

2024-25 Annual Report UMRA Membership and Communications Committee

Ron Matross, Chair

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Members: Michael Austin , Kris Bettin, Will Craig, Cathy Lee Gierke, Virginia Hanson, Nancy Helmich, Kathy Jensen, Virgil Larson, Deanne Magnusson, Ron Matross, Jan McCulloch, Jan Morlock, Kris Mortensen, Lynn Slifer, John Sullivan

UMRA Membership

As of July 29, 2025, the number of active members was 921, 707 (76%) of whom had renewed their membership for 2025-26 or were newly joined. The renewal campaign is ongoing, and the renewal rate will increase. Later this fall, after renewals are complete, we will prepare a more detailed membership report.

Proceedings

The Committee did not meet as a whole this past year. Instead, it did its work in smaller groups. After raising dues and developing a strategic planning report the previous year, there were no issues that required the approval or discussion by the committee as a whole.

New Member Database and Portal

The most significant accomplishment of the year was the selection and implementation of a new member database and web portal, a major recommendation of the strategic planning report. UMRA's old home-grown database system and member portal were obsolete, and the volunteer supporting it would be no longer available. Consequently, a project team was formed to select and implement a new system. The team was led by Cathy Lee Gierke and included: Cathy Lee Gierke, Michael Austin, Jane Glazebrook, Kathy Jensen, Virgil Larson, Ron Matross, and Sandy Weisberg.

The team spent several weeks evaluating commercial membership management systems, finally selecting the Wild Apricot system. With the approval of the UMRA Board of Directors, the team worked on a tight schedule to implement the system in time for the 2025-26 membership cycle.

While there has been a learning curve and some technical and procedural issues, the implementation has been successful, with records from the old system loaded into the new database. As of this writing, 75% of the members have logged into the new portal.

The new system promises to streamline the registration for events, membership renewals, and mailings to members. The system allows for the automation of sign-up and

membership notices, and in the process of implementation, we reviewed the content and timing of these communications.

Small Group Meetings

Another recommendation of the strategic planning report was the development of small group meetings to get together to socialize. The report conceived of them as “zip code coffees”, where members in a given set of zip codes would be invited to meet.

Thus far, these group meetings have not taken off. However, committee member Lynn Slifer and Bill Donohue started some breakfast meetings at a local restaurant featuring a discussion led by an invited participant. These are space-limited and different from our forums and workshops in that they are back-and-forth discussions rather than presentations.

These sessions have been quite successful and quickly fill up. The topics have included both medical issues like dementia and political/cultural issues. It is hoped that they will now serve as a model for the zip code coffees or other small group social opportunities.

Outreach to Prospective Retirees

A third recommendation of the strategic planning report was to strengthen our outreach to prospective retirees. Our primary method of reaching them is a letter about UMRA sent in a blind mailing by the Office of Human Resources. Now, the UMRA leadership has supplemented that effort by partnering with the Office of the Provost to participate in some pre-retirement seminars for retiring faculty. In these, UMRA remembers share their experiences with retirement. In the sessions held this past year, the UMRA participation has been well received. We have also worked with the Office of Human Resources to get for next year a description of UMRA in the OHR virtual pre-retirement seminars which reach a broader cross-section of University retirees.

Newsletter

The UMRA newsletter, edited by Kris Mortensen, continues to be well-done and well-received both in digital and print editions. At her suggestion, we were able to switch to all-digital printing, which offers more flexibility and higher quality than the old system of pre-printing paper with the UMRA masthead and then printing the newsletter in the conventional way.

Issues for the Coming Year

It has been suggested that UMRA pro-rate membership dues charges based on the member's distance from the Twin Cities. Our old system didn't allow for doing this, but Wild Apricot does.

We will continue to pursue the concept of zip code coffees and see whether we can some experiments started. We will also refine the new member portal and the communications associated with it, as well as monitor other issues as they come up.