

**MRPA Focus Groups:
Understanding Member Needs and Expectations**

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MRPA Focus Groups: Understanding Member Needs and Expectations

From March – October 2021, the MRPA Membership Resources Committee recruited MRPA members and non-members to participate in focus groups about their needs and perceptions of ideal professional organizations. Recruitment emails were shared through MRPA communications and personal invitations beginning February 2021.

A total of 53 members and non-member indicated an interest in completing the focus groups, and 47 of those participated. The focus groups were scheduled for the spring and fall of 2021. Fourteen focus groups were conducted in total with the size of the groups ranging from two to four participants and took place via video conferencing software. Focus groups lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Transcripts from the recorded sessions were analyzed for themes.

Focus group participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Describe your ideal professional organization.
- What benefits would a professional organization offer to show it is focused on its members?
- What role does membership in a professional organization play in your career development?
- Why are you a member of MRPA or other professional organizations? If you aren't, tell us a little about why you made that decision as well.
- How do you decide which professional organizations to be a member of?
- What deters you from being a member of a professional organization?

Participant Profile

Participants primarily represented parks and recreation professionals and aspiring professionals from the metro and southern regions of the state:

- Members – 30 participants
- Non-members – 8 participants
- Students (membership unknown) – 9 participants

Findings

Upon content analysis of the transcripts from the focus group data, three themes emerged: a) communication and advocacy; b) organizational re-structure; and c) networking and education. Each theme provides feedback that can be used by MRPA to plan for future viability and growth.

Communication and Advocacy

The participants in the focus groups stated that MRPA needs to focus on improved communication with professionals in the field and develop strategies to better advocate for the profession among key decision-makers within the state. The participants also shared their perceptions on how the association can increase interest in the field as a viable career opportunity for searching for a field of study while pursuing a college degree. Particularly, the participants desired a greater communication and advocacy focus on marketing and media engagement, inclusion and equity advocacy, and creating credibility for parks and recreation professionals.

According to the focus group participants, practitioner and media engagement was an essential area of growth that MRPA must pursue. This engagement included direct communication with Minnesota residents and the media. Two participants shared the following:

“And then, for me, the biggest thing that I would love to see is that our professional organization is the face of us out in the community and talking to the media and advocating for us so whether that's on the hill doing legislation, it is you know, whenever there's a parks and rec story, MRPA should be the first phone call.”

“Oftentimes they know [City X] park gets featured a lot for not only their great and wonderful things, but they're right next to [news outlet]. There, there are other places that have good things to promote and show, and I would love for MRPA to be advocating for that, and I would love for them to be the person who is getting those phone calls from the media because they are a known resource for anyone within the community, to be able to get that information. And they want to know who to talk to about this happening in parks.”

Others shared concerns that not enough advocacy with local and state leaders and stakeholders was being done by the association to support the profession and the important services and needs provided to communities through parks and recreation.

“As an industry, we should have certain things that are important to us as an industry, we should be advocating for those things, and we should whether it's a similar tool kit like how NRPA puts out for parks and rec month or talking points or here's all the training we can attend or things that are important to us as an industry. Like a common message, a common theme, a common goal, like I think we're all stronger together than we are in our separate little pods of cities.”

“It's advocacy so going out versus back to us right it's advocating for our profession, one thing I know that conversations I've had so city parks and recreation are not allowed to hold childcare as a licensed exempt Center, but they can hold social and recreational programming. For day camp, so you can never call it childcare, even though technically it is exactly the same thing right and the YMCA which has shaped very much like a park and recreation department is allowed to hold childcare. What's the difference and why isn't someone advocating for that and those folks who are creating the legal terminology to say look, this makes no sense. This makes it so much more difficult, and it causes mth staff to follow up on all these things because they look like they're holding child care.”

Additionally, there was concern about the perceived limited digital presence of the organization and the ease with which professionals could learn about opportunities, specifically, through the website.

