

So, You're Thinking of Going into Association Management?

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As children growing up, companies like the Ronald McDonald House, The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, Boy and Girl Scouts of America, and the Salvation Army were familiar names. We knew they did work for society, but did we know that it was “work” for some? The path to association management is one of those career paths, much like being a sorority or fraternity professional, we learn about well into our young adult lives.

As individuals consider a career in association management the steps forward can often be unclear, given there are different types of associations and, debatably, an association for everything: charitable or philanthropic nonprofits (The Susan G. Komen Foundation), trade associations (the North American Interfraternity Conference), or individual membership associations (our own organizations, Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, Fraternity Executives Association). With so many paths to choose from, it is often difficult to know where to start. Does working for a sorority or fraternity headquarters limit the paths into association management? Is it impossible to switch from one career path into association management? The questions are endless.

Associations are constantly looking for talented, mission-driven individuals who can advance the goals and vision of the organization. There are critical steps professionals pursuing a career in association management can take to get a leg-up on their peers.

Inventory Your Skills

Professional roles provide a wide array of opportunities from strategic planning to recruiting, coaching, and mentoring to budgeting and fundraising. Association executives do it all. Take time to inventory skills and current professional responsibilities to understand what skills are strong and what immediate opportunities are available to strengthen those skills. Think about how those skills will translate into future career steps. For example, recruiting a past chapter president to serve as council president has a direct parallel to recruiting a Fortune 500 CEO to serve on an association's board. Understanding the skills that are possessed is the first step to translating those experiences to responsibilities found in association management roles.

Advocate

It is important to know what areas of growth exist, given the breadth of responsibilities within association management. Is a current role not providing exposure to a particular area: financial reporting and budgeting? Fundraising? Developing organizational culture? Recruiting staff?

Discuss with a supervisor, an executive director, or an associate executive director what they identify as areas of growth and propose an opportunity to hone in and develop those skills. Association executives want to help cultivate and groom the next wave of organizational leadership, and they will do what they can to invest in their teams.

Seek Mentorship

Since associations in America, in some form, have been around since the first settlements (American Society of Association Executives, 2019), there are organizational leaders who have trekked a variety of paths in their journey to association management. Often, we think of mentors as individuals who are doing exactly what we want to do. However, understand there is an entire spectrum of organizations to think about when exploring a career in association management. Being a fraternity executive director may be an aspiration, but it would be wise to expand a circle of mentors to include leaders in trade associations or community-centered nonprofit organizations. Expand your horizons and look beyond the nonprofit space — seek a mentor who is in the for-profit world. These leaders are often tasked with similar responsibilities as nonprofit leaders. Additionally, there may be a potential mentor who works in the for-profit world but sits on several nonprofit boards. There are endless opportunities for mentorship in the association management space.

Engage

Working for or with associations provides an incredible opportunity to engage and develop skills towards association management, but it is also important to see how those skills are practiced by others. Getting involved with an association shows firsthand how various association management professionals practice their trade and helps provide additional perspective when developing the skillset needed for association management. Not only does getting involved help to develop personal skills, but it allows us to engage in work that we care about. Engaging with other professionals pursuing careers in association management is easier than you might think, especially given there is an association ... for associations! Each state has their own association (ex. the [Indiana Society of Association Executives](#) or ISAE) and there is a national association, the [American Society of Association Executives](#) (or ASAE). For young professionals, ASAE provides a “young professionals” membership rate, adding an additional bonus to signing up early in a career. Being a part of ASAE (or a local state version) provides an opportunity to engage in dialogue, learn, and converse with peers who are charting similar paths.

Educational Development

Learning skills through professional experiences is a great way to grow as an association professional; however, to make the jump to managing an association, additional education is an

important step. Consider sitting for the [Certified Association Executive \(CAE\)](#) certificate or the [Certified Fund Raising Executive \(CFRE\)](#) certificate. Both require course work and professional work experience. In addition to a certificate, explore a master's degree program. There are nonprofit-focused Master of Public Administration or Affairs programs but even a broader MBA is beneficial. In recent years, more and more programs have been developed that teach skills relevant to nonprofit administration, like a Master of Organization Development. Some current association management professionals do not think advanced degrees are necessary for the field (certificates are still advantageous, and oftentimes required), so pursuing graduate school simply for the degree may be a mismanaged investment (J. Rundle & S. Wiley, personal communication, 2019). Yet, others still advocate for the necessity of advanced degrees. It is important to think about the skills, knowledge, and relationships that will be learned and built in a program.

Lifestyle Matters

Working for a nonprofit is incredibly rewarding. Having an impact on society or in the day-to-day lives of members is not only a great opportunity, but a tremendous responsibility. Mission-driven professionals become personally invested in their day-to-day work, and this is evident in association management. There is always a volunteer to train, an alumnus to re-engage, and a strategic plan to create that will grow the organization and spread the impact of the association to thousands more members. Association management is a demanding career. There are more things to be done than staff and resources available to do it, often stretching every employee to do the most with the least. When thinking about a career in association management, realize not all associations come with the same demand and strain on personal lives. This is point number six but should really be point number one: think about what kind of life you want, what kind of spouse, parent, or sibling you want to be and pursue opportunities that align.

It does not take years of association experience to make a path forward in a career of association management. These six things can be implemented well before the first day on a first job. There are roles at all levels of an association and skills that can be developed in each professional role. Association executives are focused on running organizations, and one of their key functions is ensuring their organizations are set up for future success by recruiting and retaining talented staff. Taking even a single step in inventorying current skill sets, advocating for new opportunities, finding a mentor, volunteering for an association, or continuing your education will help advance a career in association management.

Zach Lepperd has been on staff for Beta Theta Pi since graduating from Truman State University, and he has helped start over a dozen Betas chapter across North America. He currently serves as the director of expansion and works with campus partners and alumni in establishing values-

based fraternity experiences on new campuses. Beyond his day-to-day responsibilities, he has developed an interest in association management and has networked with mentors and other professionals to understand how to pursue a career in the field. Outside of work, Zach loves spending time with his fiancé, Nicole (who he reconnected with at an AFA Drive-In).

References

American Society of Association Executives (2019). Association FAQ. Retrieved from <https://www.asaecenter.org/about-us/newsroom/association-faq>.