

Indeed Relevant

Creating a Place for Associations
to Examine Issues and Discover Solutions
in a Hyper-connected World

A **Working Paper** prepared
for the association community
by a core group of professionals
for the **Melos Institute**

Greetings:

If you're like me, you 'fell into this profession.' And at the start, thought "What have I gotten myself into?" Then something inspired you and it became your career. For me it was the stories that members across generations told of how involvement in their associations changed their lives for the better.

- How they built relationships with colleagues who became life-long friends.
- How they learned things about themselves they didn't know.
- How participation gave them access to information and knowledge that made them successful.

It made me want to learn more about the *pivotal role* these organizations play in their lives. Our dedication to this profession has afforded us the expertise to become adept at navigating our associations through constant change. We've yet to find a satisfactory solution to the most fundamental issue that makes them vibrant: *increasing member engagement/involvement*. We offer members great opportunities, but not all take advantage. Why?

At the same time, we're bombarded by protestations about the relevance of membership because of our rapidly changing world. We're told we must change to survive. We search for the innovations that will suffice. This dire prediction may or may not prove true for your association. But one thing - whether in good times or bad - that persists is your desire to get as many members as possible to become *actively involved* your association.

We share that feeling. That led us to ask some rather critical questions:

- How is member engagement or involvement defined? How is it measured?
- What characteristics must be present in an association for it to thrive?
- What role does each department play in influencing and affecting it?
- Will adaptations to current operations make a substantial difference?"

That led to us then to wonder:

Would the association management profession benefit by having a place solely dedicated to examining critical questions, conducting cutting-edge research, and finding meaningful solutions?

The **Melos Institute** was established for that purpose. For the past few years, we've been taking the necessary steps to become that place. Our projects are accomplished by bringing together association professionals, volunteer leaders, academic scholars, and content specialists. Their efforts produce working models for examination and comment by association professionals - like you - before anything is finalized or completed. We believe that this generative approach will produce more practical and more enduring solutions.

When examining the issue of member engagement, where to begin? Dan Pallotta, an expert in nonprofit sector innovation, provided the perfect metaphor for our current set of working papers. In an article in the *Harvard Business Review* he said,

"... You cannot possibly think outside the box unless you understand the nature of the box that bounds your current thinking. You must come to know that nature deeply..."

This white paper details the Melos Institute's nature and scope. The *remaining two working papers* in this series propose the "nature of our box," of associations, in a new and different way. We hope these papers stimulate your thinking. We welcome your thoughts and comments. And we invite your participation as we continue our research efforts in the area of member engagement.

Regards,

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*This white paper describes the nature and scope of the **Melos Institute**; and how it operates as a think tank independent of, yet in cooperation with other organizations focused on association management.*

Why an Institute?

The advancement and well-being of any modern society depends less upon the abundance of the material culture and more upon the continuous development of the skills and abilities of its citizens. No one person can keep pace with all the changes that are happening in the society. But each can through the institutions that define their identity and interests.

Our society has been creating organizations for generations that do precisely that. We call them *membership-based organizations* (MBOs). They play an essential role in a democratic society. They are unique in their nature, purpose and focus. While each may develop somewhat differently, they engage in common actions. Their mission statements suggest they are active agents of change in their respective disciplines and in the larger society.



Association executives know that membership-based organizations provide the information, knowledge, and skill-development to those in the respective discipline; members who become involved benefit by advancing in some personal and professional way. Executives also recognize the pivotal role members play as volunteers and leaders to get things done. Associations are dependant upon members to fulfill their mission. The challenge has been to find practical ways to harness the membership's full potential.

Today's technology enables the compilation and analysis of information about members' background, expertise, interests, and connections to be leveraged as never before. It affords MBOs more direct and personal ways to communicate with their members. Yet, just knowing more about members and disseminating information through more contemporary mediums haven't proven fully effective. Something else appears to bear greater influence over the members' willingness to become actively involved.

Could the answer lie by examining the consequences of membership growth within MBOs? While it brings more stability and security, anecdotes suggest that it too often has had an *inverse affect on member engagement or involvement*. Though not yet empirically proven, a direct correlation has been observed between the consequences of growth (e.g. the increase in the membership community, the onset of professional staff, etc.) and the level of member engagement.

For some members, this experience causes them to question the value and relevance of their membership. While growth (and all that is associated with it) enables MBOs to better represent their specific discipline, offer greater range of services, and become more effective at navigating change, it may just be having a counter-intuitive impact on the vitality of the membership community. While often considered a contemporary issue, similar accounts in MBO published histories have been found that date as far back as the late 1800's; and seem to persist with each successive generation.

“...It seems to be that we are at a point in history unlike anything that has ever been before. Life moves far more rapidly now than it did ever before. Think for instance of the huge acceleration in the growth of facts, of knowledge, of techniques, of inventions, of advances in our technology. It seems very obvious to me that this requires a change in our attitude toward the human being and toward his relationships to the world. To put it bluntly, we need a different kind of human being...to be able to live in a world which changes perpetually, which doesn't stand still.