“Um, also the problem is, I know you have a website because I'm on it, of course, all the time, but I. I just have to make it simple, for me, so I remember that you exist, you know, of course I you know I do remember, but it would be helpful if you also send out an email on the workshop you're going to have.”

“If you, as MRPA can put a word out there to the superintendents and the... you know the top people of rec in each of the districts and say to them – this is really important, could you be supportive? – it doesn't cost that much money you know? I mean it's so valuable and just kind of encourage them to allow everybody to attend some of the things we're good right now, but we haven't always been good.”

The participants noted an inclusion and equity deficit within MRPA, particularly as it relates to the development of a unified and clear position on equity to support professionals and communities.

“ I kind of [...] saw that there's a huge deficiency and MRPA with race and equity trainings. The knowledge that the journey is that important isn't there. They haven't started their journey as an association with race and equity. Training raising equity training for the Board which they've never had and we've done workshops we've done sessions at conferences that's totally different

we're talking a policy decision making, raising equity lens on the association so sorry I've got my soapbox now."

"And they need to figure out a way to make sure that they're welcoming people of color welcoming people that have different backgrounds and all these barriers that exist in a lot of our communities, probably exist in our associations too."

Furthermore, the participants are looking for the association to provide supports on how to support, attract, and retain a diverse staff.

"MRPA as a professional organization, help us [...] bring people of color into our organizations and help our communities that would be my one takeaway above any other line right now."

"Really interested more in that diversity, inclusion and equity focus and lens and, like to make sure that I am inclusive in things I do. And then hiring to as it relates to like, how can we diversify our candidate pool so maybe that's marketing to those are the ones me and my order interested in and social media."

Lastly, the theme of communication and advocacy included a need for MRPA to provide professional credibility to a career in parks and recreation, especially for those with aspirations to work in parks and recreation.

"As a profession, and I think we need to do it much earlier and that's where I think MRPA could really do a lot is be the person that's going out and creating these slideshows these presentations like connecting with high schools and saying hey we want to come in for career day, how can we talk to you about how we're more than just what Leslie Knope does. You know, and like, how do we sell parks and recreation as a viable career opportunity rather than just being that major that people found later in life. And or later in their college career like, 'Oh, this is a thing,' like all the people who really realize that education is a pain in the butt, and they really then just decide that they want to be programming with young kids or whatever and use those really good tools that they have from you know their education stuff that they started and then end up in parks and recreation. I mean, I have a former teacher that's one of my best staff, you know she didn't like actually teaching, but she loves kids and loves the programming aspect. So how do you get to those people early and show them that this is an opportunity that's there and I just keep thinking that MRPA is missing the opportunity in the mark, to be able to be proactive and that education piece of what is a possibility."

"Really, an organization that's on the front side of the trends that as our profession pivots and continues to make sure that we are advocating for our place in tax dollars is in legislation that really tells our story and gives us the tools to tell our story in our communities to make sure that parks and recreation is valued in our community so that we can continue to get the resources and the support that we need to continue to impact people's lives so. You know I think I think really serving that advocacy purpose and providing the resources to help us do that, it is important to me."

Organizational Re-Structure

The second theme that emerged from the data was a desire for organizational restructuring. this included reviewing and defining what it means to be member-driven, having the flexibility among leadership to be open to change, prioritize marketing and develop a staffing structure to support this priority, and examine

board recruitment and appointment process for more equitable representation of the field and the communities they serve.

According to participants in the focus groups, MRPA members are over-worked and frequently feel like they are tasked with completing all the work.

“10% right, that are the doers and MRPA tends to find those 10% of people and [Participant A] and I have both been those people, and we do do do for so many years and then we're freaking burned out. Like literally burnt out, and then we have to go away and then we come back and it's like we don't know anybody anymore, because it's now the next 10% so it's hard to break back in.”

"I think it's harder and harder to say you're getting value from something when you're being asked as a member of that organization to create most of what's happening in MRPA. And while I think it's beneficial as a for me as a professional I mean I'm a little torn because it's helped me grow professionally. But on the flip side there's been a lot of initiatives that are great Members have put together and I part of me thinks why isn't our staff doing that why isn't the MRPA staff, providing those resources and those things so. I struggle with that and I think the model has to I think the model has to change, somehow, and that that's significant. I think difference from how we're currently operating, but you know you got to be able to find value and I don't."

