

How to Start and Build a Regional Group

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In 2014 I was elected as the Michigan representative to APA Council and joined the board of the Michigan Psychological Association (MPA). I soon discovered that MPA was suffering from a crisis of declining membership. The organization only had 15% of the licensed psychologists in Michigan, half of its prior peak.

At Council I made a special effort to network with psychologists representing other states and informally surveyed them to ascertain the percent of psychologists who were members of their associations. I was dismayed to discover that, like Michigan, few had more than 15-20% participation.

I reasoned that MPA was not sufficiently relevant for psychologists in various parts of the state, who do not recognize the more abstract value of a professional organization that is protecting their interests. This led to my founding the Washtenaw Psychology Society (WPS) to bring together psychologists who live or work in the area surrounding Ann Arbor.

I started by reaching out to local MPA members regarding the feasibility of a regional group. A couple of dozen expressed interest and we launched WPS in October 2015. We decided early on to have monthly meetings with talks by speakers from our group. We then began the painstaking process of compiling a recruiting list based on the state licensing agency's (LARA) list of licensed psychologists in our area. We were not provided access to emails at that time and had to laboriously track them down by cross referencing lists at the universities and various local organizations.

From this small core group, WPS has grown at a rate of about 75 members a year to its current size of 450 members. This constitutes 50% of the licensed psychologists in our area. Half of them have attended at least one meeting. About two years ago, LARA began to release emails as part of their lists of professions. This has immensely speeded up our recruiting efforts. Our primary source of new members are the notices that advertise our meetings. We send these emails 3-4 times during the weeks leading up to each meeting.

Our main selling point is that everything about WPS is free. Members join by filling out a survey on a Google Doc, which automatically populates our member database. This provides practice information on each member to facilitate networking and referrals. We write a personalized welcome letter to each new enrollee, based on information gleaned from web searches. This enables us to recruit speakers with particular areas of expertise. The variety of practice types and specialties represented by our members has been astounding.

All of the work of running the organization is done by volunteers. An eight-person steering committee oversees its operation and makes decisions. The structure is simple but responsive to changing needs. Much of our work has been facilitated by graduate students from a local clinical psychology training program and volunteer undergrad interns from the University of Michigan.

Not long after our inception, we created a free Google Group Mail List that functions as a listserv for our members. This turned out to be one of the most valuable aspects of WPS. Members post queries regarding potential referrals and get responses within a day or two from therapists who match the needs of the potential client (e.g., age, gender, diagnosis, type of treatment desired, and insurance) along with availability. This last aspect is crucial, since often therapists who have the proper qualifications don't have openings. Members also pose practice questions and share resources.

Our database and mail list can only be viewed by members. For all intents and purposes, WPS does not exist outside of our membership. Within the last year, we created a website, which gives WPS a public face for the first time. It has a referral page that operates by means of a volunteer who posts queries on our mail group. This maintains the separation of the internal mail list from the public view.

Monthly meetings (ten per year) take place on a Sunday afternoon in the small social hall of a local religious organization. Each meeting starts with introductions by the members and circulation of flyers and business cards. This is rather informal and permits members to get to know one another and recognize connections they may have. After a break for refreshments and informal networking, we have an hour-long educational presentation by one of our members. We are able to provide a free CE credit by virtue of sponsorship by our parent organization, MPA. Our parent organization has provided modest funding for room rental and liability insurance, refreshments, office supplies, and fees. While business/networking meetings are for members only, the educational presentations are open to guests, no matter what their professional affiliation.

During the pandemic we quickly pivoted to virtual Zoom meetings. These have been even better attended than our in-person meetings, though they lack their intimacy. In recent months, we have opened these virtual meetings to MPA members throughout the state. This has, in turn, provided more CE content for MPA.

WPS has a half dozen free peer consultation groups with a variety of themes, led by our members. We have experimented with mentoring for graduate students and early career psychologists or those starting individual and group practices.

Lessons learned.

WPS has been successful beyond our dreams in building a local professional community. In that respect, it is proof of the concept. However, it was intended to be a demonstration project that could be replicated elsewhere in Michigan. For various reasons, this has not yet occurred. There are some fledgling efforts underway that lack the comprehensive structure of WPS.

WPS was also meant to rejuvenate MPA by bringing in new members and demonstrating the value of the state association. In this regard, we have fallen short. Only 1/3rd of our members have joined MPA. This has been a source of deep disappointment. Members highly value what WPS does for them but do not appreciate the behind-the-scenes activities of our parent organization. We are now beginning to more energetically promote MPA, which has been transformed by new, younger leadership. Hopefully we will have more progress to report on this front in the next year or so.