 140,000, and 1,000 new associations are being formed each year. They consist of: 127,340 local, state, and regional associations; 20,285 national associations;

and, 2,409 international associations headquartered in the United States.

■ Nine out of ten adult Americans belong to one association, and one out of four belong to four or more associations, according to a 1998 AARP study.

■ Associations are the originating source for codes of ethics and professional and safety standards that govern a host of professions and disciplines in this country.

■ Ninety-five percent of associations offer education programs to their members, making associations the primary professional development resource for America’s workforce post-college.

■ Businesses and the government depend heavily on associations for their research and statistical information, which is often not available elsewhere.

■ Associations also promote volunteerism, logging nearly 200 million volunteer hours in community service per year, according to the most recent survey completed by ASAE.

■ Associations also spend \$5.6 billion annually on printing and publishing. Virtually all associations publish a periodical and roughly 40 percent publish books.

■ Associations employ 295,000 people in the United States.

■ More people work for nonprofit organizations than for the federal government and all 50 state governments combined (8.6 million versus 6.8 million).

The position that associations hold in American society is mirrored beyond our borders. Contributions to society by this element of the nonprofit sector are a global occurrence! Indeed, the Johns Hopkins University conducted a study of the private, nonprofit sector in 26 countries. The extensive review revealed six key findings documenting the global significance of the nonprofit sector. Impacts in the areas of economics, globalization, social services,

volunteerism, revenues and growth were explored. One of the major findings of the study illustrated the incredibly global nature of the development and importance of the nonprofit sector. A key finding revealed that “nonprofit organizations are not restricted to any one country or region: they are present in virtually every part of the world.”

## III. ASPA as an Association – Historical Perspectives and Future Possibilities

Lewis “Lew” Sims vividly recalls the thrill of joining with ASPA’s founders to mark the birth of the American Society for Public Administration at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C., in December 1939. He was a young professional surrounded by those who were or would become luminaries in the field: Leonard White, William E. Mosher, Louis Brownlow, Marshall Dimock, and many others. Though perhaps he differed from other charter members by degree of fame, Lew shared with his ASPA compatriots a passion for public service. And it would be that shared passion that sustained Lew’s commitment to ASPA and good government over the course of nearly seven decades.

His passion for civic activism continues unabated. During a telephone conversation in March 2006, Lew advised President-elect Wendy Haynes that ASPA faces significant challenges in its pursuit of excellence in public service. In Lew’s judgment, government simply fails to do a good enough job at any level, whether that be local, state, federal, or internationally. He sees that failure as a result, in part, of individual complacency. And he sees, as well, a crucial role for ASPA in inspiring young professionals to step into the breach. Indeed, Lew credits ASPA with providing an inspirational environment that supported and encouraged his accomplishments throughout his 38 years of federal service and civic activism at the local level. Although at 96, he’s more likely these days to be enjoying supper with one of his many friends or judging a barbershop quartet competition than attending an ASPA event,

*The American Society for Public Administration has sought to enhance the art and science of public administration by supporting the improvement of both theory and practice within the field.*



Lew remains proud of his lifetime ASPA membership and vigorously advocates the importance of engagement in the Society for all public administration professionals at every level of government.

In his carefully wrought 1988 retrospective (*Looking Back — Moving Forward: A Half-century Celebration of Public Administration and ASPA*), Darrell L. Pugh explores ASPA's evolution from a fledgling organization chartered in 1939 to a mature professional society at the close of his book. Pugh notes that three principal values have dominated the Society's development:

First and foremost, ASPA has sought to enhance the art and science of public administration by supporting the improvement of both theory and practice within the field. Second, ASPA has worked to advance the concept of professionalism in the public service at all levels of government. Third, the Society has maintained a commitment to strengthen and sustain a sense of community among the wide array of public administration practitioners and academicians who compose its membership.

Pugh could as well have been writing at the end of 2005 as the end of 1987 in his recitation of major issues that have permeated ASPA's history:

- (1) determining ASPA's proper organizational configuration;
- (2) supporting the relationships between practitioners and academicians and between public administration generalists and specialists;
- (3) resolving the tension between local and national interests within the organization;
- (4) deciding on the appropriate means for selecting organizational leadership; and
- (5) defining ASPA's position and relationship among other associations within the field of public administration.

