Distance Education Associations

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the distance learning professional associations were founded in the 1990s, at a time when most Internet backbone speeds were T1 or slower. Although scientists in universities, corporations, and the military used the Internet for supercomputing capabilities, the predominant academic application was electronic mail. The public was generally unaware of the Internet's existence. The explosive growth of information and telecommunications has combined to strengthen and diversify the options for school, skills development, technical and professional training, postsecondary credit courses, and special interests. New associations are established everyday to promote innovative educational strategies, as well as ways to leverage technology to provide new ways of learning online. Each of the strategies suggested below have some measure of support amongst the professional association participants and represents a way to improve opportunities for distance education and training.

1. Developing strategic alliances to support and encourage project-oriented coalitions amongst members as the need and opportunity arises
2. Recommending standards of quality
3. Institution promotion under a common logo within the region and beyond marketing
4. Identifying and supporting markets that are currently underserved
5. Sharing technological and human resources for development and delivery
6. Conducting applied research and development of distance education technology and instructional design
7. Developing and maintaining a system to provide a central source of current and relevant information on courses and programs, the credit-transfer system, and student-assistance programs

NORTH AMERICA

United States

In the United States, the director of the Office of Educational Technology in the Office of the Secretary for the U.S. Department of Education is responsible for coordinating programs and policies on virtual education and e-learning, the National Education Technology Plan, technical assistance grants under Enhancing Education Through Technology, and the use of technology to further the mission of the department and the No Child Left Behind Act.

Founded in 1987, FARNET, the Federation of American Research Networks, was a primary information source for the government and industry during the preprivatization days of the Internet. FARNET 's original mission was to coordinate regional and backbone high-speed networks to promote the general advancement of science and education by assisting in the interchange of information and research using high-speed communication.

Later on, FARNET developed into a forum for state networks to share information. Beginning in the early 1990s, FARNET hosted a series of workshops discussing how the National Information Infrastructure (NII) and the Internet might impact the public sector, including health care, libraries, and K-12 education.

In 1995, FARNET opened a policy office in Washington, D.C., to monitor the regulatory environment, and it communicated developments back to its membership via an e-mail newsletter called *FARNET'S Washington Update*.

In 1996 FARNET received an NSF award to build a clearinghouse for tracking information infrastructure development on a state-by-state basis. The purpose of the States Inventory Project (located at http://www.states.org/) is to promote the exchange of information among state and local policy makers so that states may develop their own information infrastructures more efficiently. The State

Inventory Project clearinghouse currently has over 4,000 entries in its database, divided into nearly 100 categories for each state, territory, and province.

One of the early associations, the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI, http://www.cni.org/timeline.html), was founded in 1990 by the library and information technology communities to enhance scholarship and intellectual productivity. At the end of its first year, CNI had 118 member institutions. In the early years, on their meeting agenda were contemporary issues such as economics of information, the Rights for Electronic Access and Delivery of Information (READI) project, the Elsevier TULIP Project (one of the earliest examples of instrumented large-scale experiments in electronic journal delivery), wide-area information servers (WAIS), the introduction of Gopher (an early tool to find and retrieve directories of information on the Internet), electronic theses and dissertations, and the demonstration of NCSA's Mosaic, the first graphical Web browser.

In 1996, CNI cosponsored a conference, Networked Information in an International Context, with the UK Joint Information Systems Committee, the British Library, CAUSE, and the first ACM International Conference on Research and Development in Digital Libraries. As the result of the conference, the Internet 2 Project was launched. CNI was represented on the Applications Council to launch the Internet 2 Project and worked closely with this effort to help identify advanced networking applications. These associations together facilitated the starting plans of Internet 2, which is an effort to establish higher education's leadership role in internetworking.

EDUCOM is another early organization for the enhancement of information technology in higher education. The mission of EDUCOM is as follows:

EDUCOM is a nonprofit consortium of higher education institutions that facilitates the introduction, use, and access to and management of information resources in teaching, learning, scholarship, and research. EDUCOM's work is done in cooperation and partnership with the broader education and library communities, professional societies, and information industries (Internet Library for Librarians, 2002).

In the 1990s, EDUCOM focused on the following.

1. Increasing individual and institutional intellectual productivity through access to and use of information resources and technology
2. Assuring the creation of an information infrastructure that will meet society's needs into the 21st century

EDUCOM's Networking and Telecommunications Task Force (NTTF) monitored the education telecommunications-related changes of the federal government. NTTF was created in 1986 as a vehicle to provide leadership and focus for colleges and universities in identifying and communicating strategic networking and telecommunication policy issues. Its membership is composed primarily of chief information officers from leading universities.

In 1988, NTTF organized the first of what has become an annual conference in Washington, D.C. This conference brought together leaders from government, industry, and the public sector to discuss the latest developments in telecommunications policy.

CAUSE is the Association for the Management of Information Technology in Higher Education (http://www.cni.org/docs/infopols/CAUSE.html). The mission of CAUSE is as follows.

• To promote more effective planning, management, and evaluation of all information technologies in colleges and universities
• To help individual member representatives develop as professionals in the field of higher education technology management

In direct response to the changing nature of campus computing organization and management, CAUSE expanded its mission to reflect an expansion from an earlier focus on administrative computing to incorporate the planning and management of administrative computing, academic computing, telecommunications, and other information technologies in colleges and universities.

EDUCOM and CAUSE were consolidated in July 1998 with a mission *"to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology"* (EDUCAUSE, 2002). While CAUSE's FARNET primarily has concentrated on issues related to internetworking, EDUCOM's NTTF has been actively involved in a broader range of telecommunications policy issues. Both FARNET

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