A Tale of Finding My Intellectual Home with ASIS&T
by Chirag Shah

Unlike, perhaps, many LIS or iSchool doctoral students, I didn’t join ASIS&T right away. ASIS&T, and even the whole field of information science, was quite new to me as I came to the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill from computer science. During my first two years as a doctoral student I saw that many of the faculty members and students took off for a few days in October-November to go to some professional event called ASIS&T Annual Meeting. It seemed very important to them. And so I wondered if that’s something that I should also look into. Fortunately, my advisor was Gary Marchionini, who was deeply engaged, not only in ASIS&T, but also in the field of information science in general. His continual participation in ASIS&T (he later became ASIS&T president) and encouragement to me to do the same sealed the deal for me. I had to go to this Annual Meeting and find out myself what it was. I joined the organization in 2008 and presented a paper at the Annual Meeting which was held in Columbus, Ohio.

I still remember that first meeting. Other than the folks from UNC, I didn’t know anyone or so I thought. But then I started seeing people about whom I had heard. I couldn’t believe that people like Tefko Saracevic, Marcia Bates and Carol Kuhlthau were “real!” I had been reading and been inspired by their groundbreaking works, and now I was seeing them in person. It was like having a backstage access to my favorite rockstars’ concert! I knew immediately that I wanted to keep coming back to this meeting and make ASIS&T my intellectual home.

The years that followed only strengthened the tie with ASIS&T that I had made back in 2008. I started not only submitting papers and posters to the Annual Meeting, but also volunteering for different activities at SIGs (special interest groups) and at the organizational level. Since joining ASIS&T, I have never
missed an Annual Meeting, and every time that I attend, I find myself more and more connected to this community.

Reflecting back on my association and experiences with ASIS&T, I recommend a few things to my students that I hope will be relevant:

- Join ASIS&T as early as you can as a student. The membership is very affordable, and the benefits are tremendous. It’s really a no-brainer.

- Go to the Annual Meeting and participate in as many student activities that you can. These activities include the student party (typically on the first evening), student design competition and doctoral seminar.

- In your first meeting, definitely go to the newcomer’s brunch. That’s the time you get to sit down with other first-timers and hear from ASIS&T leadership about various opportunities that the organization offers. Look out for SIG presentations and try to identify at least one or two SIGs that are relevant to you. Your ASIS&T membership includes one SIG membership of your choice.

- At these meetings, go talk to people – no matter how big name scholars they are. You’ll be pleasantly surprised to see how nice and personable these distinguished personalities are.

- With your membership, you also get membership to your local chapter.

See what that chapter offers. Some places have both a local chapter and a student chapter, and often they are excellent places to root yourself, take leadership positions and start getting the most out of your ASIS&T membership.

- As you move forward in your studies or professional career, you are likely to have a better idea of the area of information and/or library science that you want to focus on. This development should allow you to identify a SIG that you can be more involved with and invest your time and energy into. See if you can volunteer and even take leadership positions in this SIG. They are always looking for energetic people to join and contribute.

- Finally, look out for scholarly opportunities that both ASIS&T and its SIGs offer – not just publishing and presenting at ASIS&T Annual Meetings, but also awards and scholarships that you can apply for.

Personally, I have been publishing and speaking every year at the annual meetings since I joined ASIS&T. I have also organized events (panels, workshops) and contributed by reviewing and chairing research tracks and sessions. Yes, all of these require a lot of work, but as someone said, when you love what you do, you never really work. Love essentially characterizes my association with ASIS&T and the work I have done for the organization. I love the various activities of service and scholarship that I have been engaged in with ASIS&T so it has never been a burden. I believe it is very important for all career-savvy professional to identify themselves with such an organization where working for it means working for themselves.

Currently I am privileged to be advising the Rutgers University Student Chapter of ASIS&T and also to be guiding the resurrection efforts of New Jersey Chapter of ASIS&T. As the Student Chapter representative to the ASIS&T Chapter Assembly, I am also involved in overlooking and helping with all the student chapters. These past and ongoing associations with ASIS&T bodies have made me identify several issues that we need to address:
We need more transparency between ASIS&T and its components, including SIGs and local/student chapters. For instance, chapter officers should be able to extract their membership roster and change details about their chapter on ASIS&T website whenever needed.

While most ASIS&T members and the attendees to its annual meetings are coming from academia, we should not forget our non-academic members. In fact, ASIS&T should extend its programs to make the membership more relevant to those members.

The organization’s website needs work. While it’s usable, many of the functions are hidden in corners or unclear to at least new members. The website needs to be refreshed with more inviting, accessible content more relevant to its members and the outside world.

Finally, ASIS&T has to start becoming more relevant and cater to its international membership as we officially change our name to Association of Information Science & Technology, projecting boldly that it is no longer exclusive to only American participants.

In these comments I want to take the opportunity to thank all those without whose help I wouldn’t be where I am in ASIS&T and in the field of information science. I am extremely grateful to those who wrote letters in support of my nomination for the Cretsos award, as well as countless individuals who have provided constant support and inspiration throughout my association with ASIS&T. Finally, I will always be indebted to ASIS&T for including me – an outsider who came from a different field – and allowing me to make this organization my intellectual home.