Much of ASPA's history would play well as a case study in organizational theory as the entity grapples with environmental changes, shifting societal challenges, and evolving per-

ceptions of what its members need and want. At times, institutional survival trumped idealistic concerns for excellence in public administration. Indeed, as in years past, ASPA continues to deal with significant challenges in the realm of finances and membership. But despite such challenges, ASPA has "remained remarkably faithful to the original and noble purposes to which this organization was initially committed." (Pugh, 6)

As much as Pugh contributes to our understanding of ASPA's history, the recitation does not fully capture the spirit of prideful ownership we hear in charter-member Lew Sims' words: "I went to ASPA for inspiration from and connection with others who were passionately committed to good government and public service." It is in the bedrock of belief in something larger than any one of us individually that ASPA's future resides.

## IV. Associations and Civic Society

### A Value Proposition

The ASAE Foundation conducted a multi-year research project, which explored **future trends** facing associations. The report, *Exploring the Future* (ASAE 2001), identified seven vital and emerging trends, the recognition of which is essential to the life and sustainability of an association. The vigor and tenacity with which an association, such as ASPA, effectively embeds these issues within the organization's strategic development will determine the association's value to its members, and to society as a whole.

### SEVEN EMERGING TRENDS:

#### Meaning Matters

Meaning is the best way for associations to differentiate their value to members. Associations create meaning through meaningful purpose, meaningful relationships, and meaningful contributions. Amid the chaos of rapid change, meaning and purpose are the enduring qualities that attract and retain members.

## **Global + Local = Global**

Globalization is a term that describes how many aspects of life are becoming more global and more local at the same time. Many national-level decisions, for example, are moving upward to international organizations and developing downward to state and local governments. Associations will find new challenges and creative roles in a “glocalizing” world.

## **Inclusively**

A rich variety of cultural backgrounds and viewpoints within associations can improve creativity, decision-making, and programming. To tap these potentials, associations will need to shift from assimilating differences to raising awareness of differences, valuing them, and making use of them.

## **Generational Synergy**

Achieving greater synergy among generations is one of the key challenges involved in inclusively. Each generation has contributions to make and roles it can play in its interaction with other generations. Associations that learn to foster generational synergy will gain enormous advantages.

## **Learning Culture**

The ability to learn is the single most important skill individuals and organizations need to thrive amid rapid change. Associations need to focus more on learning and less on teaching. To compete effectively with other organizations and information sources, associations need to shift from providing “continuing education” to facilitating continuous learning.

## **Transparency**

Demands for greater openness and accountability are growing rapidly, driven by the spread of democracy, economic globalization, the digital revolution, and Internet-enhanced

social activism. Associations need to balance the organizational and social advantages of greater transparency with legitimate concerns about transparency’s disadvantages and limits.

## **Living Organizations**

Instead of trying to control everything in an environment of continuous change, association leaders need to view their organizations as living systems able to self-organize to adapt to change. To promote self-organization, leaders need to clarify their purpose and values, minimize bureaucracy, and understand the critical importance of knowledge sharing and trust.

Associations that fail to acknowledge and address these trends may find themselves faced with a slow and steady demise. Associations are “living organisms.” Therefore, organizational development must be driven by activities, which compel forward movement. Strategic discussions around the trends listed above will initiate this process. “Associations that fail to anticipate trends, create new relationships, and develop flexible and insightful leadership will find themselves struggling to survive.” (ASAE Future Trends)

For the sake of discussion, the following are additional trends and issues that need to be considered by forward thinking associations, within the context of the emerging issues noted above. (Exploring the Future):

**Leadership’s Role** — Adopting a new set of leadership characteristics for association boards and staff will be necessary to move into the 21st century.

**Value/Return on Investment (ROI)** — Meeting rising member expectations and a greater demand for a return on dues investment will drive association redesign.

**Responsiveness** — Keeping up with external changes and responding rapidly to members’ emerging needs will require associations to become “fast, fluid, and flexible.”

**Governance** — Replacing current governance models that are too slow and cumbersome to deal with an increasingly complex, fast-paced environment will require a cultural shift for most associations.

