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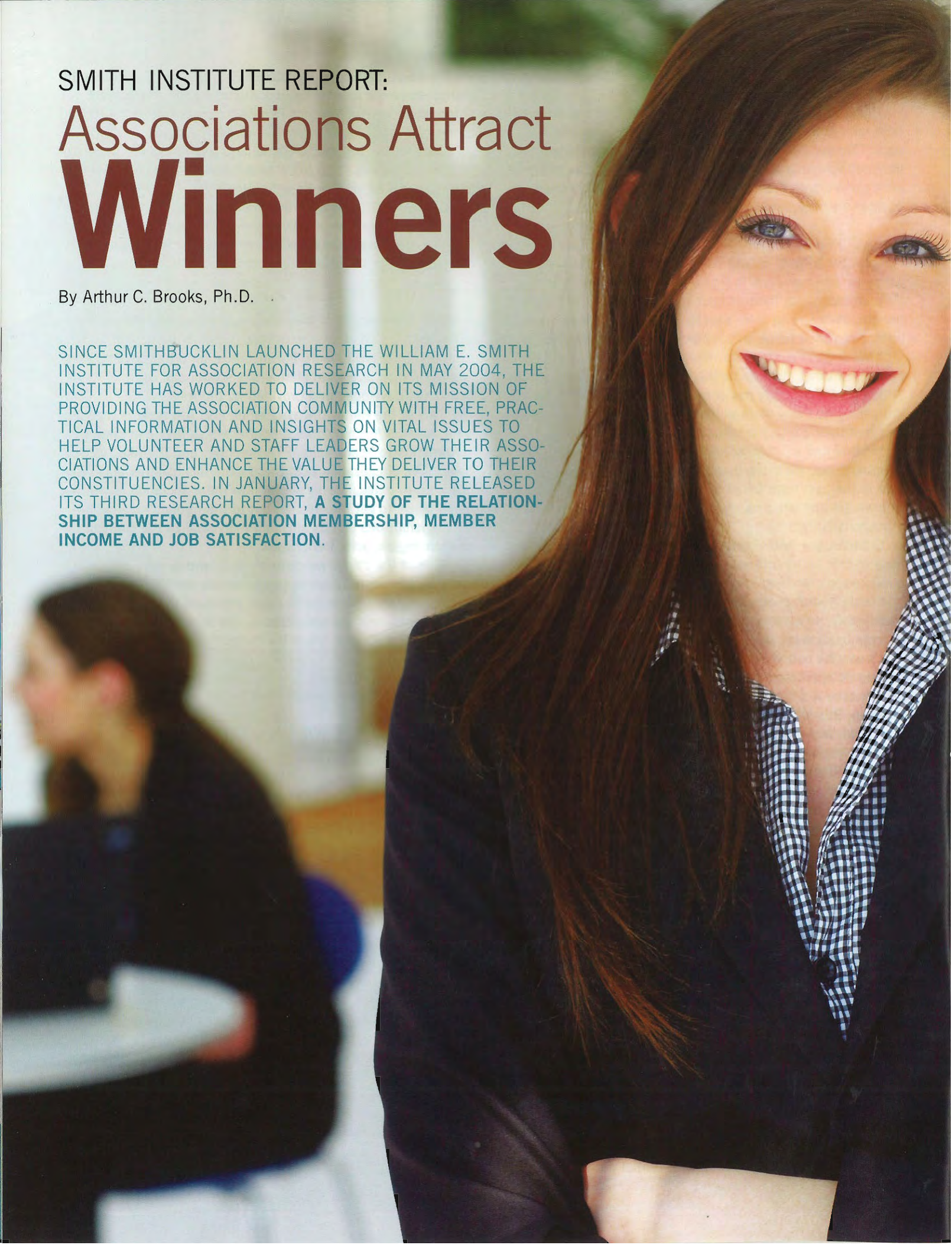
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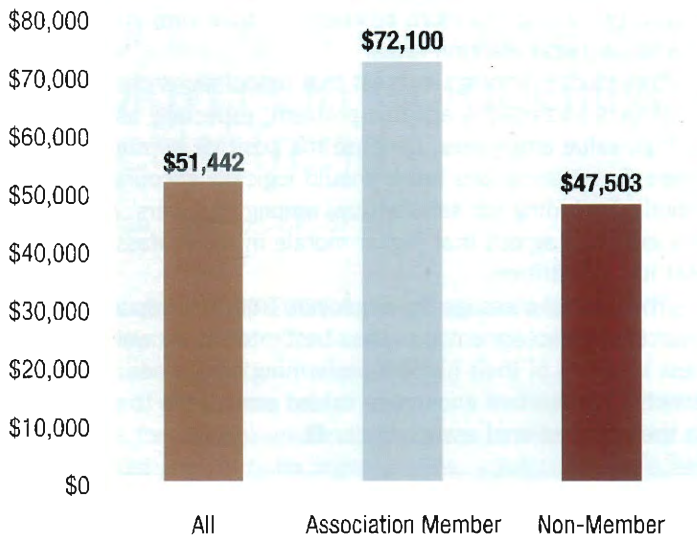
SMITH INSTITUTE REPORT:

# Associations Attract **Winners**

By Arthur C. Brooks, Ph.D.

