Moving Beyond the EDUCAUSE Policy Conference

By Mark A. Luker

EDUCAUSE has sponsored the annual Policy 200X conference in Washington, D.C., for the past five years, preceded by the Networking Conference for fifteen years before that (convened by our ancestor organization, Educom, for the first ten years). During this time, the content of these conferences has shifted to focus less on federal directions and funding of research and education networking and more on other matters of IT policy and federal regulations such as copyright, security, privacy, e-discovery, CALEA, commercial broadband, municipal networks, spectrum, costs, and competitiveness. In the early days, we argued that IT policy should become an important component of the work of the CIO—indeed, of all college and university executive leaders—and that these executives needed to come up to speed on the major aspects of IT policy. Our conferences played a significant educational role in that regard, helping to prepare a small but growing contingent of academic leaders to grapple with a new constellation of policy issues.

Looking back twenty years, we see that the world of IT policy has fundamentally changed. IT now plays an integral role in virtually every aspect of higher education. IT policy figures prominently in the meetings and publications of most major higher education associations, as well as in high-visibility events such as the annual State of the Net Conference sponsored by the Congressional Internet Caucus Advisory Committee. EDUCAUSE no longer needs to convince the world that IT policy is important. Beyond higher education, IT is essential to business and government as well, with a corresponding constant stream of policy issues addressed in the halls of Congress and federal agencies. EDUCAUSE has therefore dramatically escalated our year-round efforts to educate higher education about IT policy and to educate IT policymakers about higher education. IT policy permeates the EDUCAUSE publications, partnerships, web pages, and national and regional conferences.

As a result, we've moved beyond the effectiveness of an annual policy-focused event. This year's Policy Conference was thus the last in a successful series, which we end in order to focus even more energy, along with that of our partners, on the broader, ongoing support of IT policy for higher education. (And a bang-up conference it was, opening with Jeffrey S. Lehman speaking on the globalization of U.S. higher education and closing with FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein commenting on the value and timeliness of the EDUCAUSE white paper A Blueprint for Big Broadband.)

Our goals for this conference (and for our broader policy program) included the following:

- Educating higher education on the issues of IT policy
- Educating IT policymakers on the issues that higher education cares about
- Building consensus among our members and partners
- Influencing IT policymakers
- Showing our flag as a “player” in D.C. policy circles

But after much deliberation, we have decided that these goals can be reached more effectively through other means in the future:

1. Increase mainstream organizational outreach on policy issues in our annual, regional, and specialized meetings, as well as those of our association and industry partners, to reach a much wider audience. Utilize webcasts to get information to appropriate audiences in a more timely manner. Add federal policy issues to the EDUCAUSE/Cornell Institute for Computer Policy and Law.

2. Take our message to the policymakers on their turf at Capitol Hill, the Federal Communications Commission, the National Science Foundation, and other agencies. Bring our program to a much larger group at events such as the annual State of the Net Conference. (In January 2008, A Blueprint for Big Broadband was introduced at this conference by FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps.)

3. Consult our members and partners frequently through the EDUCAUSE Network Policy Council, policy website and discussion lists, our association and industry partners, and other public-interest groups.

4. Engage on specific, critical issues in effective grassroots advocacy with our members, reinforced by direct visits to Capitol Hill and federal agencies.

5. Play a strong leadership role regarding key IT policy issues (e.g., network neutrality, big broadband, CALEA, privacy and security, and copyright infringement). Use the media to promote our messages. Convene and convince!

Initiatives such as these, which we have expanded and refined in the last few years, provide a fitting next step in the evolution of the EDUCAUSE policy program.

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