CNI Leadership Challenges

by Richard P. West

Paul Evan Peters served as CNI’s executive director from its inception in 1990. The list of the Coalition’s accomplishments of white papers, sponsored projects, technical standards setting, and convened meetings is substantial and impressive. To me, though, most important are the relationships that Paul built among the individuals, groups, and professions who must come together to achieve a new form of network-based scholarly communication. Paul’s quiet style belied his firm vision of what was possible. He challenged traditional approaches without threatening those of us who still practice them. He introduced us to one another and got us to talk, and not just superficially. His accomplishments in this area are unparalleled.

CNI’s Task Force membership is a tribute to this skill. Among the Task Force members are higher education institutions represented by information technologists and librarians, for-profit and not-for-profit publishers, software and hardware vendors, and colleagues from Australia and England. All of these Task Force members have an interest in understanding, developing, and benefiting from a robust operational networked information environment.

Paul’s contribution is an enviable legacy, although he would have been the first to observe that the work encompassed by CNI’s mission is unfinished and likely to be always so. New technologies will continually challenge old organizational and delivery models and create opportunities to advance intellectual productivity through networked information.

Since Paul’s unexpected death on November 18, 1996, the leadership of the sponsors of CNI (ARL, CAUSE, and Educom), the more than 200 Task Force members, and the CNI steering committee have reaffirmed enthusiastically and emphatically that CNI should continue its programs. That CNI should continue was not immediately obvious to all. Many people with whom I have spoken concluded that CNI and Paul were the same. Could Paul’s relationship building have been too successful? It is an understandable conclusion to view CNI and Paul as one. Such a conclusion would compliment Paul if he were to hear it, but he would also be very disappointed to think that CNI would falter because he is no longer leading it.

CNI now looks ahead, and is expected to continue and to prosper. We are truly fortunate that Joan Lippincott has stepped in as Interim Executive Director, and Gerry Bernbom from Indiana University has joined the staff as Visiting Program Officer to work almost full time throughout the spring and summer to keep our program operating at its high level of activity.

CNI has engaged Korn/Ferry International, a well-known executive search firm, to help seek a new executive director for CNI. As the CNI steering committee developed the search profile for the new director, it became clear to us how much had been accomplished and the important set of skills that any individual coming into this position must possess. We also clearly understand that CNI will change with new leadership. The form such change will take is not obvious, but a new individual will play a key role in continuing CNI’s relevance to its Task Force members as well as to ARL, CAUSE, and Educom.

CNI gains its financial support from the Task Force members and gets its program direction from its sponsors and steering committee. This is a complex political environment that Paul managed well. Keeping the relationships working was often very difficult, and the effort expended could have been distracting from CNI’s mission. Paul kept that from happening. Political and relationship-building skills are obviously key traits we seek in a new executive director. However, the steering committee recognizes that the strength of CNI is in its program. That program is developed through Task Force meetings, regional conferences, ideas generated and tested through projects, and speaking engagements, as well as the staff’s intellectual leadership. Thus, above all else, the new executive director must have a vision for the CNI program, be able to articulate that vision through presentations, discussions, and projects, and collectively take us to a new level of understanding of the intellectual benefits of networked information.

We hope to fill the executive director position sometime this spring. In the meantime, CNI’s program activities continue to build on the momentum established by the excellent work of Joan Lippincott and the CNI staff. The fourth regional meeting co-sponsored with CAUSE is scheduled for May 21–23 at the University of Delaware, and project initiatives in cost measurements and institution-wide information strat-
• Organizing and staffing to provide support in a distributed, networked environment
• Effectiveness of a teams approach

Support for Distributed Computing

How can information resources professionals, especially those in central technology organizations, support distributed computing? We must address the following issues:
• Standards maintenance. Support for a homogeneous environment is many times cheaper than support for a heterogeneous environment, yet strict enforcement of standards is counter to the technology needs of many users and prevents the technology organization from adopting an effective customer service orientation. What are reasonable standards? What incentives are powerful enough to attract adherents; what level of flexibility is sufficient?
• Institutional property. With databases managed on departmental equipment, how is access assured for other departments with need for the information? How can management activities such as backup, access control, and disaster planning be coordinated centrally when the data are distributed? Who sets the standards? How are they audited/enforced?
• Tiered support. Distributed support implies that support providers are “out there” in user departments. Who pays them? What is their relationship to their users? If they’re the front line, what are the appropriate roles for employees of the central organization to take in supporting them? What roles do we take in organizing and focusing primary support providers on common technology and service standards? What is the proper role for tertiary support providers (in operations, production control, etc.)?
• Infrastructure boundaries. Where does the central information technology unit’s responsibility for infrastructure begin and end? Do we manage the network but not the routers? the routers but not the data jacks? the data jacks but not the network interface cards? Do we provide the network but not the servers? the servers but not the client software? the client software but not the server content?

Enterprise-Wide Management of Information Resources/Assets

Colleges and universities are quintessential information-age institutions. From the scholarly information held in library collections to the administrative information stored in structured databases to the information accumulated throughout campuses in other applications, faculty research, and instructional material, higher education institutions amass an astounding collection of information. Increasingly this information is available in digital form and accessible through a campuswide technology infrastructure. Many institutions are moving toward the World Wide Web as a common platform for information and information systems delivery, but is this being done within a comprehensive, strategic effort that is engaging all of the stakeholders throughout the campus in an articulated plan? How are institutions approaching the management and use of electronic information resources? Are there institution-wide strategies for coordinating activities related to these assets? Some of the issues that need to be addressed include:

• Is there a planning process linking institutional program strategies and directions with budget allocations for information resources?
• Does the institution have an institutional information assets policy that addresses such issues as data administration, ownership, access, privacy, and archiving?
• Does the institution have a plan to leverage its information assets?
• Have enterprise-wide information architectures, both for the information (data models, entities, processes) and the technology platforms to support them, been established?
• Do organizational structures facilitate or present obstacles to taking an enterprise-wide approach to managing information resources?

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strategies are under way. (See Gerry Bernbom’s article in this issue on the latter project.)

Joan Lippincott and I invite your comments or suggestions for CNI’s future as well as names of possible candidates for the executive director position, by phone or e-mail.1 The support for CNI has been gratifying during this time of unexpected and substantial transition. Your continued support is critical to carrying on the work that has been started. A fitting tribute to Paul is a healthy CNI program focused squarely on the future.

1 Contact Joan Lippincott (joan@cni.org, 202-296-5098) or Richard West (richard_west@qmbridge.calstate.edu, 310-985-2734). A position description is available on CNI’s Web site at http://www.cni.org/CNilexec_profile.html