It’s All about Connections: EDUCAUSE Constituent Groups

In the March/April 2001 issue of EDUCAUSE Review, Ira Fuchs—winner of last year’s EDUCAUSE Award for Excellence in Leadership—described one of the unique and professionally appealing qualities of the higher education environment: relationships between “competing” organizations are more collaborative than they are closed and secretive. College and university faculty, staff, and administrators who are trying to advance their own institutions are free to learn from the experiences of peers on other campuses across town or across the world.

This characteristic is especially important for EDUCAUSE members. Few other fields are changing as fast as information technology, and no other field is driving change in so many different, historically discrete, arenas. Twenty years ago, the core members of CAUSE and Educom—the two predecessor associations of EDUCAUSE—were clearly definable: directors of campus computing centers and innovative faculty who were intrigued by the potential of the new technologies for their academic and research efforts. Today, EDUCAUSE members and participants represent the full spectrum of higher education functionality: instruction and research, student services, admissions, library support, executive-level strategy setting, community outreach. The common ground among the complex membership is some level of responsibility for deploying information technologies in the service of higher education. But the day-to-day job challenges of many EDUCAUSE members are vastly different.

This is where the EDUCAUSE Constituent Groups come in. Although EDUCAUSE offers numerous opportunities for members to meet face to face and formally share information, those working in information technology also need prompt answers to specific questions, quick reality checks, and continued contact with distant colleagues who may have a different range of experience. EDUCAUSE thus supports about two dozen member-driven discussion groups focusing on specialized areas of interest. Constituent Groups are initiated and led by members who perceive a need for a particular forum, with coordinative, technical, and logistical support provided by EDUCAUSE staff. They may be formed around specific types of institutions (community colleges, small colleges, state systems, large campuses) or particular areas of professional interest (Web portals, software licensing issues, teaching and learning, wireless networking, change leadership). Open to all interested professionals, the informal groups allow participants to connect not only face to face, in their meetings at the EDUCAUSE annual conferences, but also remotely via electronic discussion lists.

Constituent Group listservs provide a place to get a quick answer to a nagging question, to gather a few anecdotal or statistical points to bolster a presentation, or to get a reading on the possible pitfalls of or alternatives to a proposal. Listserv activity varies widely from week to week and from list to list. Recently, in three days, participants in different groups

- shared their experiences with course management systems,
- introduced themselves to the group, describing the range of their professional responsibilities and concerns,
- directed inquirers to useful resources—conferences, Web sites, discussion lists—both within EDUCAUSE and elsewhere,
- shared frustrations about the challenges of integrating and motivating work teams from different backgrounds (“techno-geeks,” faculty, administration),
- posted an informal survey on staffing and organization,
- shared the results of an informal listserv survey about services provided to retired faculty and staff, and
- celebrated a successful system cutover at one participant’s institution.

The Constituent Groups are a mechanism for personalizing the extended community that is EDUCAUSE, forming subcommunities with common specialized interests. In evaluations of the EDUCAUSE annual conferences, respondents who attended Constituent Group meetings often comment that these meetings were the most tangibly useful part of their conference experience; in fact, conference evaluations for 2000 ranked the value of these meetings a close second to corporate exhibits and just above track presentations. EDUCAUSE looks forward to expanding their year-round value by exploring possibilities for community-building with new collaborative software tools.

Information on the Constituent Groups is available at the Web site: <http://www.educause.edu/memdir/cg/cg.html>. The site also provides group descriptions (with links to useful related resources), participation guidelines, subscription information, and searchable archived discussions.

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