At their August 5, 2000, meeting, the EDUCAUSE Board of Directors enthusiastically approved establishing a new EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR). According to EDUCAUSE President Brian L. Hawkins, ECAR is being created to address a number of important observations made by the EDUCAUSE directors at their January 2000 planning meeting: “The directors of EDUCAUSE argued compellingly that EDUCAUSE must be future oriented. New competition in higher education suggests a major role in identifying new models, processes, and frameworks that will foster institutional survival and prosperity.”

The ECAR concept also was developed, in part, on the basis of advice received from many EDUCAUSE corporate members at a 1999 forum organized by EDUCAUSE. Jill Kidwell, Partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, said: “In a knowledge-driven era, higher education commands a position of central importance. Those of us committed to supporting new ways of delivering education via information technology will need the kind of information the EDUCAUSE Center is being designed to create. This is an important initiative.”

ECAR will assemble leading scholars and researchers whose efforts have focused on issues related to the changes being brought about in higher education by the introduction of new information technologies. EDUCAUSE Board Chair Ronald Bleed, Vice Chancellor for Information Technologies, Maricopa Community College District, said, “We are in a period of rapid and potentially significant change. Leaders need high-quality and well-researched information on a just-in-time basis to support increasingly risky and consequential decisions.”

Based on the annual strategic planning of the EDUCAUSE Board and on input from the sister associations with whom EDUCAUSE works, ECAR will develop a framework of the higher education challenges presented by emerging information technologies and by new forms of competition facing traditional colleges and universities. Within these areas, suggested topics of research inquiry will be identified. This research will be carried out by a combination of campus-based faculty, EDUCAUSE staff and contractors, leading research organizations with which ECAR is developing alliances, and ECAR fellows. To this end, EDUCAUSE recently appointed the first Senior Fellow of ECAR: Dr. Diana G. Oblinger, the author of numerous books and articles on information technology and higher education and the former Vice President and Chief Information Officer of the University of North Carolina system. Oblinger, who also held numerous management and executive positions at IBM, has worked in various voluntary capacities for EDUCAUSE and will serve in a part-time consulting capacity for ECAR. Oblinger commented: “I am delighted and honored to be joining my EDUCAUSE colleagues in this new role. The center is an exciting idea that comes at the right time.” EDUCAUSE will also create an advisory board to envision and shape the annual research agenda of ECAR and to help identify candidates for appointment as ECAR fellows, who will conduct or direct the specific research initiatives.

Although many higher education strategies for exchanging information about leading and effective practices—strategies such as participation in major conferences and seminars—will be more important than ever, the complexity, cost, and impact of new alternatives are driving a need for more, and more detailed, information to support decision-making. Anecdotal information about what works or doesn’t work in institutional settings must be complemented by rigorous analyses of trends and directions in higher education overall or in its key segments. These kinds of data, information, and analyses are at the heart of the evolving mission of ECAR.

Richard N. Katz, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, is Director of ECAR.