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The Art of Gathering at the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference

By John O’Brien

This issue of EDUCAUSE Review is timed to coincide with our biggest event of the year, our annual conference, at which we welcome 8,000-plus colleagues gathering in one big celebration of our remarkable community. But the annual conference—this year held in Chicago—is not our only celebration. It’s just one of the many places and ways we gather. As I welcome you to this issue of EDUCAUSE Review and welcome attendees to our annual conference, I’m thinking about Priya Parker’s book The Art of Gathering. Gatherings, Parker believes, “help determine the kind of world we live in.” They shape “the way we think, feel, and make sense of our world.” Yet, she says, most of us spend very little time thinking about the why, when, and how of gathering as a form of art.¹

Like Parker, I’m convinced that “gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them.”² EDUCAUSE events benefit from significant care and thoughtfulness, powered by exceptional staff and community volunteers. We certainly focus on curating quality content that features “the best thinking in higher ed IT,” but the work of the annual conference program committee members goes much further. Beyond the impossible task of picking approximately 450 sessions from the 987 proposals received, they invest their precious time in designing the best-possible overall experience for attendees. Their dedication deserves a standing ovation. In fact, in the midst of the flurry of activity of any EDUCAUSE conference in any given year, the planning committee for the next year’s event is already meeting. Benefitting from a fresh group of creative volunteers with a new set of ideas, the program committee determines how to make the next event even better. Each planning committee is like a powerful two-stroke engine fueled by creativity and a strong drive to serve our association members.

Of course, all the work is a labor of love. If you are reading this column while attending the annual conference in Chicago, you are undoubtedly enjoying the fruits of that effort. This year, we are continuing to offer what members have come to expect: experiences that create the sense of belonging we strive for in all EDUCAUSE gatherings. We work hard to create relevant events beyond the sessions

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and featured speaker keynotes. These include our EDUCAUSE institutes, auxiliary meetings that bring together other organizations and stakeholders, and “Meet & Mingle” networking for a variety of affinity groups. As usual, the gathering is richer for the broad diversity of members attending, with representatives of every kind of college and university imaginable from more than 45 countries.

We have expanded our “Relax & Renew” space this year to make it easier for more people to recharge their batteries (figuratively and literally). For those looking to learn more about how to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion, we are offering a service project to support the Girls Who Code organization. For professional development, attendees can take advantage both of coaching and of curated itineraries. Again this year, instead of attending a single keynote on the second day of the conference, participants can choose from three simultaneous featured sessions.

We know that not everyone is able to attend the annual conference, and every year on the last day, I remind attendees that “EDUCAUSE is more than the annual conference.” We gather at special-topic events throughout the year, and we gather for webinars in between. Moreover, this year’s annual conference highlights will be extended through our Encore! series, where attendees will be able to access (for free) more than thirty of the most influential sessions, and through our webinars, EDUCAUSE Review articles, and other content appearing in your inbox.

Thinking of gatherings as a form of art invites us to consider why and how we gather and how to make the most of these valuable times. Because EDUCAUSE supports a community that is always looking ahead to the coming waves of technology innovation, EDUCAUSE staff are also contemplating what the future might hold for our gatherings. We are exploring additional ways to connect the EDUCAUSE community, through communication and digital learning environment technologies. I will have more information on this before the end of the year as we continue to progress through the EDUCAUSE 2017–2021 strategic priorities.

Who knows what lies ahead? What if events become less like meetings and more like a Meetup? How might our events become more deeply personalized, building on the power of social networking and affinity groups? How might augmented reality change navigation at our events or deepen the engagement our members enjoy onsite? Parker says that the key to creating a great gathering amounts to “designing it as a world that will exist only once,” a “temporary alternative world.”

What will happen when virtual reality makes creating alternate worlds a literal possibility? Perhaps, in some future year, EDUCAUSE colleagues will plug into a virtual EDUCAUSE space and forget about physically gathering?

As usual in our line of work, the unending questions inspired by new technologies are as fascinating as their possible answers.