An honor—like the EDUCAUSE Rising Star Award—may be given to individuals, but we would not be where we are today without learning from and receiving support from our amazing professional networks. We owe much of our professional success to the smart and engaging members of the peer networks that we have developed throughout our work in higher education. As the two of us spent hours reflecting on and discussing how we have benefited from our peer networks, we realized that there were some commonalities among why we are leveraging these relationships, who is included in our networks, and how we all can be strategic about the long-term care and feeding of those networks. Additionally, we uncovered some hidden gems of wisdom about where to find people to include in peer networks, how to establish common ground among a variety of disciplines within information technology in higher education, and how best to realize the unintended benefits of these relationships.

In the spirit of leveraging our professional networks, we have included quotes from our colleagues, who have graciously contributed their wisdom to our ongoing conversation.

On the Shoulders of Giants:
Leveraging Peer Networks for Leading-Edge Professional Development

By Barron Koralesky and Jennifer Sparrow

If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.
—Isaac Newton
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Why? The Challenges of Work

External peer networks can provide several benefits often not afforded by colleagues within our organizations. First, they can provide insight and expertise based on experiences that complement our own. Secondly, they offer a perspective that can illuminate the reality that many of the challenges we face are not unique to our individual circumstances. Finally, they inspire us to respond to these opportunities by stretching ourselves beyond our self-imposed limitations.

—Mike Kubit, Interim COO, Information Technology Services, Case Western Reserve University

Why do you think peer networks are important in your current position?

BARRON KORALESKY: My path to higher education information technology was not a direct one; thus almost everything I have learned about doing my job I learned from my mentors and from people in my peer networks. One of the ways that my networks are important to me in my current role is to share experience, advice, and answers, as Mike Kubit said so well above. If I am struggling with a problem, I can always count on someone in my network to have already solved it or to be in a similar position and wanting to exchange information or work through it together. My networks are also important to me as an unending source of energy. Through the support and encouragement we give each other, we are able to accomplish far more than we could alone. As Gardner Campbell, Vice Provost for Learning Innovation and Student Success at Virginia Commonwealth University, once said to fellow Frye Institute colleagues, “You are my oxygen.”

Why do you regularly engage your peer networks?

JENNIFER SPARROW: I have both personal and professional reasons for engaging my peer networks. Professionally, if there is a question that we’re looking to answer in our organization or maybe a challenge that I know others are facing, I find that it helps to bounce these questions off members of my professional listservs. Often, I’ll put the question out to a variety of listservs, in order to get a diversity of answers. The responses on these shared challenges are the true embodiment of a collective intelligence. On a more personal note, I find that these peer networks are the source of encouragement, wisdom, and moral support for me on a variety of leadership, professional development, and even day-to-day operational challenges. The personal aspect of my peer networks challenges me to be a better me.

How? Building Professional Networks

The surest principle I can offer in building a peer network is to give as much as you can without keeping score.

—Jerry Sanders, CIO, Macalester College

What are some ways that you intentionally grew your networks?

KORALESKY: The best place to start a network is within your own department. Information technology has become so complex and so specialized that we have a lot to learn even from the people in the cubicles next to us. Not only do we have a lot to learn from them—we can’t be successful without them. As you are doing your job on campus, you are going to need help from many other people with a lot of other talents within your department. Unless you’ve built out your departmental network well, you can’t bring your team to bear on the problems that you need to solve.

From there you can reach out across campus. Each unit around campus has rich experiences and differing approaches from which you can learn. A great first step is to reach out to your library. At Macalester College, we worked with the library to teach information fluency sessions for all of our first-year courses. There’s no better way...
to network with your librarians than to actually work together to train your students on how to use information and the technology involved in accessing it.

Reach out to members of your facilities department. Obviously, you will need them to provide space and power to wherever you’re installing technology, but beyond that, you’re going to need to work together on future learning space design. Both the IT department and the facilities department will be pushed to grow to support all the new teaching and learning methods that are emerging today. You should do that together. If you understand each other’s challenges and cultures, you’ll be better able to work together.

