ASIS&T Online Education Initiatives: Driving the Future

by Diane M. Rasmussen and Linda C. Smith

At the ASIS&T 2012 Annual Meeting, SIG/Education for Information Science (SIG/ED) sponsored a panel session entitled “ASIS&T Online Education Initiatives: Driving the Future.” The panelists included Diane M. Rasmussen, Linda C. Smith, Jacob A. Ratliff and Julia Khanova. They updated panel attendees on the activities of the Webinar Task Force (2011) as well as the Online Education Task Force (2011-2012) and led discussion about the future of ASIS&T’s online education offerings. Unfortunately, Diane and Jacob could not attend the panel session due to hurricane Sandy, but Linda and Julia graciously presented on their behalf. This article presents a summary of the panel and related discussion.

Background and Context

One of Linda Smith’s goals during her term as ASIS&T president in 2010-2011 was to develop a program of online education offerings in order to further the roles of SIGs and chapters as well as to reach a broader scope of members. ASIS&T “encourages and supports personal and professional growth through opportunities for members to extend their knowledge and skills, develop and use professional networks, pursue career development goals and assume leadership roles in the Society and in the information community” (www.asis.org/about.html). Linda believed that webinars, defined as “live online educational presentations during which participating viewers can submit questions and comments,” (from web+ seminar) (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/webinar), were one way to further develop this purpose of the Society.

Speakers present ASIS&T’s webinars using software called GoToWebinar. The Headquarters office has a contract with the vendor, Citrix Online, LLC, and the software is free for members’ use. Headquarters also supports the promotion, registration and technical aspects of the webinar program. Webinars are presented live, but archives of all past presentations are available for members to access anytime at www.asis.org/conferences/webinars.
Are Webinars a Good Idea?

In early 2011 Linda appointed Diane Rasmussen, then co-chair of the Information Science Education Committee, to serve as chair of the Webinar Task Force. Other task force members included Education Committee co-chair June Abbas, SIG representative Daniel Alemneh, Chapter Assembly deputy director Remlee Green and New Leaders Award winner Alex Garnett. Linda charged the group with exploring how to develop a beneficial webinar program that would raise ASIS&T’s profile.

The task force utilized a number of data sources, including web statistics, competitive intelligence scans and surveys distributed to ASIS&T members as well as to members of other organizations. The group found that webinars in their current form (short, one-time presentations) are a preferred format of online education, their main audience is practitioners and that the developing ASIS&T webinar program was generally well received. At the 2011 Annual Meeting the task force recommended to the Board of Directors that the webinar program continue to develop in current and additional directions. The Webinar Task Force’s final report can be viewed at www.asis.org/Conferences/webinars/TaskForceOnWebinars.pdf.

Since the Webinar Task Force determined that many SIG and chapter leaders were interested in presenting their own webinars but hesitated due to unfamiliarity with the organizing process and the technology, Diane presented a meta-webinar called “The ASIS&T Webinar on Webinars: How to Propose, Organize and Present a Webinar” in January 2012. It is available at www.asis.org/Conferences/webinars/2012/webinar-on-webinars.php.

Webinars Are a Good Idea, But What’s Next?

Also at the 2011 Annual Meeting, incoming president Diane Sonnenwald formed the Online Education Task Force. This task force was charged with making additional policy and implementation recommendations, as well as with exploring other potential modalities for presenting online education and membership networking offerings. Members included chair Diane Rasmussen, immediate past president Linda Smith, Education Committee co-chair Kathleen Burnett, New Leaders Award winner Jacob Ratliff, immediate past SIG/Cabinet director KT Vaughan and student member Ian Burke.

Discussions explored how the future of ASIS&T’s online education program should unfold.

Ultimately, the group’s recommendations to the Board included that ASIS&T develop a unified online platform for all things ASIS&T: webinars and related discussions, Annual Meeting session topics, informal chat spaces for members, links to events and so on. The Online Education Task Force’s final report can be accessed at www.asis.org/Online_


The task force may have ended with more questions than answers; the most effective way to develop this needed platform is still under consideration, but the opportunities signal an optimistic future.

At the panel session, Julia Khanova reviewed current online education trends that provided ideas for potential directions. Trends include a constant change in technology tools, an emphasis on collaborative learning and knowledge creation and the development of learning communities. Most online education programs utilize learning management systems such as Blackboard and Sakai that tend to exist in a closed, static environment unless other elements are introduced in conjunction with them. These additional tools might include blogs, discussion boards, web conference tools such as GoToWebinar, videos created with screen capture tools such as Jing, social networks like Facebook or LinkedIn, presentation software such as Prezi and collaborative content creation tools like the office productivity software offered through Google Drive. Julia suggested that ASIS&T’s online learning could further engage members by including formal offerings such as webinars in conjunction with a new learning community that could utilize the above-mentioned tools together.

If Online Unification Is Next, How Can It Be Realized?

Suggestions from audience members at the panel session included the following:
- Offer online education opportunities in collaboration with related organizations.
- Add text-based chat opportunities for Webinar attendees.
- Determine how to maintain the activity level of online spaces.
- Consider what tools ASIS&T members would prefer the most before they are developed.
- Further utilize post-webinar evaluation surveys. Perhaps ASIS&T could ask webinar attendees about their preferred tools for continued communication on the webinar topic.
- Determine the best platform option for ASIS&T’s needs through additional discussion. It is important to remain mindful that technologies evolve, and that online presences require resources to maintain them.
- Explore how to “repackage” the one-hour webinars might increase ASIS&T’s visibility, such as placing “microcontent” from them on YouTube or Vimeo. ASIS&T could consider whether to publish learning objects for information science.
- Continue to consider formats other than webinars to support professional development.

At the Board of Directors meeting that took place after the 2012 Annual Meeting, the Board discussed the Online Education Task Force’s recommendations. Given the discussion that ensued at the panel session as well as the points raised at the Society’s annual business meeting in Baltimore, incoming president Andrew Dillon suggested the need for another task force to explore ASIS&T’s web presence holistically and how it can present content, services and resources in a more centralized manner. Diane will again chair the task force, Linda will continue to serve as a member and other members will be recruited.

Your Thoughts Are Essential to This Project!

As of December 2012, ASIS&T had almost 40 successful and informative webinars archived on its website, but much more content can be offered. The efforts of the task forces discussed in this article as well as the conversations among the membership about the Society’s online future suggest that tremendous potential exists for the creation of a vibrant online community of information science practitioners, researchers, teachers and students. The vision for and realization of this unified presence has complete support from Headquarters and the leadership, but it cannot be accomplished without participation from current and future members. Please send your thoughts and questions on this initiative to Diane at infogirl99<at>gmail.com, and she will incorporate them into the planning of ASIS&T’s online future. The Board looks forward to your contributions.