

## Creating Successful Local Emerging Professionals Committees

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### SUMMARY

Case studies from Emerging New York Architects (ENYA) and the Northeast Illinois Young Architects Group (YAG) provide strategies to help local components revitalize and/or create an emerging professionals group. Committee creation, strategic planning, communication, plan implementation, and annual assessment are the basic steps a local component needs to take to create a valuable group.

### GET INVOLVED

Recent graduates or others who might be considering joining the AIA repeatedly ask, "Why should I join the AIA? What's in it for me?" Too many times, established members have ignored the question, fully confident that the AIA indeed provides a great number of opportunities to engage the profession in a variety of ways.

As in other volunteer organizations, often what you get out of AIA membership is what you are willing to contribute, be it time, money, or plain old hard work.

### SETTING UP YOUR COMMITTEE

A steering committee enables more individuals to take ownership in your group and allows many hands to accomplish many things in many areas. Solicit interest in the committee by way of a local newsletter or through e-mail or telephone calls.

Define the roles of the committee members. As an example, the AIA Northeast Illinois Emerging Professionals group has three divisions: Relationships, Community Service, and Professional Development. Each area has been identified as an area of active interest among our local membership or one that may best serve the demographic identified as most prolific in the component. The AIA New York Chapter ENYA Committee has formed subcommittees around the programs it offers: Mentoring, Design Competitions, and Industry Tours. In any context, forming committees in line with constituent needs may contribute significantly to the

success or failure of a burgeoning young professionals group.

Also, a smaller group may have greater success with a smaller number of better-quality programs than with larger quantities of programming. In scheduling events, components need to balance the strongest interests of the membership at large with those that will appeal most to emerging professionals. Sometimes quality will directly suffer at the expense of quantity; three well-run activities will have a much better impact than six moderately interesting events.

In addition, like any activity or program that involves young people, mobility must be built into the leadership framework. ENYA, for instance, plans many events, programs, and lectures that vie for the attention and time of young architects. The ability to move through and eventually out of the program must exist in order for the committee to have lasting power and to revitalize itself beyond its current leadership.

### PLANNING YOUR STRATEGY

A strategic plan is a key element for a new emerging professionals group. To begin, elicit input from the steering committee and survey the membership at large to best delineate short- and long-term goals for the group.

While it may be challenging for the committee chair (or co-chairs) to narrow down the multitude of directions that a committee for young architects can take, it is necessary to assess the interests of the emerging professionals. Begin by reaching out in some of these ways:

- Set up a way for the committee to communicate. ENYA was able to get an e-mail address for the committee through AIA New York. The Northeast Illinois YAG communicates through the chair by e-mail and at monthly steering committee meetings.
- Build a mailing list. Request a list of the local component's associate members who may have recently become licensed as well as the board

members. If your group is open to students, contact the deans of local architecture schools.

- Use the mailing list to publicize an open brainstorming session. In addition to brainstorming ideas for the committee's future, save some time at the end of the meeting for break-out sessions based on interesting ideas that come up during the meeting. This is where your future leaders emerge.

Because the committee chair(s) will be investing the most time, it is important that the committee's first endeavors interest them. Select a couple of attainable goals or programs that were discussed in the brainstorming session. Enlist the help of those who were most vocal in the break-out sessions and empower them as leaders.

To put the goals into action, formulate strategies for completing the initiatives to which you have assigned priority. Consider the resources you may be able to tap into. Consultants might give an overview of relevant study sessions for the Architect Registration Examination. Local government leaders might speak about architects' civic responsibilities. Local architects are usually happy to speak about their recent projects or areas of architecture that interest them.

Always consider cost when thinking about these events or what a parent component may be willing to subsidize. Recent graduates, interns, and young architects will be more attracted to a free event. Open a line of communication with your local component—your most immediate resource for support. Some local AIA boards have an associate director or YAF representative who could speak regularly about issues relevant to emerging professionals and garner support for initiatives your group plans to undertake.

### **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR MEMBERS AND THE LOCAL COMPONENT**

Consider presenting your strategic plan or list of objectives and goals at a component board meeting. By introducing the group and illuminating the programming the emerging professionals committee has set into motion, you may cause an infectious word of mouth that spreads from firm to firm, builds the membership and dynamic of your group, creates invaluable networking opportunities, and even enhances the group's ability to establish baseline funding for these events.

