Sustainability is a compelling topic today, both personally and professionally. We all want to do what is best for the environment and future generations. Likewise, global warming, pollution, water shortages, and energy consumption are the focus of college and university research, courses, student groups, and international collaborations. As articles in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review make clear, information technology may be part of the problem, but information technology and IT organizations can also be part of the solution.

Throughout 2009, EDUCAUSE has highlighted members’ sustainability efforts and has facilitated discussions on this compelling topic. We kicked off the topic discussion in November 2008 with the EDUCAUSE Summit on IT Greening and Sustainability. Since then, more resources have become available as members have contributed to the collective knowledge. Yet EDUCAUSE is doing more than simply highlighting sustainability through publications and conferences. We are also driving sustainable practices throughout the association. At the EDUCAUSE 2009 annual conference, for example, attendees can self-stuff their tote bags, taking only the materials they want and need. We have significantly reduced the amount of print material produced and shipped to the conference as well. For example, the printed program is shorter and printed on recycled paper. Rather than providing participants with bottled water, we are offering water stations where attendees can refill water bottles or use one of the recyclable cups, thus reducing waste. Recycling bins are available throughout the convention center.

But sustainability has implications beyond the environment. Time, attention, and financial sustainability issues are important as well. Throughout 2009, we have engaged in conversations about whether EDUCAUSE members can sustain previous levels of travel to and participation in face-to-face meetings. Early in 2009, hundreds of EDUCAUSE members responded to a survey about what the association can do to support institutions during the economic downturn. The top recommendation, validated in interviews and focus groups, was to increase the number and range of online offerings. Online event participation represents significant environmental, cost, (e.g., travel and housing costs), and time savings.

Online events will not be sustainable without sufficient quality, however. The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), which has been experimenting with online formats since 2004, offered another fully-online focus session in September 2009. Through these and other online events and through subsequent conversations with members, we know that simply moving content online is not enough. Instead, we must create a unique experience that is interactive, collaborative, and social.

These elements will emerge in a host of new online events and offerings in 2009 and 2010. For the first time, EDUCAUSE is offering E09 Online, a new way to experience the 2009 annual conference. Online participants will be able to join general, featured, point-counterpoint, and select track sessions via video-stream, interacting with other online participants and posting questions for location-based speakers. They will also have exclusive access—available online only—to experts on current issues. And they will be able to participate in a special showcase of innovative projects and to network via EDUCAUSE Central Online, the association hub.

To ensure that we can sustain smaller conferences, EDUCAUSE is introducing an alternate-year format for the Enterprise conference. In 2010, using a combination of online and face-to-face venues, CIOs and enterprise leaders will engage in dialogue during interactive sessions held regionally and will participate online to summarize knowledge at the national level. In 2011, the Enterprise conference will again be location-based. In addition, the EDUCAUSE Professional Development Committee is developing a “hosting kit” to help campuses host local events planned around EDUCAUSE online content.

Sustainability is a goal worth working toward—not only environmentally for institutions but also in terms of time, attention, and finances for individuals.

Notes
2. Publications, presentations, podcasts, blogs, and other materials can be found in the EDUCAUSE Resource Center, particularly on the “Sustainability” and “Green IT” resource pages: <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/Browse/Sustainability/31105> and <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/Browse/GreenIT/34023>.

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