Also, talk to members of your student services division. They are on the front line of support for your students. There are many ways that you can help them—from assistive technologies to software that supports their programs and student organizations—and in networking with them, you will see their charge and how they do their work. Although their work is very different from what we do in information technology, we have much to learn from each other.

How do you move beyond the local to a more global perspective in your networks?

KORALESKY: Once you’ve established a strong network foundation within your institution, you can begin to reach out beyond the campus borders. Look first for other local and regional networks that you can tap into to facilitate your connections. Although these institutions likely exist, you will have to make your own connections to them. If there aren’t any appropriate for your role, you can start to gather your peers from nearby institutions and create your own group.

For example, Minnesota has a great tradition of collaboration. We have excellent connections within the university system, the state colleges and universities, and the private college groups. With that as a base, we can now collabo-rate as the Minnesota Higher Education Technology Alliance (http://mheta.org). This allows the fifty-three institutions to work together as a state in ways we haven’t before. Top among those ways is professional development for the IT workers across Minnesota.

From the local level, you can move to the global, with organizations like EDUCAUSE. A wonderful community, EDUCAUSE is also gigantic, so it is wise to connect within EDUCAUSE carefully and intentionally. Start by joining some of the many constituent and discussion groups to learn what discussions are taking place. Eventually, you should move beyond lurking on the listservs and ask or answer a question, in order to get your name and interests out there.

A great way to join organizations like EDUCAUSE is to volunteer. You can start by reviewing proposals, which is very helpful to the association and to the programming committee for the events. In addition, you will see more of the work that is going on in your field and the people who are doing the work. This will help you identify those with whom you want to connect.

Go to the events and conferences. It is very difficult to network if you are head-down working at your desk. Get away from the office, get your chin up, and dedicate some time to connecting and learning. Here is one of our secret networking tips: volunteer to convene a session. Find a topic you are interested in or a speaker you would like to meet, and volunteer—you are guaranteed to add a new person to your network.

Eventually you will have the opportunity to present at a conference, which is wonderful not just because of what you will share with others but also because your peers will want to meet you. Presenting is a great way to have people coming to you to join your network. However, conferences are not just about the presentations. Most of the networking happens between sessions. Use that informal time to meet people at the coffee breaks, at the conference lunches, and at the vendor gatherings.

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Within EDUCAUSE, the ultimate networking opportunity is its institutes. Take advantage of these if you are able. Jennifer and I were both very fortunate to have attended the Frye Leadership / Leading Change Institute, which was an amazing learning experience and incredible infusion to our networks.

Who? The Shape and Personality of Peer Networks

I leverage my peer networks in three primary ways. One is to share challenges, successes, and new ideas for supporting our institutions. The second is to stay focused on personal growth professionally, particularly in terms of leadership development. A peer network interested in leadership and professional growth discussions is energizing and exciting! The third is friendship. Having close connections with common professional and personal interests provides a community rich in shared experiences, opportunities for empathy and compassion, honest and trusted feedback, a good self-esteem boost, and challenge! My peer networks don’t let me back down or give up!

—Cindy Mitchell, Associate CIO, University of Maine System

These smaller networks are more intentionally diverse, with the members representing a range of knowledge, positions, and perspectives.

How do you ensure that you have a wide range of perspectives in your peer networks?

SPARROW: The diversity of my networks is crucial for addressing the myriad challenges that we face in information technology. I did not intentionally set out to have this variety in my networks, but in recent years, I have found that subscribing to several professional listservs (many within professional organizations) and reading what others are asking and answering was a great way to determine the knowledge-sets of the groups. Often, I will see common issues discussed across listservs, and the responses from the participants on each listserv add a valuable voice and perspective to the overall conversation. As I have joined leadership-development programs, I have participated in those listservs, but I have found it beneficial to develop smaller networks within those groups. These smaller networks are more intentionally diverse, with the members representing a range of knowledge, positions, and approaches. I find that this diversity challenges my thoughts and beliefs in a safe environment.