SINCE SMITHBUCKLIN LAUNCHED THE WILLIAM E. SMITH INSTITUTE FOR ASSOCIATION RESEARCH IN MAY 2004, THE INSTITUTE HAS WORKED TO DELIVER ON ITS MISSION OF PROVIDING THE ASSOCIATION COMMUNITY WITH FREE, PRACTICAL INFORMATION AND INSIGHTS ON VITAL ISSUES TO HELP VOLUNTEER AND STAFF LEADERS GROW THEIR ASSOCIATIONS AND ENHANCE THE VALUE THEY DELIVER TO THEIR CONSTITUENCIES. IN JANUARY, THE INSTITUTE RELEASED ITS THIRD RESEARCH REPORT, **A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP, MEMBER INCOME AND JOB SATISFACTION.**





**Figure 1.** The earnings difference between association members and non-members  
 SOURCE: GSS, 2004.

The latest report, *Where the Winners Meet: Why Happier, More Successful People Gravitate Toward Associations*, shows that association members earn higher salaries, like their jobs more and are happier people, on average, than those who do not join associations. Perhaps most interesting, however, is that it is not just that association membership might lead to these positive results. Rather, the evidence suggests that employees' prosperity, job satisfaction and happiness are what increase their likelihood of joining an association.

Frankly, this reverse causation relationship — the fact that success at work actually increases the likelihood of joining an association — was somewhat of a surprise. One might assume, of course, that associations cause professionals to perform better in their jobs and that association membership therefore makes them somewhat more successful. This study reveals, however, that successful professionals gravitate toward associations because of the benefits they provide, such as access to resources and opportunities to network and form mutually beneficial communities.

The true impact of this study is in the picture it paints of associations as the meeting grounds for successful, highly motivated individuals in their industries and professions. Associations can use this message and leverage the fact that they are where the winners meet.

## Detailed Findings

Using data on association membership from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) — a random, anonymous sample of approximately 1,200 American adults — the study reviews the relationship between association membership and member income and job satisfaction. The study uses a common statistical technique to examine the connection between membership and income in isolation from other factors that can affect income — such as job category, education level, age, gender, family circumstances, race, religious attendance and political view.

Key findings from the report include:

- Association members earn, on average, more than \$10,000 more per year than non-members, even if they have the same education levels and job types.

- Association members are 19 percentage points more likely to say they are “very satisfied” with their jobs than non-members.

Furthermore, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey from 2000, which is the largest scientific investigation of civic engagement ever conducted in the United States, found that 45 percent of association members said they were “very happy” about their lives. That compares to only 36 percent of non-members who gave this response.

Association membership may be raising the pay and job satisfaction somewhat for some members, but the evidence is much stronger in the other direction: Job success and satisfaction drive up the likelihood of participating in an association — where other successful people tend to be found. Simply put, associations attract winners.

Associations should be able to use the findings of this study proactively to inform prospective members and their employers about the communities of success that associations offer their members. Clearly, in order to progress and, in turn, help grow the community at large, associations should focus on delivering the types of benefits that high-value professionals desire the most. Therefore, associations should regularly assess the benefits they offer through surveys or other methods, and, according to those assessments, work to assure that their services meet members' needs in order to continue to attract high-value professionals.

Although the needs of high-value individuals vary by industry and the characteristics of the members, services that asso-

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ciations can provide to attract highly motivated employees may include the following:

- Specific career-enhancing benefits, such as providing a conduit between senior executives and younger members;
- Continuing education based on a clear understanding of what members need to learn in order to be more successful;
- Community, particularly for members in jobs that require frequent moves at the beginning of an employee's career;
- Opportunities to serve the association and its related charities; and
- Evidence of the association's accountability to members and the industries or professions it represents.

## Implications for Employers

While it is clear that associations can use this information to communicate their value to all constituents, employers also should take heed. For one powerful example, consider the challenge of employee attrition.

Corporate, nonprofit and government leaders frequently cite attrition as one of the biggest problems facing their organizations — and rightfully so. In 2002, 19 percent of working adults said they had plans to quit their jobs in the coming year. That number jumps to 26 percent for college-educated workers and 34 percent among Generation Y workers (born in 1976 or later). Based on the fact that workforce research uses 20 percent annual attrition as a common “chaos point” (in which the ratio of veterans to new hires is so low that productivity plummets),


employers should therefore be keenly in tune with any opportunity to decrease attrition rates.

This study's findings suggest that associations can help employers address the attrition problem, especially as it relates to high-value employees, because the positive winning atmosphere that associations foster should logically encourage higher morale (including job satisfaction) among members. And virtually everyone agrees that higher morale in the professional context lowers attrition.

The critical message for employers from this report is that association involvement is in their best interest, as well as in the best interests of their highest-performing employees. Employers should therefore encourage valued employees to participate in their professional associations. ■

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Copies of *Where the Winners Meet: Why Happier, More Successful People Gravitate Toward Associations* are available to all members of the association community free of charge. Also available are the Institute's previous reports, *Generations at the Future of Association Participation* and *Investigation of Association Mergers*. The reports, as well as additional information on The William E. Smith Institute for Association Research, can be found at [www.smithbucklin.com/smithinstitute](http://www.smithbucklin.com/smithinstitute).



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