**Revenue Sources** — The need for new sources will drive associations to become more innovative in seeking out new partners and nontraditional sources of income.

**Technology Usage** — The profound and beneficial impact of technology usage will be felt through its increasing capacity to link people, build relationships, and foster communities.

**Change Loops** — Mastering the unplanned changes and unexpected consequences (e.g., “change loops”) that do not fall neatly inside the time frame of the traditional planning calendar or scheduled board meetings will require a new mind-set about budgeting and other planning processes.

**Generational Issues** — The generational shifts among staff, boards, and members will fundamentally alter the culture of associations due to shifts in member perception of and loyalty to the association, differing preferences for programs and services, and degree of volunteer involvement.

**Workforce** — Securing a qualified workforce with the proper mix of business, technical, and social skills combined with diverse life experiences will demand greater skill, time, and effort from the association executive.

**Outsourcing and Co-Sourcing** — Gaining maximum advantage from outsourcing or co-sourcing will require associations to carefully distinguish core from non-core functions and to identify strategic as well as cost-saving benefits.

**Competition and Alliances** — Increasing vulnerability to competition will require associations to become more vigilant about new types of competitors and to seek out nontraditional allies.

**Consolidations and Mergers** — As consolidations and mergers occur with greater speed and unpredictability, associations will have to become more proactive in dealing with the resulting impact on revenues, services, and membership.

**Globalization** - As their members become less and less bound by geography, time zones, culture, or language in their business and professional relationships, associations will have to redefine their boundaries accordingly.

**Image Building** - Increasing public scrutiny and competition will lead associations (professional and philanthropic organizations as well as trades) to defend their members' credibility and promote the unique value of their services or activities.

## V. ASPA and Public Administration

Throughout Pugh's rendition of ASPA's first fifty years, leaders have pondered — and sought to ensure — ASPA's relevance to its membership and to the field of public administration, generally. Although we tend to think of ourselves as unique in this regard, ASAE's exploration of future trends demonstrates how much we have in common with other associations. Let us explore, now, how we might embed these issues within ASPA's strategic development efforts. Under each trend, we suggest at least one strategic action we will, with ASPA National Council support, pursue in 2006-2007.

The reader will note that each of what ASAE identifies as seven emerging trends also correlates closely with the value that ASPA brings to its members — and the value that ASPA's members bring to each other.



### 1. Meaning Matters

ASPA charter member Lew Sims said it well: "We join together in a passion for public service!" The abiding values Darrell Pugh cites (enhancing art and science of public administration through theory and practice; professionalism at all levels of government; sense of community among wide array of practitioners and academicians) permeate the five strategic goals in ASPA's 2004-2008 Action Plan:

- (1) Be a recognized voice for issues and values in public policy, management, and practice.
- (2) Be a catalyst to enhance the scope and quality of resources and the knowledge base in the field of public service.
- (3) Foster inclusive communications among those who serve the public.
- (4) Find ways to enable those who serve the public to be current and effective.
- (5) Grow the society membership and ensure its financial viability.

And where do we focus our attention? We focus on four primary, inter-related drumbeats: social equity; ethical governance; performance and accountability; and professionalism. And how will we do that? Through connectivity and collaboration within our membership and with other organizations that share our commitment to sound public policy and administration.

**Model Action:** Host a summit of sister association leaders in Washington, DC. Invitees would include the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), the American Political Science Association (APSA), the International City-County Management Association (ICMA), and others.

### 2. Global + Local = Global

For ASPA, we may well want to regard this trend as thinking globally and acting locally or "glocalizing" as others might say! Even in traditionally provincial local communities, there is the recognition and understanding that like it or not, we are profoundly affected by events outside our domestic borders, whether those borders be national or

municipal.

**Model Action:** Development of a position that exemplifies the ideals of the best in public administration internationally. ASPA's newly formed International Consortium plays a key role in this venue, as does growing awareness of what it takes to create sustainable communities domestically.

### 3. Inclusivity

Many of ASPA's special interest sections — notably the Conference of Minority Public Administrators (COMPA) and the Section for Women in Public Administration (SWPA) — celebrate the rich diversity of our membership. Indeed, ASPA from its birth has provided a huge tent, ideally situated to embrace and celebrate the different perspectives offered by practitioners, students, academics, and representing a wide range of ethnic, economic, religious, and geographical profiles. Where language presents a barrier — whether that be national origin or conceptual framework — we seek to understand, acknowledge, and celebrate that richness.

