Preface: A Commitment to Professional Development

In the past few years, I have had the opportunity to think more broadly about the condition of the higher education information technology community, the changing nature of IT, the role of leaders in IT, and how those of us in this community prepare ourselves and others—both to support the changing needs of our colleges and universities and to advance in our careers. The success of our institutions—and our IT organizations—depends on our people and how well prepared they are to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

IT continues to have a profound impact on higher education, influencing not only almost every aspect of a student’s life—from performing library research to interacting with professors to dating and doing laundry—but also almost every campus function. (Nowhere was this more evident than during the Y2K remediation process, where we learned, at some institutions for the first time, the depth and breadth of dependence on IT.) The evolving global digital network has fundamentally changed the nature of our communications, across campus and around the world. The rapid advances in processing power, data-storage capacity, bandwidth, and software development have revolutionized research, teaching, and learning. And our Net Gen students, who have grown up with technology and have never known life without the Internet, have expectations for IT access, mobility, and convenience that have huge implications for teaching, learning, and institutional services.¹

Those of us who have been in the IT business in higher education for more than a few years have seen dramatic changes over a relatively short time and have witnessed the effects of these changes on the IT organization. In talking about the evolution of the IT organization, Polley McClure, vice president and CIO at Cornell University, noted: “Growth of this magnitude has necessarily strained many fronts. As IT has forced its way into all facets of our institutions, it has displaced other priorities and caused us to change the way everyone on campus works. It has spawned entirely new academic disciplines. It has opened new approaches and ideas in almost every field.”²
It’s All About the People

Many IT organizational structures now mirror the complexity of the technologies we support, in stark contrast to the early days of campus computing, when the central “computer center” staff ran the mainframe and worked with a few faculty on research projects. Today, centralized IT service departments work with distributed IT staff in colleges, schools, and departments to provide a multifaceted web of services.

The 2004 EDUCAUSE Core Data Service (http://www.educause.edu/apps/coredata/), which includes an annual survey that collects data about technology environments and practices at U.S. institutions, reported that our colleges and universities have an average of 60.5 FTE staff in IT, but the actual numbers range from one IT person at a small bachelor of arts/liberal arts institution to a high of 652 IT staff at a doctoral-extensive university. On average across all types of institutions, 83.5 percent of IT staff members are housed within a central group; the remaining 17.5 percent are disbursed throughout the organization. The number of distributed/departmental staff increases at a significant rate as the complexity of the institution increases. IT organizations at smaller or less well-funded institutions struggle to support these same complex services with bare-bones staff. At these institutions, staff often wear multiple hats, and even those with manager/director or CIO titles can be very hands-on.\(^3\) No matter the size or type of institution or the complexity of the organization, all face similar challenges when it comes to helping staff members stay current within their respective areas of specialty, keep up with the changes in technology, develop new skills or improve current skills, and develop a broader awareness of the role the staff and the department play in supporting the mission of the institution.

Making a case for professional development (PD) is easy. Simply stated, an investment in our people is an investment in our institutions and in our individual and collective future. Our colleges and universities reap the benefit of the development of staff, usually in a very direct way. Staff with current skills are more effective at analyzing and solving problems, are better equipped to complete projects accurately and on time, and can do a better job in providing effective technology support to the community. Research indicates that an organization’s commitment to staff development is directly linked not only to increased productivity but also to high staff loyalty. Both the recruitment and the retention of employees can be greatly improved with an ongoing staff-development program.\(^4\)
Actually making PD happen is harder. An old slogan from CAUSE, one of the parent organizations of EDUCAUSE, stated: “Professional Development Is Everyone’s Responsibility.” That quote appeared on mouse pads and notepads for many years, and it bears repeating today. Although the IT unit is responsible for encouraging staff development, planning specific strategies, and providing funds for training, the individual must take an equal or greater interest in his or her own personal growth.

If we recognize that ongoing PD—essentially, lifelong learning—is critical to our survival and success as individuals, we can work in partnership with our institutions to achieve mutual benefits. Supervisors, acting as coaches and mentors, can work with staff to build PD plans that include formal training and informal exploration. Supervisors can introduce staff to professional communities of learners and can assign projects that will allow them to grow and to be challenged. But the staff member has to meet the supervisor at least halfway. He or she must take the initiative to investigate opportunities, demonstrate an interest in the profession, and be willing to invest his or her own time in these endeavors.

**Time and Money**

How do we combat the problem that there never seems to be enough time or enough money to spend on PD?

At one of my former institutions, we used to joke within the educational technology group that we were the “victims of our own success.” We worked hard to spread the word about technology—to show the faculty just what was possible and how technology could support their teaching and their students’ learning. We were so successful in spreading the word that in a very short time, the demand for our services quickly outstripped the abilities of the staff to meet them. One of the side effects of our newfound success was that our workload made it extremely difficult to set aside the time for classes, conferences, presentations, or writing—PD tasks were consistently pushed to the bottom of the job list. Although the group members had a strong sense of intellectual curiosity and were quick to pick up “the next big thing,” taking the time to engage in formal planning, and then taking the time to attend a conference or other event, seemed impossible. The solution to this lack of time, of course, is to force the time. Putting an appointment on the calendar for professional planning between staff and supervisors and then keeping that appointment constitutes a first step.