The Care and Feeding of Networks

I would not be in my current position without my network of peers. They have helped me grow as a person and as a professional. I have asked for and received great advice on looking at decisions from different perspectives, directing projects, managing relationships on campus, interviewing for a promotion, leading a new team, and even raising kids. Seeing them in person energizes me, because they encourage me to dream bigger, for myself and my institution, while helping me understand and deal with obstacles and challenges. I do my best to give back to my network, and I look for new people to introduce into the network.

—Jon Crutchfield, Director of IT, Mendoza College of Business, University of Notre Dame

How do you make time for networking, and what tools do you use?

SPARROW: These peer networks should not be seen as an addition to your work but, rather, as an integral part of the work itself. Make time for this part of your work. As you develop your networks, put aside time on your calendar to talk to and collaborate with your peers, and...
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stick with it. Letting this time go off your calendar as the daily fires erupt is very easy; however, you’ll benefit from these discussions, and you might even find that your network can help you fight those fires. One thing I recommend is to have someone who shepherds the conversation—someone who invites and reminds everyone else of the meeting times and who keeps the conversations going. Consider leveraging videoconferencing tools such as Google+ Hangouts or WebEx to add video as well as audio to your conversations.

In addition to these formally scheduled conversations, consider leveraging your peer networks for just-in-time conversations that address a current challenge you’re facing. I don’t hesitate to pick up the phone for an impromptu discussion with my closer network of peers. This is also the group of people I contact simply to check up on their progress toward a goal, to see how their kids are doing, or to find out about a problematic project they discussed on the listserv or in one of our regularly scheduled meetings.

Remember that the better your network, the more minds you can tap into, the more ideas you can gather, the more inspiration you can benefit from, and the better solutions you can find for your work. Developing the relationships that become your peer networks is just the beginning of forming your peer networks. There is more work to be done to effectively maintain and grow those networks. This includes working on the give-and-take in your networks, continuing the ongoing care and feeding of your networks, intentionally and thoughtfully developing your networks, and paying back to the profession. One way to ensure that you’re nurturing your networks is to identify the common issues that become a starting point for conversations. The conversations may start with challenges you’re facing in your daily work—for example, moving to the cloud, professional development, budget, and even personnel—but they may expand to the more personal peer relationships that you can count on to push you to do your best.

Can you expand on the idea of the care and feeding of networks?

SPARROW: As I mentioned earlier, the development of networks should be a part of your work, not an addition to it. That being said, you should dedicate time to work on your networks. With a little care and feeding, your networks will exceed your expectations. In any network, it is important to listen well. This may seem obvious, but understanding the strengths and expertise of your peers will pay off immeasurably as you encounter those shared challenges. I think the most important thing is knowing when to offer up your expertise. I can listen. I could not say a word in our conversations that we have once a month; instead, I could just listen to the folks, how they’re addressing the issues on their campus, the challenges that they’re facing. But this truly is about a two-way conversation. Don’t be afraid to share your expertise. Be generous in giving your knowledge to your peers when they post a question or challenge.

One of the greatest unexpected outcomes from this group is exactly what Jon Crutchfield and Cindy Mitchell said in their quotes: these peer networks have encouraged me to stretch myself professionally. Part of participating in these networks should be the sharing of successes as well as the challenges, and the congratulations should be given freely over even the smallest of successes.

Pay It Back: Changing Roles

The process of making connections and building peer networks involves a lot of work, but this is one of the most important things you can do at every stage of your career. In addition, as you move through your career and grow professionally, you should consider how your role within your networks might be evolving. For example, there are times when you might be the mentee, and there are other times when you might be

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