



How do we become great?

Ed Huston, P.E., S.E., NCSEA President

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

William Shakespeare

I suspect that we would all like to be “great”. In Shakespeare’s time, some people were born great, that is, they were born into the nobility. However, in the twenty-first century in North America, we don’t have a nobility, so we are unlikely to have been “born great”, at least by Shakespeare’s standard. For the same reason, it is unlikely that we will “have greatness thrust upon” us. Whatever standard of greatness we use today, I suspect that we probably have to attempt to “achieve greatness.”

This is also true of our Member Organizations. At the NCSEA Annual Conference this year, our Saturday Afternoon Workshop was titled “Taking Your Association to the Next Level”. This workshop was a result of NCSEA Board Members’ visits to NCSEA Member Organizations (MO’s), which is where and how they became aware that some of our MO’s are achieving greatness, while others are, quite frankly, struggling. The workshop explored the topic of what makes an organization great and brainstormed on how to improve. The flourishing MO’s had an opportunity to share their experiences and to give advice; and organizations of similar size and longevity had a chance to talk to each other about similar problems and how they have tried to solve them. Even flourishing MO’s were able to come away with some new strategies. I think it is safe to say that every attendee had something to take back to his or her SEA.

In our workshop format, we had breakout sessions with discussions focused on member recruitment in general and recruitment of younger members specifically; meeting format; seminars; starting chapters; and recommended benefits to offer and how to finance them.

Why these topics? They came out of our board member visits. For example, SEAI changed their meeting format a year or so ago, from a dinner meeting format to a lunch format. Attendance at their monthly meetings surged! It wouldn’t work for all MO’s, however, since it depends on such things as the dispersment of the membership and traffic congestion at lunchtime. Still it’s something that other MO’s may want to consider. Some MO’s have started “Younger Member Forums” or student chapters to attract

the next generation of structural engineers. I don’t have room in this article to share all of the stories; but, as a Board of Directors, we wanted to respond to numerous requests from our MO’s, for more time at our Conferences to talk to each other, to share stories and experiences, and to ask each other questions.

At the beginning of this article, I said that some of our MO’s are achieving greatness. I know, when I said that, that I was using my own definition of what it means to have a “great” organization. Therefore, I should explain what I think makes a “great” MO. I think a great MO is responsive to its members, provides them with a wide variety of services, and may even provide services to the profession as a whole, or even to society.

I haven’t had the pleasure of visiting all 42 of our Member Organizations; but my work is often affected by them. The three volume Seismic Design Manual written by SEAOC is a terrific reference. There is an example of an MO who has provided services to the profession as a whole, at least in the USA. The Guidelines for the Quality Assurance, Special Inspection and Structural Observation Program, which is available as a free download on the SEAOC website (www.seao.org), is a very useful reference from a MO that is also providing services far beyond its state borders. In addition, I know these two organizations provide their members with monthly meetings, provide several seminar opportunities every year, hold annual conferences and provide scholarships. In my mind, they, and other MO’s, like my own (SEAW), are achieving greatness.

As each of us knows, all of these services come with a cost, in real “dues” dollars and in phenomenal amounts of volunteer hours; but I think their benefits are at an even higher level. All of you probably know of great SEA’s and you likely also benefit from what they provide. Perhaps you belong to one. So here is the challenge: What have you done lately, to help your MO be great, or become great?

No matter what forum I’m in, whether it’s an NCSEA or an SEI function, an ICC code change hearing, or a NCEES Structural Examination composition session, I see the same faces. There are a small number of structural engineers making a huge impact on the profession. Are you one of them? If not, why not?

Many of our MO’s will be discussing the topics from this year’s Saturday afternoon forum. I hope that many of them found fresh ideas and ways for their MO’s to benefit from their attendance at “Taking Your Association to the Next Level”. Will you be there to help them do that?*

