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Women in IT: Be the Change

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Women in IT: Be the Change

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You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.
—Alvin Toffler

Key Takeaways

- The **influence of established women in IT** — specifically Florence Hudson and Melissa Woo — encouraged a librarian to **apply for a position in Information Technology Services** at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.
- A **hands-on approach** to planning the IT Leadership conference developed a strong **collaborative network that also helped grow attendance**.
- Paying attention to the **pros and cons** of the 2016 conference guided the planners in **modifying their approach** to the upcoming October 2017 conference and its **focus on diversity and inclusion**.
- A main **goal for future IT Leadership conferences** focusing on women and diversity in IT is providing attendees with **practical ways to change** their campuses.

When was your last life-changing experience? Mine was in November 2015, when I attended the "Opportunity That Scales: Women Advancing the Future of Information Technology and Computer Science" event at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), an IT Leadership conference for the Nebraska community and beyond. I was curious to

see what "women in IT" looked like, as I have been involved with technology for a number of years but could name just a handful of women who fit that description. Listening to speakers Florence D. Hudson of Internet2 and Melissa Woo of the University of Oregon sparked in me a decision to change careers.

I served as a librarian for 10-plus years at the University of Nebraska College of Law. Following the event I decided to apply for a job at Information Technology Services (ITS) at UNL to become like the women in IT who shared their leadership journeys, advice, and energy on the conference stage. In February 2016 I was offered the position of assistant director of Academic Technologies at UNL-ITS. The first six months of my new position involved learning on the job and observing how the organization operates. I am thankful to the many ITS people who answered my questions, updated me with the background of projects, and volunteered me for things I did not know about!

UNL-ITS Responds to a Need

According to Mark Askren, vice chancellor for IT and CIO, Office of Information Technology Services, at UNL, the IT leadership conference is a grassroots response to the need for more women in information technology. It started as an idea in 2014 from the Nebraska alumni of the Information Technology Leadership Program (ITLP, from MOR Associates), an active group of ITS staff who wanted to continue leadership conversations on campus. This idea, coupled with the topic of inclusiveness at the Internet2 global conference Askren attended, led to the next on-campus conference in November 2015, "Opportunity That Scales."

The momentum from "Opportunity That Scales" laid a solid foundation for future growth. Like any event planning, it takes a *lot* of work to prepare for the event. We were tasked with creating a national conference in nine months. I was asked to participate in the conference planning by Amy Metzger, the assistant director of IT Strategic Sourcing, who had co-chaired the prior year. We also recruited Mary Sutton, the IT manager at the UNL College of Education and Human Sciences. We purposely asked women to serve as co-chairs for a conference on women in IT, then built a strong conference committee that represented many voices and departments within UNL-ITS. One important goal was to collaborate with the University of Nebraska ITS departments (five campuses total), so we quickly identified our cohorts at UNO (Omaha), UNMC (Medical Center), UNK (Kearney), and Enterprise Systems (University of Nebraska Central) and asked them to partner with us for a successful conference.

We organized the planning committee into sub-groups responsible for specific conference tasks: Communication and Marketing, Education and Programming,

Financial, Logistics, Registration, Sponsors and Vendors, Partners and Outreach, and Volunteers. Given our conservative conference budget, we decided to charge a nominal registration fee to pay for the site rental and food costs. We viewed this as seed money to create a sustainable conference and, more importantly, demonstrate value of the conference content. Attendee feedback after the conference confirmed this decision:

"*This was one of the best conferences UNL has organized so far. Perhaps it is because it was not 'free'.... I think this made everyone who attended have a very different demeanor. People were more engaged, focused, and serious about participating.*"

With the short timeframe to host the IT Leadership conference, we decided to solicit speakers for the event instead of requesting program proposals. This worked out well for several reasons:

- We met a number of people on and off campus we would not have connected with via a traditional conference call for program proposals.
- Word-of-mouth communication to share information and solicit speakers or programs proved effective in growing the conference. Because we spent time and effort in brainstorming program ideas, talking to people, and contacting organizations and groups outside our usual circles, the power of connections and introductions magnified in ways we did not expect.
- Since we hand-picked our speakers and presentations, the committee crafted the programming on specific topics that built on leadership, inclusiveness, unconscious bias, recruiting, retaining and promoting a diverse workforce, and women in tech.

A word of caution from the programming committee: planning a conference on a short deadline is *stressful*. The agenda and speakers had not been confirmed when we opened registration for the conference because we wanted people to take advantage of the early-bird rate; we should have waited another week. This early opening had a cascading effect on the flow of the event because we did not ask attendees during registration which programs interested them. Not knowing potential attendee numbers made scheduling the breakout sessions a challenge, one highlighted in the survey responses complaining that programs were not scheduled in appropriately sized spaces.

