Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT

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Many of us look at the chance to attend a training session, a conference, or a lecture as a wonderful opportunity to get out of the office, make new connections, engage with colleagues, and learn and reflect in an environment removed from the day-to-day pressures of campus IT life. We often return to campus with new ideas, feeling rejuvenated and ready to tackle the next big thing. Even reading an article or participating in a Webcast can be stimulating and give us new insights into our work. These positive experiences are not only valuable personal and professional activities but also directly benefit our institutions through an infusion of fresh energy and ideas and validation of current effective practice.

What about taking that next step? Could you be the person leading the discussion session at an upcoming conference or talking about a new project as part of a panel presentation? Many professional conferences, whether face-to-face or online events, organized by professional staff or grassroots efforts, solicit ideas and submissions for conference presentations and have committees of volunteers from the community who plan the event and create the program. Both print and Web-based journals have editorial committees that recruit and review articles written by colleagues. Might you consider writing an article about how your campus has addressed a pressing problem? Professional associations engage members in multiple types of advisory, planning, and program delivery capacities. Have you thought about sharing your work? Serving on a committee? Blogging about your professional specialty? If you have, you are already experiencing some of the rewards of getting involved in the
professor. If you haven’t, you might want to think about why you should. This chapter gives you some compelling reasons to become actively involved.

**Stay Current in a Dynamic Field**
*I skate to where the puck will be.* —Wayne Gretzky

IT in higher education is a fast-moving landscape of innovative products and services; new, merged, and defunct vendors; novel pedagogies; and changing business practices. Keeping pace with technology is necessary but not sufficient, since technologies often have adoption rates in academe that differ from the commercial and consumer mainstream. In some cases—TCP/IP and the Internet, the Macintosh, broadband in residences—education has been an early adopter, whereas we have lagged in deployment of security and other technologies. Our special challenge is understanding which technologies best suit the needs, budgets, and cultures of colleges and universities—the shape and surface of our hockey rinks, as it were.

Fortunately, our profession has two attributes that make this challenge tractable. The first is a broad continuum of expertise and commitment to technology leadership across higher education. Some institutions have long been committed to pioneering technology development and application, and others have recently identified IT leadership as a high priority. Indeed, some universities have dedicated units that track—and develop—advanced technology. The second attribute is a remarkable spirit of openness and information sharing, even among institutions competing fiercely for the brightest scholars and best athletes. This openness is manifest as IT leaders publish their work, present at conferences and seminars, host campus visits, and serve as advisors to colleagues from other institutions. Formal and informal opportunities for learning abound.

**Broaden Your Perspective**
*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.* —Marcel Proust

Breakthrough ideas are not the exclusive domain of the most technologically advanced, research-intensive, or wealthiest institutions, of course. The ubiquity and declining cost of technology, the broad reach of the Internet, and the universal commitment to teaching, scholarship, and service provide fertile ground for exemplary applications of IT on most campuses. Moreover, business as usual in one department or institution may look like a “killer app” to someone seeing it for the first time, perhaps in a totally different context.
The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) is in the process of repurposing a large, centrally located building that once served primarily as an undergraduate library. The planning team, in search of a new vision for supporting 21st-century learning, visited not only campus libraries and learning commons but also MIT’s Stata Center, Penn State’s Information Sciences and Technology Building, Stanford’s Wallenberg Hall, and Seattle’s Experience Music Project. Learning from such visits can take the form of notes, photos, videos, and—notably—interviews with planners and users, whose experiences and insights can inform our work.

The value of these interchanges is not limited to the article reader, seminar attendee, or campus visitor, however. Many writers and presenters have discovered that the discipline of organizing one’s thoughts for a new audience—and answering their questions—results in a more complete and coherent understanding of their topic.

**Make Professional Contacts**

*It’s not what you know, it’s who you know (and how fast you can reach them using their preferred communications medium).* —Anonymous

Assembling all the relevant information to enable an optimal decision is a fine theoretical construct, albeit one rarely experienced in practice. More typical is the requirement to speak with a reporter this afternoon, have a recommendation by Friday, or get the course management system back online, pronto. At such times published articles and Web searches may be much less helpful than professional colleagues, be they across campus, at other institutions, in industry, or on staff at associations. Contacting them can yield wise counsel, options you hadn’t considered, and perhaps even an offer of assistance.

