The Value of Peer Networking

By Heather M. Lanham, Edison State Community College, Ohio

IT’S NO SECRET THAT NETWORKING WITH PEERS IS A critical component of any professional’s work life. This rings especially true in the realm of higher education. Networking is an opportunity to gain valuable insight on best practices and get a feel for the perspectives of others in your field, as well as keep up on the constantly fluctuating trends pertaining to education and office management. It’s also an opportunity to form essential relationships and friendships with individuals who experience the same issues and circumstances in their own lines of work.

For those of us who support the governing board and/or the president/CEO of a community college, a strong networking group can be figuratively life-saving, and literally sanity-saving. We hold a unique and specific position that not many others in our institutions, let alone our states, hold. Because of that, we benefit tremendously from interactions with our counterparts. In Ohio, there are only roughly 35 other individuals who hold the following titles in community colleges: Assistant or Executive Assistant to the President, Administrative Associate to the President, Senior Secretary, President’s Office Secretary, Secretary to the Board of Trustees, and related titles. Several Ohio two-year institutions only have one assistant to the president in their buildings, and so having access to a strong peer network on the outside is critical in helping us perform to the best of our abilities.

I still remember my first meeting with my cohorts from the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) and introducing myself as a first-year president’s assistant. The good-natured laughs, and the gleam in their eyes…the wise looks of knowing exactly what I had in store have stuck with me. But the genuine sense of welcome that I received from these individuals, some of whom had years of experience under their belts… the sense that they would help with my initiation into this unique club has stuck with me as well. These individuals have proved invaluable to me throughout the past five years I’ve held this position. And I’m now at the point where I am able to reciprocate and share with others the tips and best practices I’ve learned over time.

Whether it be on a smaller, more local scale, with opportunities provided through a state association, or at a national level, such as events held by the Professional Board Staff Network (PBSN), it is always advantageous to participate in networking and professional development when the occasions arise. Peer networking allows for us to build relationships with our counterparts and feel comfortable asking for help when we need it. Creating a pool of resources through networking allows us to have the best minds in the business on hand whenever we may need instruction or advice. Being able

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WHETHER IT BE ON A SMALLER, MORE LOCAL SCALE, WITH OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED THROUGH A STATE ASSOCIATION, OR AT A NATIONAL LEVEL, SUCH AS EVENTS HELD BY THE PROFESSIONAL BOARD STAFF NETWORK (PBSN), IT IS ALWAYS ADVANTAGEOUS TO PARTICIPATE IN NETWORKING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WHEN THE OCCASIONS ARISE.

to tap into this wealth of knowledge on a statewide and national level has helped me numerous times over the years. It is a wonderful thing to be in a room, be it bricks and mortar or virtual, with others who understand my questions and concerns before I even have to ask.

The Professional Board Staff Network held one such event, our biggest networking event of the year, during the 2016 ACCT Leadership Congress last October in New Orleans. On the first night, after Congress’s opening general session, members of the PBSN met up for a fun and laid back meet and greet. PBSN Immediate Past President Tina Heskett did an amazing job of getting a room at the infamous BB King’s House of Blues on Decatur Street across from the French Market. The meet and greet was a great chance to get caught up with old friends, to make new acquaintances, to meet some of the guests presenting at the PBSN Workshop the next day, and to share our experiences up to that point on the beautiful streets of New Orleans. The fantastic food and music didn’t hurt either.

As the second day of the 2016 ACCT Congress got underway, PBSN members participated in a half-day workshop, which was yet another opportunity to connect and network with our community college counterparts from across the country. During the workshop, we were treated to several informative sessions led by an array of insightful presenters. The sessions included an icebreaker where we got to know our fellow attendees, as well as panels on the Freedom of Information Act and how to better engage trustees. PBSN members also had the benefit of sitting through an active shooter scenario discussion led by guest speaker Jeff Copeland, director of risk/emergency management at Hillsborough Community College. Copeland went over active-shooter protocols, safety tips, and surviving the unthinkable. His information was unfortunately timely and relevant, and most constructive. The group was then motivated to find more ways to stay physically active while at work with a “Heart Healthy” demonstration presented by a representative from Humana. Since many of us sit at a desk all day, we learned ways to incorporate movement into our daily schedules. We ended the day with discussions centered around preparing for and welcoming a new president.

On the third day of Congress, PBSN held its annual business meeting. New officers were elected and discussions began for planning the next event. The PBSN executive team is still hard at work planning the workshop for the 2017 ACCT Leadership congress, which will take place September 25-28 in Las Vegas, Nevada. We are all very excited for that next opportunity to meet with our peers, and to share what we’ve learned with the newer members of the group.

That’s the true benefit of networking — meeting wonderful people who help with your own professional success, and being excited to help others with theirs. In the world of higher education, this translates to assisting our institutions in the success of our students. Which, ultimately, is what it’s all about.
Professional Board Staff Need Professional Development Too!
By Margaret Lamb, San Diego Community College District, California

IF YOU PERUSE THE PERSONAL GROWTH OR SELF-HELP section of your local bookstore (if you can still find a brick-and-mortar bookstore!), you will find a variety of non-fiction books that cover most, if not all, aspects of life and career and how to improve oneself. For parents, there is the book How to Make Your Children Mind Without Losing Yours, and for today’s wise teenagers, I’d Listen to My Parents if They’d Just Shut Up.

While some of the titles may be humorous, the self-help industry itself is no laughing matter. Self-improvement guides are an $11-to-12 billion-a-year industry. Not surprisingly, one facet of life that seems to be written about most often is how to improve our professional lives. And why not? What we do professionally becomes an immense part of who we are as individuals and at times even merges into our personal life. When I first became an office supervisor in the San Diego Community College District Board of Trustees office, I purchased several books designed to help me be successful in my new career. However, what I soon discovered, as I am sure many of you have, is that some of the most valuable professional development help I received did not come from a book, but from tapping into another great resource — talking to others in my profession, especially those more experienced than I was.

As an important sector of higher education, community colleges have had a long-standing commitment to professional development, which demonstrates a long-term investment in their employees, not only in their careers, but also in their overall livelihood. For example, the San Diego Community College District Board of Trustees has included “ensuring professional development opportunities for staff” as one of its goals for years. As a result, the district established four professional development/leadership academies: one for classified staff, one for faculty, one for supervisors, and one for managers. In addition, the district’s administrative leadership encourages professional development opportunities via participation at conferences and workshops (such as the annual ACCT Leadership Congress).

There are many benefits of regular professional development, including:

- Opportunity to assess strengths and identify areas for improvement
- Enhance skills and upgrade knowledge in order to increase productivity
- Prepare for unforeseen challenges and opportunities
- Develop a sense of pride and rejuvenation
- Strengthen communication and relations with others

As professional board staff members, we are very fortunate to belong to a national organization, the Professional Board Staff Network (PBSN), which is an affiliate of ACCT. Membership to PBSN is open and free for all professional board staff members of an ACCT member institution. ACCT recognizes the value of our work as professional board staff and the importance of our professional development. Every year, workshops are provided to help hone our skills, keep abreast of legal matters, and, perhaps most importantly, share best practices. In fact, the Q&A section of a presentation is often as valuable as the presentation itself. As an attendee of these workshops for the past 11 years, I have gained invaluable training and information.

PBSN’s Executive Committee has started work on developing the next annual PBSN workshop, which will take place in Las Vegas, Nevada, in September 2017, in conjunction with the ACCT Leadership Congress. We hope you will take advantage of this wonderful opportunity for professional development!