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2021 Young Member Summit Scholarship

You are given the responsibility to recruit students and recent graduates to participate with the Structural Engineers Association, how do you do it? Describe how you got involved with your YMG, state's SEA, and/or NCSEA and what strategies you would employ to encourage others to get involved.

A young graduate student enters the room where the monthly SEA meeting is scheduled to take place and right away notices there are a lot of people they don't know. In fact, they might be the only student present. Everyone seems to be very familiar with each other, asking about each other's families and recent vacations. The student sees the speaker from across the meeting room and gets a bit starstruck, as this is the exact same person who wrote the textbook they had been reading deeply for the entire last semester. Many questions begin to set in – who should I sit with? Is it inappropriate to have my resume with me? How do I play off the fact that I already know this individual's name and engineering research contributions?

This is a very common scenario among first time attendees of an SEA meeting. I too was included in the group of people who were very glad to have brought a handkerchief to dab my forehead while speaking to some of the leading engineers in the city, if not the country. While the feelings of nervousness may always be present when attending an SEA meeting for the first time as a student or new graduate, it is in this experience where the transition from a student member to a professional can be made a bit more seamless.

One program that has benefited our young members throughout the years is the SEAOI Dinner Meeting Mentorship Program. This activity pairs first-time meeting attendees with another younger engineer, typically someone who serves on the board of the Young Engineers Committee (YEC), who can introduce them to others and answer any questions. The board has received plentiful positive feedback from dinner meeting mentees; they all have stated that the program helps them feel more comfortable and welcome to keep returning to events. This, in fact, is my story exactly. Being originally from out of state, living in the Chicago suburbs, and knowing absolutely no one in the elegant downtown high-rise clubhouse meeting location was a bit intimidating. But the young engineer who was paired with me was extremely cordial, personable, and made me feel welcome and excited to continue attending SEAOI and YEC events.

The SEAOI YEC intends to continue this tradition in a more streamlined fashion, considering the hybrid protocols that a COVID-19 fall season may bring. Expanding further on this, the concept of a direct membership pipeline would streamline the

transition process from a student SEA member to a professional one. This pipeline is more than paperwork and registration, it would involve proactive engagement before the student even graduates. Collaborative events between the YEC and local student chapters would open an avenue of communication that would benefit all parties. The transition to professional membership wouldn't be as intimidating with a previously shared community outreach experience, for example.

One thing the SEA OI YEC has noticed among student chapters is the interest in presentations from young engineers. This exposure is critical for students to understand the day-to-day lives of structural engineers, and the value they can get from being active in the professional SEA. Increasing the frequency of these events covering a variety of subjects, including resume review workshops, would be a great way to improve engagement and encourage involvement.

Recent graduates cannot take part in the events detailed above, so other means must be used to encourage involvement. Social media has become such an important part of everyone's lives, whether we like it or not. It has been my experience that social media has an underused potential for engagement, as there are many people seeking interesting content. With the partial return to a virtual environment in much of the country, this kind of online programming could be used for good. A weekly picture trivia campaign with intriguing architecture and engineering around the city is an example of a way to virtually engage a wide audience. Live streams of site visits and other events would not only engage those not able to be physically present, but also keeps the organization in their attention. A consistent marketing scheme would be important here – advertise the event beginning a month in advance, run intermittent stories teasing at what attendees will experience and learn, then a consistent follow-up post to summarize the success of the event and encourage others to attend the next one. Placing ourselves in the shoes of a new member is critical in developing an effective publicity strategy, as this will guide the direction of the planned continuous visibility. The subtitle of one of the marketing guru Seth Godin's books sums this up nicely: "You can't be seen until you learn to see".

When exploring how to encourage involvement, this comes down to making it easily accessible. That "it" can be the response to a question from a mid-tier engineer eager to help, the personal relationships that come with joining a group of like-minded people, or the shared experience of touring a new local development. Lots of work must be done in the backend so that all these processes are seamless in the eyes of the new graduate or student.

I am so very thankful that my dinner meeting mentor was as personable and eager to help as he was. Going on five years of SEA OI membership, the network of friends and

colleagues I am fortunate to have built inspires me to continue learning and improving myself in structural engineering. It is my hope that the experiences we build for those that come after us do the same.