Looking Back, Facing Forward, Listening

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There is a lot to be learned about an organization by how it sends off a departing leader, and I’m touched and heartened by the outpouring of support for Diana Oblinger. I’ve heard countless times how impossible it is to articulate all that she has done for EDUCAUSE, which speaks to the depth and breadth of her contribution. As we wish her well, this is the perfect moment for looking back and taking stock of all that the association has accomplished—while also facing forward with a view to plan for the years to come.

As we look back, the facts speak for themselves. EDUCAUSE has grown from 1,815 member colleges and universities in January 2008 to over 2,028 members today, and we have benefitted from a broader range of participation, including representation from 47 different countries, an increase of 13 percent in international memberships. EDUCAUSE has continued to develop and refine its premier programs, including the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR), the Core Data Service (CDS), and our cybersecurity initiative. Many of the signature services of EDUCAUSE in 2015 have evolved more than once over the years: for example, Net@EDU became the Advanced Core Technology Initiative working groups and eventually the ECAR working groups, whereas our regional conference strategy is now supported through the highly interactive EDUCAUSE Connect events. With the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners, we launched the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) to support educational innovation through technology to improve college readiness and completion, and we expanded services in virtual curriculum and leadership development opportunities, including the Breakthrough Models Academy and Breakthrough Models Incubator programs. EDUCAUSE also developed and deepened relationships with other higher education associations and organizations. Again and again, EDUCAUSE innovations are driven by the community and emerge from the dynamic conversations, challenges, and opportunities that make up the information technology and higher education landscape.

From the vantage point of 2015, we can clearly see how the EDUCAUSE community dealt with the challenges of the past years. People came together, and EDUCAUSE evolved to what we know today. During a time when institutional independence was seen as an unquestioned value, influential IT leaders were urging colleges and universities to embrace more, not less, “intentional interdependence.” Whether the resulting collaborations are Internet2, the Kuali Foundation, HathiTrust, Unizin, the IMS Global Learning Consortium, or others, there is little doubt that as a community, we can do much more together than we can alone. Although the last decade has seen significant change, there is no sign of a slowdown. The most compelling adventure is the one facing us head-on, and the opportunities found at the intersection of higher education and information technology have never been more promising, dynamic, or urgent. Together, we are questioning the sustainability of models that have served us for generations, and we are contemplating new models that may take us into uncharted territory.

This sense of being on the brink of a period of dynamic growth emerges and re-emerges throughout the pages of this issue of EDUCAUSE Review. In “Six Trajectories for Digital Technology in Higher Education,” Malcolm Brown takes us on an engaging tour of the digital learning environment in higher education, focusing not on where we have been or even where we are—but on where we may be going. Brown observes that in the future, “technology is no longer in the foreground” and the focus is instead on “the learners and the learning experiences that the technology enables.” In “Beyond Active Learning: Transformation of the Learning Space,” Mark Valenti too looks ahead to the future: “The
next generation of learning spaces will take all the characteristics of an active learning environment—flexibility, collaboration, team-based, project-based—and add the capability of creating and making. In short, the learning space will become a “creation space.” A key tool in this environment is the learning management system. Malcolm Brown, Joanne Dehoney, and Nancy Millichap discuss its future in “What’s Next for the LMS?” and advocate taking a “Lego approach” for the next generation digital learning environment (the NGDLE).

Part of the reason the path ahead seems so promising is that many higher education stakeholders have accepted that neither staying in one place nor going back to earlier times is a realistic option. The stakes are simply too high. Still, in ways nuanced and profound, higher education has been struggling with change, especially since the tipping point of the Great Recession. Meanwhile, members of the EDUCAUSE community have continued to come together at places like the EDUCAUSE annual conference to explore strategies for responding effectively to the changes happening across our campuses. We use the convening and research power of EDUCAUSE—participating in discussion lists, serving in working groups, attending conferences, sharing information and best practices, and writing articles. We come together and do more together than we ever could individually.

This is a remarkable moment to be joining EDUCAUSE as president and CEO. And just as EDUCAUSE members listen to each other and to those outside our community, in my first months as your new president, I will be strongly focused on listening in order to develop the understanding that makes effective action possible. For example, I met in June with EDUCAUSE staff in both Colorado and Washington, D.C. I came away from the meetings with the clear conviction that this is an extraordinary team making difficult work look far easier than it is—much as EDUCAUSE members do every day on campus. While in D.C., I also began meeting with key national associations to continue to deepen these important connections outside the technology domain. This is a high priority for me because I strongly believe that the ongoing evolution of EDUCAUSE will be the result not only of intensifying the conversations we have among IT professionals but also of furthering our rich conversations outside this circle.

I have also been closely listening to our members, our partner organizations, the foundations we work with, our corporate partners, and others to make sure that my initial impressions are grounded in conversations with our key constituents. In the months ahead, EDUCAUSE staff will launch internal conversations about how we listen to and connect with members on a regular basis to guarantee the organization is responding to and meeting members’ needs.

Listening can be a tricky thing. Sometimes you hear more than you want to hear. When my son was young, I asked him a question I had seen posted in a parenting blog: “Nathan, when do you know I’m really listening to you?” His answer, without missing a beat, was “when you put your phone down and look at me.” Since that unsettling moment I have devoted myself to listening the best I can and to doing whatever I can to understand not only the surface talk but also the tides and currents below.

As I begin my new role facing forward together with you, I welcome your ideas, insights, creativity, and constructive counsel. Please connect with me by e-mail at jobrien@educause.edu. Admittedly, I can already hear the e-mail floodgates creaking open under the weight, but I would much rather face a deluge of ideas than lead without taking advantage of every opportunity there is to listen to all of you in the EDUCAUSE community.

Note

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