Initially, the committee listed all the things we like about conferences and decided to build a conference around those characteristics: dynamic speakers, networking opportunities, a variety of program topics that relate to a big picture, movement (no one wants to sit all day in a conference room), engaged attendees, and positive energy. Going forward, we now know to review conference deltas such as gauging interest in programs during registration and confirming all speaker schedules with calendar invites.

About the Conference

The "IT Leadership Conference — Opportunity That Scales: Women Advancing the Future of Information Technology in Higher Education" took place November 7–8, 2016 at the Nebraska Innovation Campus (NIC) in Lincoln, Nebraska. Keynote speakers included:

- Karen Caitlin, the Women in Tech advocate
- Donde Plowman, dean of the University of Nebraska's College of Business Administration
- Brad McClain, social scientist for the National Center for Women in IT (NCWIT)
- The podcast group, "#3Wedu: Women Who Wine in Education"

The EDUCAUSE Women in IT Constituent Group hosted a live "Coffee and Conversations" program to kick off the conference. In addition, we invited speakers from University of Nebraska campuses, area businesses, and tech companies to focus on issues and opportunities for women in information technology.

Conference attendees included about 280 women and men from 11 states, several university systems (faculty, staff, and students), and the business and tech fields.

Takeaways

Survey feedback is beneficial, just as hindsight is 20/20. The IT Leadership conference survey of seven brief questions via SurveyMonkey obtained 64 responses from the 281 conference attendees. According to the survey results and informal conversation with attendees after the event, this year's IT Leadership conference was a success. One attendee responded with approval for:

"Idea sharing with a group of passionate people, having space and time to focus on this as a need and identify opportunities to make things better."

Conference pluses included:

- the speakers (dynamic, engaging, and diverse),
- networking opportunities,
- conversations with peers, and
- program topics (unconscious bias, women in IT, and leadership).

While positive feedback is always welcome, the deltas help us make the good even better. The IT Leadership conference deltas included space limitations (more people in

attendance than breakout rooms could handle), the Monday social event (not well attended or seen as necessary), and time to talk with colleagues (attendees wanted more of it). An unexpected but appreciated survey response was the request for action items to enable change:

"*Too many 'facts.' I know that women and more so, women of color, have a tough road ahead of them. Stop telling me how bad it is. Tell me what I can do to make a difference. What can I take home and start doing to make a change today?*"

A goal for next year's conference is more action items and ways to make change, along with programs that demonstrate how to create successful change in an organization via staff training or programs.

We did receive general feedback on the food and location, but even better were the many topics suggested for the next conference, thoughts on how to keep the conversation going, and affirmation that the conference focus is necessary and appreciated. As one survey respondent noted, the most beneficial aspect of the conference was listening to external perspectives on diversity topics and hearing presenters echo feelings the attendee had been reluctant to voice.

The CIO's feedback also confirmed the event's success and its continuation as way to make a difference, continue the conversation, and work together better to include women in IT. As we learned from the final conference program on unconscious bias, social change needs to occur in our society, our systems, and ourselves.

Summing Up

The IT Leadership conference started as a grassroots effort to continue a conversation on the UNL campus. While the topic of women in IT is not new, several national conferences such as the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference include it as a track or as focus sessions; it is a necessary conversation for higher education, business, technology, and our communities. As several of the conference speakers shared, **an inclusive organization is more efficient, productive, and responsive to change**. While our goal is to turn this small event into a larger conference, the impact of the conversation goes beyond the University of Nebraska. Spontaneous occurrences of women in technology events were hosted by fellow universities such as the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Mississippi, and Virginia Tech. At a recent Women in Technology Meet-Up, we discussed how to include this conversation in local technology and education conferences. Our brainstorming ideas included a recommendation to conference chairs to include a Women in IT track, a request for

program proposals on women in IT and similar topics, and scheduling networking time and/or informal meetings for people interested in meeting similar-minded individuals.

Also of interest, Stanford University hosted the [Global Women in Data Science](#) (WiDS) February 3, 2017. The conference sold out by early January, but UCLA and others livecast the event. You can check the site for other WiDS events and sign up for the [mailing list](#) to learn about access to live-streaming of the other conference programs.

Future Plans

As the committee reviews the pluses and deltas of 2016 event, we are already planning for the 2017 conference, to be held again at NIC October 18–19. The big question is, how do we continue the conversation and maintain positive energy meanwhile? One idea is to use our monthly campus meetings, known as UNIT (University of Nebraska IT) to check in with ITS staff on a particular session topic. Another idea is to engage our Women in IT listserv to schedule brown bag lunches for networking and/or in-depth discussion of a conference session.

As I review the conference committee notes and emails, I see potential networking opportunities we missed, sponsors who want to participate in 2017, campus departments and organizations to connect with, and outside groups such as K–12 schools, tech companies, and local business with whom we need to share the conversation. For all the practicalities and benefits of technology, human relationships count the most. If we want to change the world — to build inclusiveness, increase diversity, and recruit, develop, and retain future leaders — we need to speak up and keep the conversation going. It's not enough to do the small things; we need to think big while headed along our chosen path to change.

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