

fast track





# IS YOUR NET WORKING?

By Dawn R. McCoy

A career in financial aid was not what had I planned some twenty years ago. But looking back, my journey has gained me a unique technical expertise and life-long networking skills. Just out of college, my first job as a Capitol Hill legislative aide was to gather information on higher education reauthorization issues and student financial aid programs. I did not realize that talking with various stakeholders about technical education policy would help me forge strong business alliances.

Later, when I was elected to the Sacramento City Unified School District board of trustees in 2002, I again connected with people having a shared interest in making college accessible and affordable. This K-12 school district is comprised of more than 80 schools and 52,000 students. Serving on this governance team, I focused on reinforcing systemic “Kindergarten-20” partnerships and garnered support from local political and school leaders for annual College Goal Sunday financial literacy events. I soon realized what a valuable resource my networking skills had become.

In my new leadership position as Assistant Vice President of the Virginia Center for Educational Credit Management Corporation, continuing to build relationships with financial aid

administrators is one of my priorities in providing equity in and access to postsecondary education. To accomplish these and other organizational goals, strategic intelligence gathering has meant finding the right people who can offer needed information and support. My networking activities ranged from daily contacts to conference planning. The results have been valuable business contacts, insightful mentors, and sometimes lifelong friendships.

## Why Networking?

Networking is more than “schmoozing” or a tool for those climbing the proverbial career ladder. Networking is the exchange of ideas where people share and teach technical concepts and connect yielding further insight. It might be summed up as goal-oriented small talk and is characterized by determining who can be of assistance to you.

In *Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty*, author Harvey Mackay says “a network is an organized collection of your personal contacts and your personal contacts’ own networks. Networking is finding fast how to get what you need in any given situation and helping others do the same.”

In the financial aid industry, you continuously build relationships, gather student aid program details like “Dear

Developing a strategic networking plan is simply good business that will cultivate organizational and personal growth.

Colleague Letter” guidance, discuss statutory and regulatory changes, and make new acquaintances as people enter and leave the field. More often than not, your most significant forums for networking include annual state, regional, and national conferences. These relationships create ties between you and others in the field.

Why should you bother to create these ties? The greater your network, the more information and assistance you have at your fingertips. How are others handling a new, confusing regulatory requirement? What approach have others taken in getting approval for more staff in their office? What innovative debt management techniques are others using? What software will accomplish your goals and what bugs have others discovered? Your network can help you answer these questions and many, many more.

# fast track

Your network can also help you as you advance in the field, by recommending you for positions in association leadership, or alerting you to opportunities as they arise. Likewise, it can help you to find volunteer opportunities related to your expertise, including serving on committees, authoring articles, and presenting workshops. And of course, should you want to make a job change in the future, your network may provide you with opportunities you may not find in the help wanted column.

Some tips to remember about building your networking ties include:

- Reach out to new contacts and build industry connections to expand possible information and support networks
- Use innovative technology, such as personal digital assistants (PDAs) to maintain contact after you have established a personal rapport
- Discover resources and ideas through

your acquaintances rather than sustaining a myopic perspective

- Establish trust and linkages between people on issues of mutual interest
- Expand your circle of contacts as roles and rules change

## Conference Preparation: Casting Your Net

Conferences offer endless possibilities for networking with professionals who share your interests. I have found my conference networking skills are essential to maximizing contacts in a limited timeframe. I've also found that sharing my experience can help my personal development and organizational objectives while I help others in the financial aid community.

Developing a strategic networking plan is simply good business that will cultivate organizational and personal growth. Motivational speaker, author, and networking expert George C.



# fast track

Fraser points out the importance of a “networking street map” for determining how to accomplish your goals.

Annual financial aid conferences are great opportunities to expand existing relationships and to create new ones. Here are seven ways to effectively network at your next conference:

1. Review the conference program and Web site to get familiar with current organizational leadership, committees, and sessions of interest. If a list of conference attendees is provided beforehand, highlight names of people you want to meet and prioritize making those contacts.
2. If you are a new financial aid administrator, explore a “beginner track” of sessions to become better acquainted with the larger financial aid world and issues beyond your campus. The NASFAA conference and others offer a “first time conferees” reception you should try to attend.
3. If you are a supervisor or seasoned aid administrator, consider using conference networking to introduce members of your staff to contacts. These activities will offer a reasonable return on investment, as staff feel a part of a larger community and enjoy personal growth opportunities. They also help you to mentor rising leaders among your staff.
4. Come prepared to network. Have on hand a supply of business cards, a notebook, and an electronic or manual data tracking system.
5. Develop a concise self-introduction that explains what you do, the value of services you provide and where, and includes a phrase that helps connect you with people. For example, for meetings with community organizations to help get them involved in College Goal Sunday planning activities, I scripted a self-introduction stating my name, role, and a list of my organization’s national college awareness programs. At the same time, I underscored the event objectives and mentioned specific local school sites where publications have

been distributed. Finally, recognizing our mutual interest in helping youth gain access to higher education, I asked for volunteer support at upcoming annual training-the-trainers and College Goal Sunday sites.

