

The Illinois Online Network

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Overview

The Illinois Online Network (ION) is a small organization that provides a variety of services and support to the field of Educational Technology. Michael Lindeman, ION's director, took time out of his busy schedule to allow me to interview him about the organization, its mission, contributions to the field, and its future. The interview, with Michael's permission, has been archived on my blog at <http://www.kevinj.info/node/46>.

Mission

According to the organization's Web site, "The Illinois Online Network (ION) is a faculty development initiative that provides comprehensive professional development opportunities in the area of online teaching and learning to faculty and staff from higher education institutions in Illinois and beyond" (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about>). When reading this, one might think that ION solely focuses on online education. However, further investigation of the Web site revealed a more broad audience in the form of ION's mission statement: "ION seeks to promote the effective use of networked information technologies, to enhance traditional classroom instruction, and to build the foundation for developing, delivering, and supporting online education throughout the world" (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about/mission.asp>).

History

During the interview, Michael revealed that ION began in 1997 from a Higher Education Cooperation Grant Act (HECA) through the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) (Michael Lindeman).

When ION first began in 1997 there were few online courses offered by institutions of higher education in Illinois, and knowledge of the technologies and

pedagogical approaches needed to teach and learn online was not widespread. Since that time, ION has provided a number of different professional development opportunities to over 2000 individual faculty members throughout the state, and now all forty-three ION member institutions are offering online courses, with many offering complete degrees online. In fact, ION member institutions now offer over 2700 online courses and there were more than 32,000 enrollments in these courses during the Spring 2004 semester.

(<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about/history.asp>)

Location, Staff, & Membership

We conducted the interview at the ION office in Champaign, Illinois, home of the University of Illinois. Michael noted that ION is a division of the University of Illinois Outreach and Public Services (UOPS) department. One of the goals of this department is that it “works with local and regional leaders to match the resources of the University of Illinois to community needs” (<http://www.uops.uillinois.edu/>). Michael directly reports to the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Charles V. Evans (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about/administration.asp>). Along with its formal reporting structure,

ION relies on the guidance of its Steering Committee to implement its comprehensive approach to faculty and staff development. The Steering Committee is comprised of leaders from the Illinois community colleges and the University of Illinois. Typically, the people on this committee are a Vice President for Instruction, the Vice President for Academic and Student Development, or the Vice President of Academic Affairs.

(<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about/steeringcommittee.asp>)

The list of steering committee members changes based on institutional employee turnover. A current list of steering committee members can be found at <http://www.ion.illinois.edu/about/steeringcommittee.asp>. Other than those already mentioned, ION currently has one other staff member: Terri George, Secretary (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/about/staff.asp>).

In regards to membership, ION targets instructors, educational technology staff, and administrators. The original HECA grant stipulated that ION Partner Institutions, the 38 community colleges in the state of Illinois, receive services free. However, not every member of each of those institutions is required to utilize ION's services, nor are they required to create a member profile. This makes it difficult to truly provide accurate membership numbers. ION's audience has grown to include state, national, and international membership. At this time, the ION member's database holds 4,300 plus profiles. In order to support this growth, ION has recently implemented a fee-based membership model that allows faculty and staff from non-partner institution to participate in, and benefit from, existing services. This model allows institutions to pay an annual membership fee so that their faculty and staff can receive a discounted rate for desired services (Michael Lindeman). Additional membership information and fees can be found at <http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/partners/become/membershipinfo.asp>.

Annual Conference

Prior to the interview, I provided Michael with a list of questions. As a way of connecting this assignment to our first discussion question, I provided Michael with my definition of Educational Technology and asked him to talk about how ION contributes to the field based on the given definition. Michael responded by listing some of the resources and services offered by ION. One of the resources mentioned is ION's annual conference: Faculty Summer Institute (FSI) (Michael Lindeman).

The Faculty Summer Institute (FSI) is an annual three-day conference on learning technologies for faculty, staff, and administrators. The program includes hands-on laboratory sessions in computer classrooms, discussion sessions and presentations on a wide variety of topics, round table discussions, electronic poster sessions, and social activities to allow participants to get to know and learn from one another. (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/institutes/>)

The conference brings in over 200 community college faculty and administrators, Lindeman mentions in our interview (Michael Lindeman). In 2006, ION partnered with the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign Campus to merge two conferences into one. As a result of this merger, attendance now includes community college as well as four-year institution faculty, administrators, and educational technology staff. The next FSI is scheduled for May 12-15, 2008. Proposals for presentations are now being accepted via the conference’s official Web site at <https://communities.cites.uiuc.edu/fsi/>. According to the site, “FSI 2008 will offer more than 50 presentations, including hands-on workshops, forums, keynotes, learning teams, and panel discussions” (<https://communities.cites.uiuc.edu/fsi/>).

Additional Services & Resources

Along with the annual conference, ION provides a wide variety of services and resources. Many of these resources are free to members and non-members alike. For example, ION’s Webinars: “a series of live, interactive discussions on topics related to online teaching and learning” (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/institutes/webinars/monthly/index.asp>). From the ION Web site, you can also retrieve articles, tutorials, and case studies all for free (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/>). Paid services include the annual conference, on-site consulting and presentations (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/institutes/presentations/index.asp>), and ION’s Making the Virtual Classroom a Reality (MVCR) program.

The Making the Virtual Classroom a Reality (MVCR) series of online faculty development courses is designed to help students and faculty members acquire the skills and knowledge needed to teach and learn online, to help staff and

administration support online education, to improve the quality of online education across the globe, and to research the online teaching and learning context. (<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/courses/aboutmvr/>)

Benefits of Membership

Though ION's foundation is grounded in research and best practices, the target audience is truly practitioners such as faculty, educational technologists, and administrators. As a practitioner, my professional goals include building a network of professional relationships in the field, staying abreast of changes in areas of educational tools and technologies, and sharing my knowledge and experience with others. As a member of the Illinois Online Network, I am able to accomplish all of these goals. The organization's conference has provided me opportunities to network with other professionals from around the globe and present multiple workshops over the past three years as a way to share my experience with others. The online classes have modeled best practices and provided a theoretical and practical foundation for my participation within the field. It is these experiences that supported my interest in the field enough to pursue my doctorate degree from Nova Southeastern University in Instructional Technology and Distance Education. By continuing my membership with the organization, I hope to gain further knowledge of the field while sharing in a professional relationship of give and take as ION grows and provides even more opportunities for networking and professional development.

References

Michael Lindeman. (2008). Interview with ION director on January 30, 2008.
Champaign. [Audio recording in possession of author]