**Model Action:** Actions under #1 (summit) and #4 (working groups on succession planning and human capital crisis) contribute to proceed inclusively. For ASPA, work of our members in civic engagement also adds another dimension to the meaning of inclusiveness.

### 4. Generational Synergy

Many of our workplaces face a mounting leadership deficit as Baby Boomers retire in increasing numbers without a wave of experienced leaders set to replace them. Likewise, it's imperative for our ASPA leadership to focus on identifying and nurturing the leaders of the future. This challenge also presents a marvelous opportunity to develop synergy among and between the generations ASPA embraces now and will embrace in the future.

**Model Action:** Establish an interdisciplinary task force, comprised of academics, practitioners, and students, to explore and present authoritative conclusions and recommendations for dealing with the human capital crisis in the public service. Establish an action team, comprised of volunteers and profes-

sional staff, to prepare a strategic action plan for dealing with the association's succession planning and leadership development.

## 5. Learning Culture

What better place to *learn* about governance and public administration than in an association populated by those who devote their careers to the study and practice of these topics that are so fundamental to constitutional democracies? Our membership in ASPA positions each of us wonderfully well to learn from each other and practice what we preach and, in the process, attract those to our Society who will carry on the pursuit of excellence in public service. Our array of publications, conferences, workshops and organizational elements (sections, chapters, affiliates) provides a rich culture for mutual learning.

ASPA is also uniquely positioned to engage those who study and practice public administration in dialogue around hot topics of the day.

**Model Action:** Create venues for collaboration among those engaged in the diverse and complex field we love, study, and practice. Welcome and revel in our differing perspectives, at conferences and elsewhere. Embrace bold leadership whose concentration is substance, not process.

## 6. Transparency

Communicate what ASPA represents and how we pursue those beliefs and aspirations. But do so thoughtfully and judiciously, recognizing that our current and potential members are inundated with information. Our members have a need to know, but not a need to know everything about everything.

**Model Action:** Vigilance!

## 7. Living Organizations

We work in conditions of continuous change, and so it goes, too, for our Society. In ASPA, our members have the opportunity to observe, read about, rub shoulders and learn with the best, the brightest, and the most humble of those with a passion for public service. And we are better for the experience. . .

Our ASPA leaders face many challenges, including the need to ensure that those who wish to be engaged in the Society – whether that be in its internal workings or its contributions to the field of public administration broadly defined – can do so. We must connect with our members. And collaborate with our sister and brother organizations.

**Model Action:** Ensure that our governance structure encourages connection and engagement with our members. Collaborate with our compatriot associations on matters of mutual interest – we cannot do it all! (See #1 on previous page.)

## VI. Conclusion

The desire for those of common interest to “associate” for the advancement of a cause, profession, or ideal will continue as a human phenomenon. Historically associations have developed, adapted and transformed to meet the need of a changing society.

Unencumbered by profit motives and constraints of government, associations can focus on value and relevance. Today, with the convergence of technology, globalization and social diversity, associations will continue to play a vital role. As agents of change, associations will drive our society's adaptation to emerging trends, and effectively respond to emerging issues. The outcome for associations in general, and for ASPA in particular, depends on whether we build our capacity to provide an agile, adept, and effective response. The response requires new thinking, new tools, and new delivery mechanisms.

In the years to come, we will find ourselves increasingly reliant on connecting and collaborating with those who share our passion for public service. ASPA offers a forum for connection and collaboration among those engaged in public service, policy, and administration in all its complexity. We may differ in our individual needs, depending upon whether we tilt toward study or practice of public administration, but we most certainly share a common bond in our passion for the topic. ASPA provides a home and launching pad for thought, action, and change. We invite participation and we welcome the challenge of this changing world.

In today's civil society, influenced by internal and external transformations, the “process of associating” is still extremely relevant. Associations are a resource for our members, and the public at large, as they attempt to understand issues, adapt to trends, and manage the related change. Within the framework of a learning organization ASPA must, and will, continue to pursue its meaning, place, and relevancy in a growing global civil society.

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