T he Postsecondary Education Standards Council (PESC) began in 1997 with a critical mission: to figure out ways to control costs, improve service and maintain systems interoperability in higher education.

The volunteer IT researchers, school administrators and vendors involved in PESC want to find ways to get business done, by developing technical standards for leading-edge technologies like XML communications. But PESC operated more like a think tank than a standards body at the outset, and standards development was stalled. Then, something happened.

“We figured out a couple years ago that we should change our perspective from ‘why’ to ‘how’—from thinking through the issues to actually doing something about them,” remarks Michael Sessa, PESC’s executive director since October 2002. “We realized that we should add tactical goals to our strategic planning.” The first tactical decision produced an enterprise-wide XML data dictionary and technical specifications for higher education institutions.

“Everyone could focus on those deliverables,” Sessa says, and they were actually delivered in May 2003 at PESC’s annual meeting. That success had a lot to do with the unusual set of skills that Sessa brings to the job. He emphasizes that he is not a tekkie, but an artist “by training and by lifestyle.” Sessa notes that his passion for standards, and his ability to identify and draw out that passion in others, tipped the scales in the board’s decision to hire him.

His artistic temperament was honed at Dartmouth. His artwork, including paintings like “Cusp” (see opposing page), took long hours and significant technical skill to produce an enterprise-wide XML data dictionary and technical specifications for higher education institutions.

In the associations

A fine art

Passion and creativity are necessary skills in running this association

BY RICHARD D. R. HOFFMANN

Why is SIIA looking to expand its higher education membership?

It’s a growth marketplace. Our education division is largely focused on K-12. We need to include more companies with higher education and lifelong learning customers, who will benefit from our anti-piracy and copyright efforts, as well as our lobbying, industry promotion, market reports, studies and surveys.

Who are the members of SIIA?

The SIIA represents more than 450 digital code and content providers, with 100 of them in education. Code and content providers include software companies, the digital divisions of textbook publishers, internet content providers and the like. Some names include Atex Learning, Apple Learning, Houghton Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, Thomson and others. Our membership dues are based on a company’s overall annual revenues.

Are your members broadening their commerce within education?

Many K-12 members are moving into higher education, and vice versa. Blackboard, which focused exclusively on higher education, recently moved into K-12. Kaplan K-12 has just joined SIIA. ProQuest sells its Xanadu course packs in higher education, but now with the purchase of Big Chalk, its focus is K-20. PLATO Learning, already in K-12, community college and adult education, is acquiring Light Span, which owns Academic Systems’ math and algebra first-year college courses. And watch for moves by MathSoft Engineering & Education and Red Hat.

Please compare SIIA and other education technology organizations.

EDUCAUSE and the League for Innovation serve people within educational institutions. The Association of American Publishers has a partial focus on education technology. The total focus of the SIIA, however, is to serve education technology providers.

What issues and activities are important to your members?

HEA reauthorization is a shared concern, particularly its affect on distance learning. Copyright and digital rights management; open sourcing; the TEACH Act; and faculty/professional development are a few others. A major development/implementation issue is the integration, interoperability and transferability of one software program with another. SIIA can bring players together from all markets and industries. We cooperate closely with standards organizations like MERLOT, SCORM and SIF.
produce. He also possesses an engaging and outgoing personality, plus more than a modicum of business savvy to go along with his creative bent.

“It’s a relationship business,” says Sessa of running an association. “A lot of people underestimate the human side of business, but that’s where I start. I talk to everybody and listen.” His business career includes three years at a savings bank, managing retail compliance and consumer loans. He also spent most of the last decade with American Student Assistance in a variety of positions.

“Just about anyone can run a workgroup, call a meeting or put on a conference,” Sessa says. “But the determining factor for this position was passion, and the ability to follow through.” The difficulty has been sustaining the awareness that the immediate goal is to build value through reliable and consistent performance. He likes to use the automated teller machine as an example of value-building through standards.

“ATM access is a commodity today,” he observes. It was originally considered a proprietary technology by banks who thought ATM’s would lock-in customers. “Instead ATMs turned out to be a way to make money through fee-based services,” Sessa points out. And standardization made that possible.

“It’s the same with XML standards,” Sessa continues. “You might lock students in for a year or two with a proprietary XML campus standard. But they will want to talk to others elsewhere. Making that happen is very costly without national standards. If students can’t interoperate, you wind up losing them— maybe for life.”

Working with other associations also has been both satisfying and frustrating. The good part has been working with members of AACRAO’s SPEEDE committee and NCHELP’s Electronic Standards Committee, whose members have brought a lot to the table. Frustrations have come with working with other standards organizations.

“We’re a member of ANSI. ANSI speaks on data issues to the larger user community outside of higher education,” says Sessa. “But it only recently developed design rules (X12) for XML. That puts ANSI not behind the curve, but behind the eight-ball,” he adds, noting that PESC and other XML developmental groups are way ahead.

“We could pull out of ANSI and simply be the voice on XML standards for the higher education industry, something we’re considering even as we continue to try and work with ANSI,” Sessa says. But the decision to do so is yet unmade. Regarding other standards-setting activities in which PESC may become involved, Sessa speaks with caution.

“We should not latch onto a specific technology,” he believes. “We should first find out what we need to get done in higher education, choose the technology that will get it done, and then define the standard.” He also frets about falling back into bureaucratic ways.

“Let’s face it, standards development is boring for anyone not involved in it, and even for some who are,” he concludes. “The process of getting a standard approved is hierarchical, bureaucratic and inefficient. It’s the application of the standard that’s exciting.”

POP QUIZ

How would capital expenditures planning, especially for new construction, be affected by tuition price controls at public universities?

The primary impact of tuition price controls at state institutions would be felt in institutions’ operating budgets. Capital expenditures and new construction, almost always funded separately via long-term bonds, would not be directly or immediately affected. However, institutions using tuition to fund debt service may be forced to limit new construction. Longer term, capital spending on construction will be affected if states divert dollars from bond payoffs into operating budgets. Institutions will also continue to be confronted by competition for expenditure dollars between programs and maintenance/repairs. The likely result will be increases in already burgeoning deferred maintenance backlogs.

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