Savvy professionals communicate frequently through e-mail, phone, instant messaging (IM), campus lunch meetings, and conference hallway chats. They know how to reach key colleagues and their trusted assistants, they make themselves available to others, and they follow up on commitments, whether to call back with an answer or “summarize the results for the list.” While a cold call to an expert in the field can sometimes be fruitful, most of us are more comfortable contacting people we know. Can your colleague in the School of Business loan you a server for a week? Has anyone in your peer group had this sort of request from the provost? Developing such a network of trusted and trusting colleagues is one of the most important strategies for professional success.
Gain Recognition for Your Work and Your Institution

*Death most resembles a prophet who is without honor in his own land or a poet who is a stranger among his people.* — Kahlil Gibran

Completing a challenging project on time and on budget is its own reward, but receiving recognition from peers can be immensely satisfying as well. The converse of seeking advice and exemplars for your efforts is having others address such questions to you—having you and your institution viewed as leaders. Interest, acclaim, and visits from other institutions can also increase satisfaction in both the project team and the user community. Of course, this can mean taking on the additional challenge of writing a paper or submitting a conference proposal, sometimes in midproject when 80 percent of the resources are depleted, and only 20 percent of the work is done!

Numerous other benefits accompany external recognition, ranging from kudos on annual performance reviews to institutional public relations payoffs. Speakers at conferences tend to meet many more people than those in the audience, and they often receive invitations to participate in other professional activities. Back on campus, a widely lauded success can make it easier to garner financial and political support for the next initiative and, quite possibly, attract interest from internal or external collaborators. Perhaps most important, over the long term, you have contributed to the accumulated experience, best practice, and insight that define the profession.

Serve the Community

*Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.* — Martin Luther King, Jr.

Fortunately, IT in colleges and universities attracts many bright and dedicated professionals. Most would admit, however, that the pace of change, escalating and diverse service demands, and constrained resources make this a remarkably demanding and stressful field. Longtime university CIO Ken King may have been exaggerating only slightly when he asserted, “Higher education sets the out-of-control standard to which other sectors aspire!” All of us, newcomers and veterans alike, come to depend on our colleagues for sage counsel, examples of best practices, and insights not learned the hard way. Such a repository of great ideas and helpful colleagues cannot exist, of course, without contributors—those willing to give back to the community.

Such service takes many forms: posting a reply on a peer list server, serving on a conference program committee, or hosting a visit from colleagues from another campus. Established professional associations, such as ACUTA (http://www.acuta.org) and EDUCAUSE (http://www.educause.edu), provide numerous well-structured...
and valuable venues for contributing and benefiting—seminars, conferences, publications, committees, task forces, mailing lists, and blogs. (See the sidebar “Navigating Professional Associations and Societies.”)

Occasions arise, however, when no formal organization is positioned to respond to the community’s need. For example, constructing and operating advanced state and regional optical networks in support of research and education fell outside the purview of existing organizations in some parts of the country, so IT leaders created new organizations, such as Florida LambdaRail and Texas’s Lonestar Education and Research Network (LEARN). More recently, the impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita precipitated a wide range of responses from campus IT, from establishing emergency Web sites and call centers for affected campuses to provisioning e-mail kiosks and building databases of evacuees and volunteers in campus and civic shelters.

**Develop Leadership Skills**

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.* —John Quincy Adams

Anyone has the potential to be a leader. In fact, the merged IT/library organization at Bucknell University has incorporated an expectation of leadership at all levels in their value statements and in all aspects of their work. We’ve all seen people who are not in positions of power exhibiting leadership qualities. By focusing on the vision of an organization, its values, and its relationship to the operational units and the community, individuals can lead a discussion, a project, a business unit, or even a university. Developing and honing leadership skills can serve you well in both university and personal life.

Local user groups, conference program committees, ad hoc working groups, and advisory groups abound with opportunities for you to take on leadership roles. Many of these groups are member-driven and highly participatory, and they rely on volunteers to get things done. Offer to chair a small working group—this is usually a greatly appreciated first step toward taking on larger roles. Often these chair positions simply require that you keep the group on track, coordinate meetings, and provide summary reports of the group’s work to the sponsoring association or society. You may find yourself facilitating communication, resolving conflict, and developing strategy as well. These roles also give you the opportunity to influence the work’s direction, so if you feel passionate about an issue, you are in a position to have your ideas heard.
Navigating Professional Associations and Societies


Professional associations serve the community by:

- Providing opportunities for professional development and mentoring
- Serving as a place for creating the profession and fostering innovation
- Nurturing a sense of community
- Advocating for the interests of higher education
- Facilitating information exchange and information development

Of the associations and societies with which IT professionals typically interact, some are academic societies, created around a specific discipline, like the Society for Information Management (SIM) or the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). Others reflect the interests of particular types of institutions, such as the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) or the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and still others were formed around a profession, like the National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA), the American Library Association (ALA), EDUCAUSE, or the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). Most have regular publications, host Web sites with libraries of information, hold annual and/or regional conferences, and offer other professional development events and opportunities, both online and in person.

Enhance Communication Skills

Calvin: Sometimes when I’m talking, my words can’t keep up with my thoughts. I wonder why we think faster than we speak.

