

Professional Responsibility, Power, Recruitment and Retention of Members in the Society

by Phillip M. Edwards

Editor's note: Phillip Edwards is one of two recipients of the 2008 James M. Cretsos Leadership Award, which honors new ASIS&T members (members for less than seven years) who have demonstrated outstanding leadership qualities. The *Bulletin* has asked him to describe his ASIS&T experiences and the motivations for his service to the Society.

It is a great honor to be selected as a recipient, along with Elise Lewis, of the 2008 James M. Cretsos Leadership Award. (Elise has a written a wonderful essay about her experiences for the February/March 2009 issue of the *Bulletin* [1].) I never had a chance to meet Jim in person but have learned about him through his writing and the stories that other ASIS&T members tell about their interactions with him. In this column, I wanted to explore not only the impact he had on our field but also to reflect upon avenues through which the Society could better carry forward some of his ideals. When Jim was the chairman of the Professional Enhancement Committee in the mid-1970s, he took a particularly impassioned stance on professional responsibilities of ASIS&T members:

Certainly, an organization such as ours, whose members can control the flow of information, has enormous power... Since many members of our profession are not accustomed to thinking of themselves as powerful, there is a strong tendency to ignore or even flee from responsibility for the impact of their work. Undoubtedly, some of our members are totally unaware of the eventual consequences of what they do. ([2], p. 211)

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Although the intervening years yielded a set of professional guidelines for members of the Society [3], the notions of power and responsibility in our field are still ones that bear upon us, particularly as ASIS&T deals with some very pressing challenges in terms of recruitment and retention of members.

I suppose that interjecting a bit of personal narrative might illustrate how these themes – power, responsibility, recruitment and retention – could impact the sustainability of the Society. I joined ASIS&T as a student member in 2002. At the time, I was a master's student at the University of Michigan, and I had just completed my B.S. in chemistry the previous year. When I noted the opportunity to apply for a travel award to subsidize my attendance at the ASIS&T Annual Meeting, sponsored by Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS) and awarded by SIG/STI, I applied. I met a handful of other SIG/STI members at that Annual Meeting, people who continue to be excellent friends and colleagues. I certainly had no idea what I was getting myself into – nor did I really have a sense of how important ASIS&T might be for me, both personally and professionally – by the end of that first Annual Meeting.

In 2003, I took a year off from the Annual Meeting. I had just moved across the country to Seattle and had little money to devote to meeting attendance. The following year, Eugene Garfield donated the funds to support several travel awards for students. I was just starting my second year in the doctoral program at the University of Washington, and I was selected as one of the awardees. From 2004 to 2006, I subsidized my travel to the Annual Meeting with portions of the stipend from the Paul Evan Peters Fellowship, and each year I took on more ASIS&T responsibilities, the first of which was secretary/treasurer of SIG/STI in 2005.

The key challenge – based on in my personal history with the Society and, I believe, shared by many new and student members – is the ability to

support Annual Meeting attendance until members have a chance to develop as leaders within the organization. Absent the support from CAS, from Eugene Garfield, from the friends and family of Paul Evan Peters, I would not have been able to discover and pursue leadership opportunities along with the veteran leaders who regularly attend the Annual Meetings. As a Society, we are reasonably successful in getting students and new members to their first meeting, but we may be less effective at specifically supporting those members during their second and third outings. This support is, I believe, one of the responsibilities we have as Society members, and, despite the current economic climate, an area in which we have the power to respond. We can, through the creativity of SIGs and chapters, continue to expand our efforts to support travel to Annual Meetings or opportunities for involvement, dialogue and networking among members that do not involve travel (for example, virtual meetings and sessions). By specifically targeting newer-but-returning ASIS&T members through these programs, these

experiences may mean the difference between developing a vibrant community of early-career leaders and stagnating as a Society.

Comments and feedback related to this column are welcomed and may be sent via email to [phillip.m.edwards<at>unc.edu](mailto:phillip.m.edwards@unc.edu). ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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