

The EDUCAUSE Regional Conference Strategy

Since the creation of EDUCAUSE more than three years ago, attendance at the annual conference for the association has grown large, to say the least. Although most of the annual conference attendees find the meeting very satisfactory and helpful, some yearn for the intimacy of smaller meetings. In addition, some institutions find it cost-prohibitive to send large numbers of staff to the annual conference, despite the need for professional development, especially for younger and up-and-coming staff members. With these factors and a host of others in mind, EDUCAUSE has provided and is continuing to develop a variety of conference options. For example, each year EDUCAUSE (with affiliated organizations) offers four considerably smaller, topic-based meetings: CUMREC, focusing on e-commerce and issues related to information systems; NLII, focusing on teaching and learning; Net200X, focusing on policy issues and advanced networking; and the Seminars on Academic Computing, focusing on issues related to the support of learning, instruction, and research. In addition, EDUCAUSE decided to significantly expand its offering of regional meetings, a process that was started by CAUSE before the merger.

The regional strategy was driven by the goal of providing meaningful professional development opportunities to more people, in a more convenient and affordable manner. Holding meetings in various regional areas should make it easier for more staff to attend and should attract staff located throughout the IT and higher education structures, not just those at the top of various hierarchies.

Initially, CAUSE had two such regional conferences, arranged through affiliations with NERCOMP in the Northeast and with NWACC in the Northwest. During 2001, EDUCAUSE hosted three additional regional conferences: EduTex, held in San Antonio in February; the Southeast Regional, held in Orlando in June; and the Mid-Atlantic Regional, to be held in Baltimore in early December. The first Midwest Regional will be held in the spring of 2003, and a California conference is planned for 2004.

EDUCAUSE has begun to evaluate the effectiveness of all its conference activities and, with the use of e-mail and Web-based tools, has collected attendees' responses, at rates in excess of 40 percent for all events. These evaluations show that there is high satisfaction with the current conference offerings. On a 1-to-5 scale, with 5 being "very satisfied," the four regional conferences held thus far in 2001 have an average rating of 4.12, with 82 percent of all ratings in the top two categories.

Statistical tests were also conducted on the response data to determine if there were any differential views of satisfaction depending on gender, age, position in the institution, and type of school (Carnegie classification, public or private). Thus far, there have been no differences in satisfaction based on any of these variables. All participants indicate equivalent levels of satisfaction, and the programs appear to be meeting the needs of all groups.

One of the most interesting facts that emerged from these statistical compila-



tions is that the regional meetings are in fact attracting people who did not attend the national conference. An average of only 8.9 percent of the regional conference attendees also attended the national conference. Nearly 2,300 people

who did not attend the EDUCAUSE national conference last October were provided with professional development opportunities through the four special-topic conferences and four regional conferences held thus far in 2001.

One surprising fact is that the age of attendees is essentially the same at all meetings. The average age of a participant at the national meeting is 45.8 years of age, and the average age is 45.0 at the regional conferences. It was hoped that EDUCAUSE would be serving the younger, next-generation leaders through the regional conferences, but thus far the data do not indicate that this goal is being realized.

The written feedback received from conference attendees, especially those in areas where EDUCAUSE had not previously held regional conferences (Texas and the Southeast), indicates that the interest in and attendance at these meetings will only increase. To facilitate this interest, EDUCAUSE has developed regional program committees. These will offer many more opportunities for EDUCAUSE members to actively participate in the association, as well as to shape meetings that have special relevance to the regional constituencies.

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