

*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.*

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**How I Became Involved in Structural Engineering Professional Organizations:**

It wasn't long ago that I was a college student at the University of Alabama (UA) and actively involved in the student chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). At various times during my enrollment, I held the roles of Secretary, VP of Operations, and President. This engagement with UA ASCE gave me the opportunity to form strong relationships with peers, faculty, and industry professionals which I am glad to maintain.

When I transitioned from academia to industry, I knew that I wanted to stay involved with professional organizations. The Structural Engineers Association of Alabama (SEAOAL) has a strong presence where I work in the Birmingham area, and it was very natural for me to join. I have certainly enjoyed being a part of SEAOAL's local events and industry network, and recently joined its YM committee.

I am interested in engaging with NCSEA and have done so on a small scale by helping provide feedback on proposed IBC code changes that some coworkers were advocating for with NCSEA. I appreciate the opportunity NCSEA affords industry professionals to impact the codes which guide our work. Applying for this scholarship, and hopefully attending the Structural Engineering Summit, is one way that I aim to be a more active SEA member. In recognition of the fact that I have limited experience with NCSEA, the following discussion will focus on my ideas for SEAOAL engagement on a local level.

**How I Would Encourage Current College Students and Faculty to Be Involved in the Structural Engineering Industry:**

My personal goal in engaging with students would start with solidifying relationships between SEAOAL and the University of Alabama engineering faculty and students. SEAOAL has several member companies within about an hour's drive to campus, and I personally know our members are individually engaged with UA through speaking engagements, Senior Design mentoring, and recruiting. While UA is where I have the strongest background, I would endeavor to implement lessons learned from UA on other campuses while tailoring our approach with the help of SEAOAL members who graduated from those schools.

Before I would aim bring an NCSEA student chapter to a college campus, I believe we should increase our visibility as an organization and utilize the infrastructure already in place with ASCE student chapters to form consistent relationships with students and faculty.

One opportunity to do so would be through attending and/or speaking at ASCE student events. This already happens with SEAOAL member firms periodically and on an individual basis at UA, but I would like to see SEAOAL take on the goal of organizing our members' regular involvement in these events. Since civil engineering coursework is fairly broad for the first couple of years, it would be impactful for students to hear SEAOAL perspectives on our industry and answer questions they may have about a specialty field they may not have considered. For upper-level students, we can show them examples of how they will be able to apply what they're currently studying in real projects.

As an example, last fall I had the opportunity to present to the UA ASCE student chapter on "An Early Career Perspective on Structural Engineering", in which I gave a brief summary of my

career timeline to that point, shared some background on the company I worked for, touched on professional licensure, and then highlighted what we produce as structural engineers (drawings, specifications, field work, etc.). I then went over tasks they could expect to see on their first job at a structural engineering firm, discussed some challenges I'd faced, and shared lessons learned that I could offer. These topics certainly seemed to engage the students, and I stayed for quite a while after the meeting answering detailed questions about industry and my experiences.

As another engagement route: UA's Senior Design program for civil engineering students is highly reliant on industry volunteers for mentoring and course instruction. I have volunteered with this program before, and I have seen that it can be challenging for faculty to get enough industry help on their own. I see a great opportunity for SEAOAL as an organization to help bring up the next generation of structural engineers by coordinating area professionals who would be willing help the program with gusto. This would help faculty have a strong and reliable volunteer base throughout the course. I have not pitched this idea to SEAOAL yet, but I am excited at the prospect of being able to help organize such meaningful mentorship for students.

I believe that if we as SEAOAL could work to build consistent channels of engagement with schools we would be taking a step in the right direction to engage students where they are and be able to share our profession with them. We can highlight the significance of professional organizations and make them aware of opportunities in SEAs at state and national levels as a result of our involvement.

#### **How I Would Encourage Recent Graduates to Participate in SEAs:**

In the Birmingham area, I have seen that professional membership in SEAOAL is often sponsored and encouraged by employers. Having this strong framework already in place is a major benefit to the structural engineering professionals in our area.

In terms of attending SEAOAL/NCSEA organized events or taking on leadership roles, it seems to me that the limiting factor for younger members is the additional time that they could be willing and able to dedicate to the cause. Undoubtedly time is a limiting factor for all industry engineers, but, with the faced-paced nature of our work and exceptionally busy season our area has been seeing recently, on top of young members still experiencing so many "firsts" on the job and preparing for licensure exams, it shouldn't be a surprise that younger members may not be actively engaged in professional associations.

With these demands on young engineers, it can be difficult to weave professional organization involvement into what is already a demanding (but rewarding) career. I am a member of SEAOAL's YM committee, and earlier this year we specifically surveyed our base to better understand what sorts of events drew the most interest from YM's, understanding that their availability can be limited, and we used those results to guide our planned activities for the year.

I would also advocate for a "top-down" approach between SEAOAL and individual companies to understand what engineering managers and principals would deem most valuable for the professional development of their employees. For example, would managers be more likely to encourage staff to attend a site-visit to a storm shelter currently under construction to increase field experience, or a mixer with the local AIA younger members to help build the next generation of architect-engineer relationships in our community? Both certainly have their merits.

If we design our events to have support from younger members as well as their engineering managers, we should maximize our likelihood of engaging members, and once members are

more active in events, it would be more natural for them to be interested in volunteering for leadership roles within the organization.

**A Case Study: Coordinating SEAOAL's Involvement in UA ASCE's Networking Night:**

Earlier this year, a contact from UA ASCE reached out to me see if my company at the time would be interested in attending a civil engineering-specific networking night on campus ahead of their spring career fair. I immediately recognized the benefit of such a targeted event for structural engineering firms looking to engage with students. I had been a part of SEAOAL conversations about how to increase the number of applications we receive for our annual scholarship, as well as hearing from several firms that structural engineering groups are looking to hire (a well-known phenomenon in our area in spring of 2022), and this event could help with both.

Due to the extremely busy season our profession had been having, I started brainstorming on a way to maximize exposure of students to as many potential employers as possible and be able to represent all of our interested member companies within SEAOAL without needing employees from each company to attend. I came up with the idea of compiling company profiles into a handout for students, and then SEAOAL could attend the event with a small number of volunteers to represent the profession as well as their individual companies. I pitched the idea to SEAOAL Board members, as well as the UA ASCE organizers, and both parties jumped eagerly onboard. With enthusiastic responses from our member companies, and the exceptional logistical help of our association managers, five SEAOAL volunteers attended the event and were able to give students a two-page handout profiling seven SEAOAL firms and providing our scholarship application information.

Not only did this event benefit the students and expand SEAOAL's visibility, but it gave local companies the opportunity to at least get their contact information in front of students with the minimal time commitment of completing their company profile in a template we provided. In a "buyer's market" for job seekers, there's a lot to be said for recruiting aids such as these.

**Concluding Remarks:**

With my background in professional organizations as a college student and young professional, I do see opportunities for SEAOAL to expand our coordinated outreach activities to students and recent graduates. Offering consistent and organized volunteer mentors on college campuses, as well as actively tailoring our activities to meet the interests and availability of our potential young members are ways that the organization can bolster our visibility and recruit and retain more engaged members.

These approaches to engaging students and industry professionals are very much based on my personal experience and current knowledge base. I am actively trying to expand that knowledge by pursuing the opportunity to connect with NCSEA members at the 2022 Structural Engineering Summit. I would eagerly learn from NCSEA peers about how they engage members and appreciate any opportunity to bring back viable strategies to SEAOAL in addition to participating in such a robust schedule of activities throughout the Summit.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.