Chapter VIII

The Development of IT/Community Partnerships at a Small Regional University

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Lacking the resources and national recognition of large universities, small regional universities and state colleges must employ different strategies in the formation of IT partnerships with community organizations. Opportunities for mutually beneficial relationships with K-12 students and parents, current CIS students and alumni, CIS faculty, local businesses, the local IT industry, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and current and prospective employers of program graduates are plentiful. These relationships can lead to stronger curriculum, improved student job opportunities, increased enrollments, high quality adjunct faculty, private funding sources, and enhanced reputation of the IT program and the university within the region.

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships between information technology (IT) academic programs and community organizations have, in varying degrees, been part of the university landscape since the inception of IT degrees. Large urban universities and research institutions leverage their national reputations and resource base in the formation of IT partnerships, frequently resulting in large corporate donations to support program development, facilities,
faculty and students within IT academic programs (Tobias, 2001). Smaller regional universities and state colleges must employ different strategies in the formation of IT partnerships with community organizations. The activities involved in these relationships may differ from those of larger academic institutions, but the benefits and advantages to all involved parties are equally valuable.

This chapter describes a “Partners in Excellence” plan that has evolved over a 23-year period into a comprehensive program of community interactions for a computer information systems (CIS) undergraduate degree program at a small regional university. Partners in Excellence involves a variety of community constituents: K-12 students and parents, current CIS students and alumni, CIS faculty, local businesses, the local IT industry, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and current and prospective employers of CIS program graduates. The CIS degree program receives benefits from Partners in Excellence through increased enrollments, on-going development of curricula and pedagogy, enhanced reputation in the community, donations from local organizations, and from contributing to university goals for service to the surrounding community. Community constituents receive a wide variety of advantages from their interactions with the CIS program, including IT services they would not have access to without the Partners in Excellence plan.

Following a review of some of the existing partnerships between IT academic programs and community organizations documented in the literature, the Partners in Excellence framework is presented and discussed. Future directions for the Partners in Excellence program are also included. The chapter concludes with guidelines for IT programs at small regional universities and state colleges who wish to develop stronger community partnerships.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Over the past two decades, a number of factors have driven the demand for closer relationships between IT academic programs and community organizations, and both groups have requested or initiated collaborations. The primary focus of IT academic program collaboration with industry has centered on curricula issues. Prior research reported that inadequate formal education and training in IS, for both developers and users, was the cause for the majority of the cases of non-acceptance or resistance to information system implementation and other causes of information system failure (Yaffe, 1989). These early researchers proposed curriculum changes developed as a
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