Abraham Maslow (1963)

Is it possible that the decline of member engagement/involvement is not simply a contemporary issue? Do the published histories of MBOs afford us a greater context? Does gaining a historical perspective provide greater insight to understanding its root causes? And in doing so, find alternative solutions? Maslow might just prove the point. Who would suggest that 1963 (see above) was a time of rapid change?

A great deal of information has been generated over the past several decades surrounding the governance and management of nonprofit organizations. And even more information has been generated surrounding MBOs specifically. And much of it has contributed to the development of very sophisticated and complex MBOs producing some very worthwhile and meaningful things for their members and the discipline they represent. Yet, the one essential element that ensures their sustainability – a highly active and engaged membership – persists. While the degree of involvement desired may vary, the recognition of its importance to retain members is widespread.

The **Melos Institute** was established as an independent think tank to provide a place for the MBO community to (1) confront the persistent challenges facing MBOs head-on, (2) engage a wide range of professionals across professions and generations to consider the causes, implications, and consequences, (3) contribute practical solutions that could have enduring impact, and (4) build a more comprehensive evidence-based body of knowledge.

While many challenges exist that require attention, it is believed that they may be manifestations of a larger more systemic problem – that of *member engagement or involvement*. Because this issue is inherently linked to the MBO's existence and sustainability, a broader set of questions also emerges:

- Does the current model for managing MBOs provide sufficient insight to address the most critical challenges that have persisted over time?
- Would a different approach generate better results?
- Would studying MBOs as a social system - from both the members' and the staff professionals' perspective – change the strategies currently employed?
- What impact might that have on member engagement/involvement?

These are complex questions. Just finding answers is not sufficient. The answers must fit into a larger strategic framework that transcends time. This enables the development of a much more comprehensive body of knowledge unaffected by fads or trends; and is supported by sound evidence-based research. Such steps will help association management be recognized within the larger society as a legitimate and highly-respected profession.

A lot of very valuable information and knowledge currently exists. Efforts are being made to examine and incorporate it within the context of Melos' projects. Additional answers are being found by engaging a wide range of professionals who are willing to contribute their ideas, experiences and perspectives. The Institute reaches out to association professionals, volunteer leaders, academic scholars, and content specialists. And, to tap the rich talent that exists within the association management profession specifically, the Institute pursues 'open source' access of its efforts to offer comments, suggestions, and ideas. Every project provides an opportunity for input to be shared from the convenience of one's desk to meaningful onsite discussions. Each project is generative in nature; grassroots-led and grassroots-fed.

MBOs play such an integral role in our democracy. Their active presence at any 'planning table' will be required as this society contemplates the most fundamental issues surrounding its values and the reforms necessary to maintain its relevance and competitiveness in a global society.

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Melos Institute:

Focus of Our Efforts

Starting in 2011, the Melos Institute is focusing its efforts to:



Examine Complex Challenges & Seek Strategic Opportunities

Address the systemic and complex issues facing MBOs. Design approaches to investigate the underlying causes, implications, and consequences of action/inaction. Provide space for essential questions to be posed, concepts considered, and research defined. Engage the association community in the pursuit and affirmation of solutions and relevant tools.

Conduct Systems-oriented Research

Conduct research based upon a set of prioritized short- and long-term research needs. In addition to working with association professionals, engage volunteer leaders, academic scholars and content specialists to contribute their expertise. Develop ongoing productive working relationships with association-related institutions to support design, implementation and dissemination of research efforts.

Strengthen MBOs' Capacity to Achieve Change

Conduct meaningful learning experiences for association professionals and volunteer leaders who are interested in advancing the governance and management of their organization. Expand the learning model to enlighten the learner to the critical principles, processes, and practices that produce productive outcomes; blending relevant theoretical models with direct application strategies and tactics. Demonstrate learning models that build competent volunteer and staff leadership partnerships.



Serve as a Clearinghouse of Information and Change-Process Tools

Provide access to cutting-edge information and results-oriented tools. Promote existing materials proven to address key issues that align with the Institute’s strategic framework; develop new materials where gaps exist. Samples of available materials can be found at www.melosinstitute.org.

Expand Public Awareness and Appreciation

Support existing efforts to educate a wide range of public and government officials, along with American citizens of the breadth and impact that MBOs have on their respective discipline and the larger society.

Current economic times might prove that efforts of this kind to be somewhat problematic. On the other hand, the time might just be incredibly relevant. What remains compelling for those who have given time and talent to establishing the Melos Institute is the notion that members benefit personally and professionally from making connections. While the relationship they build directly with the MBO is valuable, it often pales in comparison to those established with fellow members.

MBOs are designed to affect change. Now is the time to take bold action – to lay the groundwork for generations to come. In order to ensure they have the capacity to continue to do so, they will need highly engaged member communities.

The Melos Institute offers a place where collective dialogue can lead to productive and outcomes. The *two working papers* that follow in this series offer some new thoughts for your review and comment. Please visit our website to contribute your thoughts and ideas.



Second in Series

Indeed Relevant:

The Pivotal Role Associations Play in a Hyper-connected World

Third in Series

Indeed Relevant:

A Relation-centered Management Model for Building a Highly-engaged Membership Community in a Hyper-connected World

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