Hobbes: Probably so we can think twice. —Calvin & Hobbes, Bill Watterson

Most if not all of our campus IT positions these days list “good communications skills” as a job requirement. The ability to listen well and to speak and write clearly becomes increasingly important, even critical, moving through the different stages
of a career. As levels of job responsibility increase, so does the requirement for addressing project teams, committees, boards, visitors, faculty, staff, and students. Just about everyone who works in IT today must be able to clearly translate techie jargon into understandable terms for the campus community.

Answering a call for proposals for a conference or workshop lets you formally share your work while building your writing and public speaking skills. Most of us remember that first presentation, and many experienced speakers still get “butterflies” when stepping up to the podium, but it gets easier with practice. Similarly, writing an article for a Web or print journal gives you the experience of working with an editor and/or a committee of reviewers. While not everyone in our community faces the requirement to publish, many societies and associations offer the opportunity to gain exposure and to contribute to the body of knowledge through formal publication processes. In addition to writing articles for journals, many of which are peer reviewed, you can maintain a timely and topical blog, write chapters for books, or contribute to a white paper or position paper.

Find Career Opportunities

*Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice: it is not to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.* —William Jennings Bryan

Where will you find your next job? Most people do not make their job connections through the want ads or the *Chronicle* job listings, although they are useful sources of information. Maintaining a level of professional activity not only provides some short-term benefits, it can—and should—become part of your long-term career plan. By being active in the profession, you make lifelong contacts and establish your name in the community. The same colleagues you consult for assistance on a problem can offer good career advice. The person you met at a conference or through a working group last year might well contact you about a job next year. It happens all the time.

Change Your Environment

*A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.* —John Le Carré

Sometimes it can be incredibly useful to leave campus—a day or two at a professional event, whether a conference, a workshop, or a training program often provides additional time for reflection and renewal. Many of us find a change of environment, away from the day-to-day pressures of campus IT, rejuvenating. If the event you attend is stimulating, you will return with new ideas to share.
and discuss with your colleagues. Evenings and breaks offer time not only for networking but also for personal planning. Organizing your thoughts, thinking strategically about your unit—even making career plans seems easier when you are out of the office.

External engagement brings with it some challenges, too, not the least of which is being away from family. Overcommitting yourself can lead to difficulties both at home and on campus, so managing time well is critical. Finally, others on your campus might suspect that your priorities do not lie with the institution if you are involved in professional activities. You can mitigate this perception by educating colleagues about the nature of your professional activities and helping them understand the benefits to the campus from your involvement.

Make Friends and Have Fun
*We know what we are, but know not what we may be.* —Shakespeare

While the rewards of professional involvement manifest in better access to resources, lifelong learning opportunities, skill development, and career enhancement, some of the more gratifying aspects of active participation in the profession are the personal connections you make and the sense of community that develops through interaction with your peers. Our community has developed a series of awards and recognitions to honor those among us who have made exemplary contributions to the profession, and we gather periodically within various groups such as the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM, [http://www.acm.org/](http://www.acm.org/)), EDUCAUSE, or the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) to bestow those awards with great pleasure. For many of us, though, it is the personal friendships that develop through our common interests in higher education and in technology that add rewarding dimensions to our professional lives.

Next Steps
If you want to participate more broadly in the profession, and you are convinced that this engagement should be part of your own professional development plan, what steps should you take?

Understanding some of the venues for professional participation is important. For those of us working in higher education, opportunities to get involved are numerous. They exist on our own campuses, in the region, and with national and international professional societies and associations. Table 1 summarizes some of the places you can look and the ways you can participate. Local, state, and
Cultivating Careers

Regional entities, or even chapters of larger associations, typically offer lower travel costs—which translates into lower barriers to entry—than do their national or international counterparts. Keep in mind that there is value to broadening participation beyond IT to include other campus perspectives, including business officers, librarians, planning officers, and institutional researchers. Looking at IT groups outside higher education is important, too—investigate local or national technology associations like the Society for Information Management (SIM) or your city’s technology council. Use your existing network of colleagues to introduce you to relevant opportunities, and ask people to recommend you for assignments in professional activities.

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<td>Publications</td>
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<td>Electronic forums (listservs, blogs, mailing lists)</td>
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<td>Conferences</td>
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<td>Seminars</td>
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<td>Task forces, committees, and working groups</td>
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<td>Professional associations and organizations</td>
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<td>Community engagement</td>
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By getting involved—presenting your work, writing for the profession, or volunteering to serve on committees, working groups, or boards—you will not only build a network and grow professionally but also have rewarding experiences and make connections that will last a lifetime.

**About the Authors**

*Cynthia Golden* is a vice president of EDUCAUSE. Her responsibilities include many facets of professional development, from conferences and seminars to Web content to print. She previously held IT management and leadership positions at Carnegie Mellon University, MIT, and Duquesne University.

*Dan Updegrove* served for more than a decade on the staff of Educom (predecessor to EDUCAUSE), held IT management positions at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University, and now is vice president for IT and CIO at The University of Texas at Austin. He recently played a key role in founding LEARN, the Lonestar Education and Research Network.