6. Set reasonable networking goals for connecting with existing colleagues and meeting new ones at conference receptions, meal functions, and in the exhibit area.
7. Coordinate with your office colleagues beforehand about sharing responsibilities to attend overlapping functions and conference sessions. Pre-planned brainstorming and business lunches, for example, are focused ways to re-connect and develop relationships at conferences. In my career, these pre-planned meetings reinforced my relationships while supporting my personal knowledge and my organization’s goals.

## Ready, Set, Network!

Once you are at the conference, keep your personal and professional goals in mind to guide your efforts. With your pre-planning and a solid and concise self-introduction in mind, and your business cards in hand, jump in and start meeting people. Note the circumstances of your meetings throughout the conference in a notebook or on the reverse side of each business card you receive. This will serve as an informal way to recall your new contacts later when you follow up. Be aware that brief but valuable conversations in a limited timeframe might bring you multiple and new perspectives.

Sometimes your plan might be sidetracked by unavoidable schedule conflicts. Be prepared to re-prioritize accordingly. Likewise, it is important to pace yourself, rest, and be flexible. Unlike a regular day in the office, 12-hour conference days may include both early breakfast meetings and late evening receptions.

In addition, take advantage of unplanned opportunities to build relationships throughout the conference.

Maximize every opportunity to meet people, and you will notice how connections seemingly will just happen. Also, get acquainted by sitting with people you do not know at sessions and meals events.

Watch for chances to meet seasoned professionals and keynote speakers and get helpful support by being a “shadow” with peers. Maximize every opportunity to meet people, and you will notice how connections seemingly will just happen. Also, get acquainted by sitting with people you do not know at sessions and meals events.

Remember to ask questions and learn what you can about the people you meet. People enjoy talking about who they are and what they do. A few simple questions and a genuine interest will generally yield a great deal of information from anyone you meet.

## Conference Follow Up

Cultivating our new connections is essential to “making our net work.” Maintaining contacts in the financial aid community is vital to opening doors to a mutually beneficial exchange of information. Sometimes conference contacts and business cards sit on desks or are tossed aside after returning to the office as we wrestle with daily competing priorities. After any conference it is crit-

## Ten Networking Tips

**1. Develop a personal networking approach** – Implement your unique style to initiate and make contacts. Schedule follow-up and share industry information via e-mail, telephone, and in-person meetings.

**2. Establish networking objectives** – Guide your efforts with questions such as: What insight and expertise can I share? What information or support do I need?

**3. Enhance your circle through networking** – Set reasonable and specific conference networking goals. Focus on opportunities to expand the ever-changing circle of financial aid contacts. Identify industry committees and endeavors that will underscore your personal and professional objectives.

**4. Set daily networking goals** – Conference networking occurs during the entire conference. Prepare to incorporate networking in your daily activities. Also make information-sharing part of your everyday routine.

**5. Make use of the pre-conference agenda** – Review the conference agenda in advance and identify those with whom you plan to connect, including organizational leadership, key contacts, committee members, session participants, and session presenters and speakers. Bring business cards, a notebook, and a solid self-introduction.

**6. Strategize your conference networking** – Identify specific people to add to your network, particularly those who might assist you (i.e., peers, mentors, supervisors, committee members, etc.).

**7. Manage your conference follow up** – Establish a solid follow-up plan. Categorize and manage your contacts after reviewing your notes about mutual interests for future correspondence. Make a plan to send follow-up notes and e-mail messages and make telephone calls.

**8. Mind-map networking possibilities** – Expand your assumptions and consider overlapping circles of contacts to explore future networking.

**9. Offer yourself as a resource** – Share your technical expertise while networking with colleagues. Make conference presentations and serve on committees to reach a greater number of colleagues.

**10. Serve as a mentor** – Share your knowledge and experiences with protégés who might be assisted by your help. Consider possible introductions for new financial aid professionals and allowing others to “shadow” you at the conference.

ical to categorize and manage your new contacts and business cards in an electronic database or even an old-fashioned card file. Technology can simplify this efforts with card scanning machines, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and other electronic capabilities, but we have to take the time to do it.

Set aside time on your calendar to contact your new acquaintances. This means carving out time in your schedule for post-conference follow up such as handwritten notes, sending e-mail messages, and making telephone calls. If you are setting up time to meet or talk via telephone, be timely in your contacts. I sometimes send follow up notes with news articles on topics of mutual interest. Everyone has a unique personal style, time, and approach to reaching out. After just a few contacts, you will likely find what best suits you.

### Networking Priority and Success

Successful networking occurs when you stay connected, sustain a rapport with financial aid colleagues, and maximize your time at conference and other venues. Staying focused on personal and professional goals will underscore mutual interests and expand your expertise in serving as a mentor to peers and newcomers.

Futurist John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends*, summed up for me how important networking is when he said “today we live in a world of overlapping networks, not just a constellation of networks but a galaxy of network constellations.” What a tremendous consideration to ensure that our industry explores all the possibilities to stay connected. Just ask yourself the question: Is your net working?

Dawn McCoy is Assistant Vice President for the Virginia Center for Educational Credit Management Corporation based in Richmond, Virginia. She is also a recently retired school board trustee elected to the Sacramento City Unified School Board. She can be reached at [dmccoy@ecmc.org](mailto:dmccoy@ecmc.org)