To generate support for the emerging professionals committee, it is important to integrate the committee's leadership with the component's

leadership. To that end, consider the following suggestions:

- Get an associate member to serve as an associate director on the board of the local component. This is an effective way to get the board used to seeing young faces at the table. This individual can express the concerns of young architects at the component board level. Likewise, encourage recently licensed architects to run for board positions.
- Ally the emerging professionals committee with a prominent member of the component. Although the associate director may represent the committee at the board level, it is wise to find a licensed member in good standing who will advocate for the committee's interests as it becomes familiar with the culture of the established board practices.
- Get an emerging professional on as many of the component's other committees and task forces as possible. Again, this helps the component to become aware of concerns, interests, and opinions of emerging professionals.

Embedding associates and young architects in the component at all levels ultimately gives the committee more credibility and enables the committee chairs(s) to focus on facilitating the overall vision of the group.

### **IMPLEMENTING YOUR PLAN**

Now you are ready to put your plan into action. You have a mission and a vision. You have your goals clearly outlined. You have a steering committee and a plan to reach your goals. You have enlisted the support of your local component. All the pieces are in place.

If you are fortunate enough to succeed immediately, you may have an active group of emerging professionals ready to contribute, learn, advocate, and achieve. But that may not be the case. You may experience a slow start. Don't give up.

Finding the formula for your group might be harder than it sounds. For instance, the AIA Northeast Illinois YAG thought it had accurately forecasted the needs and desires of the local component's associate members, only to experience lackluster participation in some of the group's activities. It is easy to get discouraged in situations where you have put a large amount of effort into an activity, event, or initiative, and things may not seem to go as planned.

For a group in its infancy, the best strategy may be to mix things up a little. Try different types of events, at different intervals, using different modes of publicity until you find a formula that works. Especially in an industry where all are so active and busy, it is easy to fall into a pattern that may not work and give up when results do not improve.

Keep pushing and you will eventually succeed. In every instance, there is ultimately a group of interested individuals who want to give back, participate in a lecture or roundtable, or talk to a classroom of students about what an architect does. Even if you don't succeed, you will have benefited every person who has participated in one way or another, and that itself is a distinct and positive contribution to our profession.

### ASSESSING

Even the most successful group should come back to its core and reassess where it had been and in what direction it is headed.

Once a year, the AIA Northeast Illinois YAG revisits its strategic plan. It examines its short- and long-term goals and assesses how successful the programming of the previous year had been. This development period allows the group to reflect, change, and adapt to the "marketplace" environment of the local component; ensures that it best serves the immediate needs of the emerging professionals; and helps it change direction when certain areas require improvement.

### SUCCESS STORIES

The most essential aspect of what may make or break your group of emerging professionals is teamwork. The ability to be accountable to one another is central to the way a group will function and make positive motion toward achieving the mission and vision set out by the leadership of a group.

Both ENYA and YAG have found these strategies to be successful:

- ENYA currently has two cochairs. Along with the associate director, they divide the leadership of the committee's three subcommittees: Industry Tours, Mentoring, and Design Competitions. The Mentoring subcommittee offers opportunities for young architects to apply to be selected by mentors for small-group mentoring sessions.
- ENYA hosted the Groen Hoek: East River Community Boathouse Competition in 2004. The competition received 350 entries from 32

countries. The Design Competitions subcommittee is planning another competition to be held this year.

- Whenever possible, an emerging professional writes a summary of ENYA's most recent event for AIA New York's publication, *e-Oculus*.
- ENYA's mailing list has grown to more than 600 e-mail addresses. It is used to publicize ENYA's events and programs as well as other items of interest to young architects and students around the city.
- The associate director and the two cochairs meet four times per year with ENYA's committee advisor, who is the president-elect for the component. This relationship has been essential to the committee's success and voice within the component.

There is a desire to solve the issues that face emerging professionals in their day-to-day struggle on the path to reaching their potential. By creating a forum for concerns, ideas, thoughts, dreams, and expectations, emerging professional groups are an essential part of the solution.

Creating a community of emerging professionals can foster an interdependence that embodies the spirit of those who ask, "Why should I join the AIA?" You will find that the group will not set out to answer this question; the group will be the *answer* to the question.

### LESSONS LEARNED

This Best Practice explains how to set up an emerging professionals committee. It is important to create a steering committee, write a plan, stick to it and assess your effectiveness. However, critical to the success of an emerging professionals committee is the importance of getting associate AIA and just licensed AIA members active in the component. The more active emerging professionals are the more their voices will be heard and their goals will be met.

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## RESOURCES

### More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 07.03.01 Definition of Architectural Positions
- 03.02.01 Mentoring Interns: A Firm Commitment
- 03.02.13 Colorado Component and University Develop Partnership for Mentoring

### Feedback

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### Keywords

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components