

# Thirty Years of The NorthWest Academic Computing Consortium

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## **Building a Framework for Collaboration: 1987 - 1989**

In 1987 the chief academic officers of nine institutions, together with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and Boeing Computer Services (BCS), collaborated on a proposal to the National Science Foundation to establish a supercomputing center in the Pacific Northwest. With guidance from Bob Gillespie of *Gillespie, Folkner, and Associates*, the group incorporated as the NorthWest Academic Computing Consortium or NWACC. (At the time, the term "academic computing" was used in contrast to "commercial" or "government" computing rather than to distinguish between academic and administrative computing in higher education.) The proposal was not funded. However, the following year the group submitted an NSF proposal to build a regional network. That proposal succeeded and NWACC was awarded \$2,500,000 to develop and manage the northwest segment of the rapidly evolving national internet.

## **The NorthWestNet Decade: 1989 - 1997**

Initially sited at Boeing, NWACC's network operations moved to the University of Washington in 1989. During these formative years, Ron Johnson, then Associate Vice President for Computing & Communications at the University of Washington, provided much of NWACC's leadership. Ron worked closely with Bob Gillespie, Marty Ringle (Reed), Tom Mueller (WSU), Dick Jonsen (WICHE), Joanne Hugi (UO), Ken Neves (Boeing), Jerry Johnson (PNNL) and others to create the NorthWestNet operations group.

In June 1991, NWACC hired Dr. Eric Hood to serve as Executive Director of NorthWestNet. Dr. Hood quickly formed alliances with other regional networks as well as with numerous public and private organizations. His leadership of NWACC yielded one of the first published Internet guides in the country and made NorthWestNet a model for other regional network organizations.

By the mid-1990s, NorthWestNet provided connectivity for nearly two hundred clients including colleges, universities, K-12 districts, research centers, and corporations (including Microsoft, Intel, Nike, and others) in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming. NWACC hosted regular workshops and conferences and provided extensive opportunities for technical training, research collaboration, and other activities for its members. As NWACC's membership increased, its revenues grew significantly and its status as a not-for-profit consortium began to look less and less appropriate, especially to the IRS.

## **The Spinoff and Sale: 1996 - 1997**

Responding to external pressures brought about by NWACC's own success, and on the advice of legal and financial counselors, the Board decided to create a wholly owned, for-profit subsidiary — *NorthWestNet Incorporated* — with the goal of putting it up for sale. Eric Hood coordinated the complex work of creating the for-profit company in 1996. The following year, Bob Gillespie and Marty Ringle negotiated the sale of NorthWestNet to a privately-held company, *Verio, Inc.* The income from the sale was used to establish a board-designated endowment to support ongoing NWACC activities.

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## **The Renewed Research and Education Mission: 1997-2007**

Following the sale of NorthWestNet, nearly all NorthWestNet members outside of higher education eventually departed, leaving only colleges and universities, two state systems, WICHE, and the Pacific NorthWest National Lab. The Board decided to limit membership to existing organizations. In 2003, the Membership Committee (chaired by Curt Pederson, then CIO of OSU) issued a revised recommendation to open NWACC membership to a maximum of five more institutions over a five-year period. The recommendation was adopted.

During this period, NWACC encompassed: (a) workshops and conferences devoted to current topics of interest and strategic technology priorities; (b) grant programs designed to promote innovative uses of curricular technologies and collaborations among NWACC member institutions. The grant programs included \$10,000 *proof-of-concept awards* for faculty members and \$25,000 to \$50,000 awards for collaborative projects in areas such as open source software development. Collectively, NWACC grant programs distributed more than a million and half dollars to its member institutions over a ten year period. A number of grants were used to attract higher levels of funding from public and private foundations as well as from institutional sources. Each year, the best projects received special awards at the NWACC CIO summit.

During the period 1998 through 2002, the membership of NWACC included twenty-six colleges and universities, two statewide university systems, and three not-for-profit organizations: the Oregon Historical Society, the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Between 2002 and 2006 admission to NWACC was closed to new members. In 2006, the Board voted to invite up to five new members to join the Consortium between 2007 and 2011, though no more than two in a single year. On January 1, 2007, Gonzaga University and the University of Montana were admitted, followed by the University of Hawaii (January 1, 2008) and Southern Oregon University (January 1, 2009).

## **Building Communities of Practice: 2007-2012**

Although NWACC's grant programs were widely utilized and well received, the Council decided in 2007 that the impact of providing "seed money" to individual faculty or staff members for proof-of-concept and software development projects was too limited. The focus shifted to the task of building "communities of practice" within NWACC member institutions by initiating three programs: (a) technology law, policy, and economics; (b) network and information security; and (c) instructional technology.

The program in technology law, policy, and economics was designed to address the specific needs of CIOs. Among other things, the program hosted conferences that brought together university legal and financial officers with their CIOs for targeted training. In 2012 it was offered, with considerable success, as a workshop for IT managers and emerging leaders (although a number of CIOs elected to attend as well).

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The program in network and information security included both an annual workshop and, from 2007 to 2011, network vulnerability testing at discounted (and partially subsidized) rates. The workshop was highly successful in promoting a growing community of practice among network security professionals in the region. In 2011, NWACC also began to provide 50% subsidies for membership in the national higher education network security organization, REN-ISAC.

The program in instructional technology hosted an annual workshop and, at various times, a collaboration web site and regular conference calls. As in the case of network security, this program was very successful in promoting the development of a regional community of practice. In 2011, the group recognized outstanding work at a peer institution by making its first excellence award. Workshops have been well attended and have attracted some nationally recognized guest speakers.

### **Organizational Maturity: 2012-2017**

In November 2012, the 33 members of the NWACC Council participated in a week-long strategic planning retreat, hosted by the University of Hawai'i. Based on survey responses collected in advance and in-depth conversations at the retreat, the members of the CIO Council achieved consensus programs for the next five-year cycle (2014-2018). The highly successful Technology Law, Policy, and Economics program, coordinated by Tracy Mitrano (then of Cornell University) was deemed to have run its course and was retired with the Council's gratitude. The annual NWACC Awards Program was replaced with a Board-managed option of making NWACC Leadership and Lifetime Achievement Awards on an *ad hoc* basis. The Instructional Technology Program (led by Hae Okimoto of the University of Hawai'i) and the Network Security Program (led by Adrian Irish of the University of Montana) were endorsed for renewal. A *Hot Topics* Program, to support one-off events and other initiatives was established (later renamed the *Special Topics* Program). The crown jewel of the Strategic Planning Retreat was the creation of a formal technology Leadership Development Program, championed by William Morse, Jr., then CIO of the University of Puget Sounds.

Following a year of planning and preparation (2013), the new and revised programs were launched January 1, 2014. NWACC member participation in all of the programs was robust. Annual attendance at Instructional Technology and Network Security workshops nearly doubled, the Leadership Program, coordinated by Chris Ferguson (former CIO of Pacific Lutheran University) was an immediate success, and the Special Topics Program, coordinated by Gary Pratt, CIO of Eastern Washington University, provided a valuable series of events that included, among others, a collaborative workshop with the Orbis-Cascade Alliance.

During this period, NWACC matured as an organization thanks to an increased willingness within the ranks of the CIO Council to take on program responsibilities and to contribute time and energy to the success of NWACC initiatives.