



I have never been concerned that three organizations represent structural engineers. So, while attending a recent engineering conference, when one of my tablemates spoke up in an agitated tone and said: “I don’t understand why there are three organizations representing structural engineers! They’re like oil and water – they don’t mix well,” I was taken aback. It is a question and a simile I have heard before, but his tone and abruptness caused me to pause and reflect.

ASCE/SEI (Structural Engineering Institute), NCSEA/SEA (National Council of Structural Engineers Associations), and ACEC/CASE (Council of American Structural Engineers), have each played an important role in my professional career, so I have never questioned why they exist. I just celebrate the fact that they do. In fact, asking me why there are three organizations representing structural engineers is like asking me to explain why each of us prefers a different style of home, why we prefer different breakfast cereals, why there is more than one fast food company, or why there are five electric hand-held drill manufacturers with sixty eight different kinds of drills on the market. (Hint: Each manufacturer and product offers unique features and benefits to the user.) Much like selecting the right drill(s) for a particular job, all three organizations have unique features and benefits that, for me, proved useful throughout my entire professional career.

I joined ASCE in 1989. The resources they had were overwhelming and exciting. I looked forward to receiving their catalog and filling my personal library with books that contained information and ideas that broadened my understanding of the profession. Because of its focus on structural engineering, when SEI was formed, I joined immediately. Although there are many benefits of membership, one I find particularly meaningful now are Tara Hokes’ articles on ethics in Civil Engineering magazine, because they broaden my understanding of how to apply ethics in real-life situations.

When I accepted my first job, my employer informed me that I would become a member of SEAU (Structural Engineers Association of Utah). It was mandatory – no exceptions. Not only was I expected to be a member, but I was expected to participate by belonging to committees and attending their conferences, social events, and monthly meetings. It was not enough just to pay my dues – I was expected to contribute. My peers at SEAU provided a wealth of insights and practical knowledge and, when SEAU joined NCSEA, the opportunity to communicate with my peers from around the county provided exposure to a broad range of knowledge and perspectives that helped me improve technically and professionally.

My first exposure to ACEC occurred when I was a local host during their conference in Utah. The firm I work for has been a long-time member of ACEC and an adamant supporter of CASE. Although I was technically competent, my knowledge of leadership and managerial issues was lacking and prevented advancement. Graduating from the ACEC Leadership Institute in 2005 broadened my understanding and appreciation of non-technical, business-related topics. I still listen to the CD’s I purchased from my first ACEC conference fifteen years ago. They are dated, but a great refresher.



I appreciate that SEI/NCSEA/CASE have a common goal – to improve the profession; and despite having the same goal, each organization takes different paths and focuses on different areas. Is there overlap? Of course, it is unavoidable. Each organization offers publications, webinars, and holds annual conferences accented with their unique perspective. Each organization has its place, its unique purpose, its value proposition, and its committed members.

Therefore, I dispute the notion that the SEI/NCSEA/CASE do not mix well. Because they serve different parts of the structural engineering community, they have different perspectives and disputes sometimes arise. But they also work together. The leadership meets yearly to discuss what their respective organizations are working on and where help and support is needed. Strategies and tactics are discussed and, if an overlap exists, decisions are made as to which organization should work on the problem moving forward. A good example of spirited cooperation is SELC (Structural Engineering Licensure Coalition), which was formed to unite all three organizations into one body to promote SE licensure. STRUCTURE magazine is another good example of cooperation between the organizations, to inform, promote, and improve the profession.

My other tablemate chimed in with her thoughts: “I can’t imagine anyone who is serious about their professional career and creating a business of lasting value not belonging to and actively supporting all three organizations.” I will second that. Instead of bemoaning what appear to be similarities between the organizations, I encourage you to dig deeper and celebrate their unique differences.



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