EDUCAUSE is a professional association. Part of the mission of any professional association is to help members grow and develop professionally. EDUCAUSE does this in many ways. Providing professional-development opportunities through conferences, management and leadership programs, seminars, workshops, and other events where people engage in person has been a very visible part of what the association does.

When members submit evaluations of EDUCAUSE events, they frequently note that the single biggest value of attending is “the opportunity to network with colleagues.” Yes, the knowledgeable speakers, the engaging discussion sessions, and sometimes even the good food get high ratings, but it is the ability to make connections—to visit with colleagues and to share stories and advice—that helps build a community and a profession.

Other quotes from EDUCAUSE members also emphasize the idea that professional growth and success is aligned not only with improving one’s knowledge of technology but also with learning from others in the relationships we form:

- “[The conference was] rich with information and current issues and great opportunities to meet others over meals and discover common goals, concerns, and solutions.”

In 2008, we all face very real fiscal and environmental challenges, both on campuses and throughout the United States. The resulting economic situation is causing some states to ban college/university travel. Institutional budgets are being slashed, and the “budget dust”—the unspent money that remains before the fiscal year ends and that helped many IT departments fund attendance at meetings and workshops—almost doesn’t exist anymore. Although these problems seem to be greater in public institutions, private colleges and universities are also experiencing a wave of fiscal conservatism.

With opportunities for personal engagement perhaps becoming fewer due to these budget constraints, many EDUCAUSE members are wondering how they will be able to maintain the personal networking and interaction that they value and that is of strategic importance to their institutions. At EDUCAUSE, we plan to offer more opportunities for “virtual” engagement—more podcasts and webcasts, more online forums and materials, as well as more ways for people to “attend” events by using social software to “connect” online. We expect that by doing so, we will reach people who have not engaged with EDUCAUSE before. In addition, we will be providing a different set of opportunities for engagement to people who have regularly attended face-to-face events but who cannot do so on a regular basis now.

Some common-sense ideas become even more practical when budgets are tight. Taking advantage of regional meetings, which often cost less for registration and travel, not only stretches a budget dollar but also helps attendees maintain and grow personal networks. Encouraging department members to participate as a group in a live webinar and to hold a follow-up conversation helps people to engage in the topic and in the event. Inviting individuals or a team from another institution to campus for presentations and discussions provides an opportunity for staff interaction and connections. And participating in online discussion groups, listserves, teleconferences, and webinars enables individual follow-up with other contributors who seem to have a common issue or a possible solution to a problem.

Remember the telephone? Calling someone can be a simple way to begin a valuable relationship.

Is there a real, tangible difference between networking and interacting online and doing so in person? Sure there is. Making a personal connection and striking up a conversation is often much easier if people are in physical proximity to each other. Conversation can flow more naturally, and commonalities often jump to the surface. This can still happen with participation from afar, but it requires putting in a little more effort, and it requires taking advantage of the technology. Whether in person or online, using technology wisely can enable professionals to continue to maintain old relationships and develop new ones—and thus nourish important interpersonal connections.

Cynthia Golden, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, leads the association’s work in professional development.