As for money, the 2004 Core Data Service survey revealed that higher education spends, on average, $1,123 per year per IT staff member on professional development or training. This amount is relatively constant across all Carnegie classifications with
the exception of baccalaureate schools, which invest significantly more in the development of their staff than do doctoral and comprehensive universities and associate degree–granting colleges. The average amount also remained consistent from 2003 to 2004.\(^5\) Having a budget line item for staff development places importance on investing in staff. For those of us struggling with funding PD activities, we can use a little creativity and thoughtfulness to take advantage of regional and local opportunities and to implement strategies that encourage people to share what they have learned.\(^6\) We can also benefit from the very effective PD opportunities available through online communities and networking and through campus and local events.

**The Role of IT Leaders**

As our institutions are challenged to embrace the extraordinary opportunities that evolving technologies bring to higher education, our IT organizations are challenged to provide leadership and guidance for the strategic investment in IT, as well as day-to-day support for the basic functions of IT. Those who lead the IT organizations, and those who aspire to do so, must understand and develop the evolving set of skills required to obtain and to succeed in these roles. In a 2004 EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) study survey, more than a quarter of the 1,850 respondents, who included senior IT leaders, planned to leave higher education within the next five years, and only 157 respondents indicated that they aspired to these soon-to-be-vacated positions.\(^7\) Preparation of the next generation of IT leaders has become critical.

Brian Hawkins and Deanna Marcum pointed out that leaders of any IT unit on campus must be active participants in the management of the academic enterprise, that they must be true partners in achieving this mission of the institution, and that they must move from playing the role of a specialist to that of a generalist.\(^8\) A 2005 ECAR research bulletin indicated that although the development of leadership skills may be overlooked in many staff-development programs, in IT professional development there is another void specific to higher education—“how to imbue an understanding of how higher education’s history, organizational structure, governance, and practices impact IT.”\(^9\) As IT leaders move away from being viewed as “just” technology experts and toward playing a key role in the operation and strategic direction of the institution, the understanding of governance, budgets, and values of higher education becomes critical.

IT leaders, and those who aspire to these positions, can have significant influence on the PD strategies of their units and on the development of a culture of lifelong learning. Working in partnership with human resource offices, consultants,
and staff, and leading by example, the IT leader can help create a climate of success and an expectation that people will continue to grow and develop in their fields. A former IT leader at MIT told his staff that every year they would “raise the bar”—expecting that his staff would achieve more than they had the year before. The expectation simply became part of the culture.

What Works
This book is full of first-person experiences, practical advice, and real-world examples of what works—what tactics are successful—in the implementation of a PD program. Part I, “The Organizational Perspective,” opens with a chapter by James Bruce and Brian McDonald on the changing nature of IT leadership and the evolving broader skill sets required of today’s and tomorrow’s leaders. In chapter 2, Gene Spencer and Jeannie Zappe outline a comprehensive approach to PD for IT staff. Marilu Goodyear, Kathleen Ames-Oliver, and Keith Russell explain organizational strategies for fostering a culture of learning in chapter 3. The next five chapters compose Part II, “The Individual Perspective.” David Dodd and William Hogue give advice in chapter 4 on how staff can take control of their careers. In chapter 5, Catherine Yang and Susan Metros stress the importance of both having and being a mentor. Daniel Updegrove and I, in chapter 6, talk about getting involved in the profession and the personal and professional rewards that can bring. In chapter 7, Tracey Leger-Hornby and Ronald Bleed offer insights into achieving a work/life balance. In chapter 8, Brian Hawkins writes about skills and habits that lead to becoming a successful and effective IT professional. Finally, in chapter 9, Lida Larsen and I use both the organizational and the individual perspective to discuss building our workforce for the future and the preparation of the next generation of IT leaders.

Summary
Having strong PD programs in place is key to effectively supporting the mission of our colleges and universities. As members of the higher education community, we are each responsible for making that professional development happen. Ideally, the expectation that we are constantly learning and are actively involved in our own development can become part of our organizational cultures. To best support our institutions, we have to invest in people. We must accept the responsibility and take the initiative to ensure that each staff member actively participates in both formal and informal activities that will enhance his or her
skills and professional marketability. Doing this requires time and resources, but mostly, it requires commitment on the part of the institution and the individual.

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Endnotes


3. The EDUCAUSE Core Data Service <http://www.educause.edu/apps/coredata/> is available to participating EDUCAUSE members; the annual summary report is publicly available.


5. EDUCAUSE Core Data Service, op. cit.


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