Participants are seeking an organization that is open to change, as many perceived the association as being rigid or operating on processes and policies that limit opportunities for new initiatives and ideas. To start, it was important to the participants that there be changes to the current staffing model structures.

“Neither of us have said softball certification leagues or sanctioning like none of those things are things that are at all on our radar at all and, in fact, many organizations that I speak with the only reason that they still sanction through MRPA is to support MRPA, and I don't know that that's a good model, in my opinion, I think it's not tearing the band-aid off and something we actually are talking about within our organization, because we don't see the value and what it brings to the table. It just, we just we don't and like we don't send teams to the tournaments, the umpires don't like the training; it's too expensive and they don't want to do it and we don't get anything necessarily for the dollars that we're paying so at all.”

“What MRPA, a benefit more if they had a person that's more of a marketing person. Maybe somebody that's \$50,000 position that does marketing and maybe they have an intern as well, for me, \$20,000 so let's say [staff] and I am just making stuff up, I don't know let's say \$80,000. So if we have something that's 50,000, 60,000 for marketing that actually can do marketing put us on a map the association and maybe possibly pay for an intern as well help out with a lot of the other duties that happened with MRPA. It generates revenue and would help generate more news and attention, which would then make more value to the organization which would hopefully bring in more members, which would generate more revenue.

"To get to the level that we're really kind of wanting, however, I also feel like maybe it's time that we look at what where should we be spending, I think we all do this in our organization. As things evolve, where should we be spending our staff time and how do we look at where what maybe traditionally 10, 15, 20 years ago we were doing as an association, we want to go now is it time to shift where we're focusing our staff time. But are we may I don't benefit at all from them having pickup ball and volleyball, to be perfectly honest and say is, do we want our staff, focusing on programming? We program so I would rather have them focus on Resources. The vast majority of the adult sports folks as far as I know, don't particularly care about and then you also look at the trend line adult sports in general is that really where should be focused anyway.

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Even if they do care and so that's obviously a bigger conversation it's a huge fundamental change, for how they've approached things and the revenue piece is obviously. You know, beyond my scope of understanding as well, but I think it's time for a really good analysis of whether that all that focus on adult sports. makes sense, as we advocate for what our professionalism, what the future what a profession is and what the future of parks and recreation is."

More directly, participants made mention of a need for a staff person that was devoted to marketing, engagement, and education.

"A couple of things that I thought about for MRPA, it's about marketing and maybe it's again it goes back to having the staff dedicated".

"If you knew if there was a staffing model at MRPA and somebody was there overseeing you know, maybe education and engagement and diversity, whatever I'm throwing out words the initiatives, then you would know that."

Board recruitment processes and the membership of the board of directors need thorough and thoughtful examination.

"Working on the elections process to actually have them be competitive elections and actually have people be able to understand who's running and what the board responsibilities are and kind of taking a look at that I think would be important, too, because I know, right now, sometimes we struggle to get people to run for different positions. And nobody rarely reads the packets to know who to vote for, they just vote for the person that they know that they met 10 years ago when they are in your professional right so."

"I mean, it could be two years from now, maybe next year if we get to this change for MRPA, I really hope that the recent equity advisory committee be part of that change as well to help with that reason equity lens and what that change looks like going forward as well."

"And I felt like you had to be on the in-crowd to get into that to begin with, that they the chairs of the conference are hand-selected there's no way to be like hey I want to do that. I'm not saying I'm ready to do that, personally, but I know some people might be. And when someone happened to raise their hands to step forward and do that and it doesn't seem like there's an opportunity to step forward and do that. There's no public process to that at all it's just hey these guys are the conference chairs for this year and we're moving forward, and by that point, they've already selected the better part of a committee, and then from there it's an 'I know this person' that's a Co-chair for a subcommittee or something, and they've invited me to join them."

Networking and Education

The final theme that emerged from the focus group data was networking and education. Within this theme, focus group participants stated that they wanted to see more opportunities for connection with professionals across the state, a mechanism for sharing resources and information, and educational programs and workshops that are available for professionals at all levels of their career and address all organizational types and sizes.

Many parks and recreation professionals and aspiring professionals requested opportunities for connection to others in the field beyond conference attendance.

"For me, it brings the most value so you know nothing no problem is unique to one Community or one municipality, and we, the fact that we can share resources. And you now learn from each

other's errors and successes, I think that that's what makes it I if there are opportunities to do that, within the professional agency that is key for me."

"I've seen so many networks roles and participation, just because of the accessibility now digitally through zoom and go to meetings and just virtual meetings it's been pretty awesome [...] I do want to just stress that that connecting has to be more than just like the networking at the conference. You know, once you've made that connection like we have the ability to pick up the phone and make the phone call right like we can do that. But I think that there is more to it than just that those social opportunities like it really does need to be connecting for purposes of. You can work well together if your group of cities tackle something together just currently there's four cities right around me that are tackling the idea of Okay, we all have summer day camps. So we're all working together to have the same guy come in and do a magician show save US dollars makes him more you know able to you know hit four places in one day and we're connecting together because we've created that connection through some of our different sections so it has to be justifiable back up the chain to that it's more than just a social aspect of knowing everybody else in the cities."

"I think the big one, is just the networking, I think, being able to be a part of a membership that I can get to know other people."

"I have not been on the MRPA website in years, so I don't know, maybe that exists when I used to be on the MRPA website more there were places where you can post questions that people would respond, and you know and things have changed so much in technology now Maybe those aren't even the tools for us I'm not sure. And just, you know that whole ability to ask questions get answers, whether it's through email or through meetings or information sharing and just having those professional contacts."

The ability to share resources was an important membership need for the participants.

"Help towns and cities, who don't have all the resources pool together to get things that they can't get like whether that's raising equity training or whatever. It was just going to mention that as well, the reason equity piece. Like I know we're not the League of Minnesota cities but them as an organization to me is awesome like they are the place that someone will go to get information about X, Y, and Z that have to do with you always start with them when you're talking, you know simple stuff you start with them, whether that's legal it's HR its buying power all those things are right there."

"Whether it's like condensed purchasing power like how you get with you know, like the joint cooperatives or things like that you know banding together to get better pricing, which would justify the money that's spent on the memberships."

Lastly, education for all levels and entity (rural, urban, small communities, large cities, non-profits) types was important for the participants, whether members of MRPA or otherwise.

"But kind of at least what I look for is specific trainings to like what would apply for me so what are the new trends and how would I implement them into a program create a new program event."

"Definitely on the education piece and on it, you know when crisis things hit like COVID, what are you doing, how do we survive this so that's where I am at least."

“Yeah definitely hit on like the education piece providing more and different types of educational opportunities, especially with location wise obviously we're all over the state so providing it maybe not just strictly around the metro.”

“I would circle back to education. I've looked at some other associations, state associations near us some of them have a staff person that that's all they do is education. So they're out there planning 1, 2, 3, 4 education opportunities, a month, and then their sole focus is conference outside of that so that focus person on just education opportunities or that next big thing or advancement opportunities for professionals on to me that would be the trade-off.”

Conclusion

Members and non-members shared their desires for a professional organization with particular attention to ways to enhance the mission and growth of MRPA. These perceptions provide important suggestions for changes and resources to be considered for development to support the future of MRPA. Some specific recommendations informed by the data gathered from the focus groups include:

- Create a comprehensive marketing plan that includes connecting with professionals from member and non-member organizations.
- Create an online space for discussion, connection, and resource sharing.
- Develop or reorganize personnel structures that focus on professional advocacy and regional outreach.
- Provide thoughtful and timely education opportunities, particularly related to racial equity and inclusion in the communities.
- Develop a plan to recruit and retain a more diversified membership and board of directors.