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## *The Importance of Student Organizations*

*By Dr. James R. Owens*

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# The Importance of Student Organizations

By Dr. James R. Owens

## Introduction

As I returned home from last fall's National Association of Industrial Technology (NAIT) Conference in Panama City, Florida, I reflected upon what a great conference it was. The hotel and setting was unmatched, conference attendance was up over previous years, and students were very visible. One could sense a high level of excitement in the first, and what is expected to be, annual Student Robotics Competition. We witnessed firsthand the problem-solving abilities our students have developed (i.e., removal of vehicle shells, tape on end reflectors) and the asking of that most basic question, "Is it in the road gear?" This hands-on application competition is the latest addition to the other activities scheduled for Industrial Technology (IT) students attending the NAIT conference. The IT/IQ Quiz Bowl has for many years been at center stage as a way for students and their chapters to compete directly with one another. This year, one of our 18 students in attendance placed third in this event. I am very proud and honored to say that Southeastern Louisiana University team members in recent years have also competed quite well, having placed first or second in the Quiz Bowl. Our department brought students to the NAIT conference for the first time in 1992. Since then, we have had a large contingent attending each year. Originally, the theory was that it would be fun and educational for the students. However, since then, our department and the university have come to realize that their inclusion in this annual event is *much* more valuable. It has become a major benefit to the department (its growth and status within the university), to the students (both to the student chapters as well as for the individuals), and to NAIT. In this article, I would like to explore with

you the benefits we have witnessed, as well as how we overcame the challenges posed to such an undertaking.

## The Payoffs

Southeastern is a regional university whose student population totals approximately 15,000 full-time undergraduate and graduate students. Although the university has an international student population, its main "draw" is from south central to eastern Louisiana, and western Mississippi. Although university costs are rising, the administration continues to focus its' efforts on making improvements for students and faculty. For example, the university faculty to student ratio is 1 to 25; the IT Department ratio is 1 to 23. The individual attention, which this provides, creates a closer faculty-student cooperative relationship. And, out of this closer relationship, came the realization early on in our departments' NAIT membership that our students could truly benefit by attending the NAIT conference. Our hunch has been correct: The benefits for the students have been numerous. They have a greater awareness of the IT field, and the various careers within it. As a whole, our students exhibit a high rate of motivation and enthusiasm for the career they have chosen. The time they spend at the conference as well as preparing for it creates bonds between them. The ideas they learn of at the conference serve to enrich their classroom experience. As both an educator and one committed to the continued development of the IT profession and our professional organization, I also enjoy seeing the seeds planted in these young minds. In attending the professional conference, these students are learning that their education does not have to stop when they receive their degree. Rather, NAIT offers to its' members an avenue

to continue their professional growth. Attending the conference at an early stage in their career begins a long and productive relationship with others in the field. Whether they ultimately opt for a career in industry or academia, these students become aware of NAIT, its' existence and its' goals, and the important role that they can play in furthering the profession.

For the IT Department, there are many benefits as well. First, our highly motivated and enthusiastic core group of students serves as great ambassadors to the university community as a whole. They are great "recruiters" for other students who may still be searching for a major. Each year, we return from the conference with "Bragging Rights", this includes NAIT recognition of faculty and student honors. This gives our department a higher profile, as many times our University President will mention and cite NAIT Accreditation action and successful student competition at annual NAIT conferences in convocation speeches. At a time when the Louisiana Board of Regents is carefully scrutinizing all public universities for duplication of programs and in many cases deleting them, the university administration at Southeastern is appreciative of how our efforts have brought honor and positive recognition to our department, the College of Business and Technology, Southeastern, and Louisiana.

Another benefit is much more long-range in nature. Most Industrial Technology programs throughout the United States are continually recruiting new faculty members. This is an ongoing challenge for the Department at Southeastern, as well. I am proud to say that we now have a new faculty member that I believe, is an indirect result of student attendance at a national conference. This individual attended the NAIT conference in Atlanta, participated in the IT/IQ Quiz Bowl, and placed 3<sup>rd</sup>. Upon his graduation from Southeastern, he was offered Assistantships at two out-of-state Industrial Technology/ NAIT accredited institutions to work on a master's degree. This young man

subsequently completed his degree at Purdue University and is now a member of our faculty. He is involved not only in university instruction, but also actively supports young men and women in their attendance at national conferences. Our recruiting resources are limited, but I believe that "growing your own" faculty members are one possible method of facing this recruiting challenge. Although you cannot rely on it exclusively for staffing, it is one viable method. One additional advantage of this is that because of the previous relationship with this job candidate, you know them and their ability to work as part of your faculty team. Therefore, surprises in job performance are less likely to happen.

Finally, for NAIT, the benefits are obvious. As I alluded to earlier, bringing students to the national conference is a great way to introduce them to the virtues of becoming an active member in a professional organization. The organization has greater name recognition, and therefore, has an easier "sales job" recruiting members. With increased membership, there comes greater activity by its members which yields a more varied, vibrant, and vigorous membership. All of this is important if NAIT is to continue to be a progressive organization interested in future growth.

### ***The Challenges***

When our department first embarked on this plan to bring students to the NAIT conference in 1992, some of these benefits were self-evident then. But of course, so were the logistical and financial challenges. Travel distance was a major factor. There has never been a NAIT conference in Louisiana; however, conferences held in Texas, Georgia, and Florida have been relatively easy for the students to attend. Transportation to sites, which are 8-10 hours away, has been made possible by the rental of vans and student car-pooling. On the other hand, we had a large student delegation in attendance at the conference last year in Dearborn, Michigan. In the wake of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, airline ticket prices were very competi-

tive, and our students flew to Detroit Metro, where we took ground transportation to the conference hotel.

Conference travel expenses for students and 10 full-time Industrial Technology faculty members can be daunting. If presenting a professional paper, individual faculty members at Southeastern may be awarded up to \$1,000.00 annually by the Center for Faculty Excellence to assist with the cost of professional travel. Funding to address student travel has come from the following funding streams: the IT Department's travel account, the Student Government Association (SGA) funds, the College Dean's student travel account (\$800.00 in FY 02), and student fundraisers via department sponsored BBQ, jambalaya, hamburger and hotdog sales on campus. Another great source has been funding from Advisory Committee members and their business and/or companies. One member has contributed over \$15,000.00 to assist students over the past five years to attend out-of-state conferences because he recognizes the importance of this as part of a total education experience. We feel that this "Sharing of Cost" has worked well because of the buy-in of all parties, plus no one source is overwhelmed by the requested amount. A letter of thanks is written to sponsors and Southeastern's level of participation at the annual conference is publicized after students and faculty return from each national conference. We also schedule our annual Fall Advisory Committee meeting in close time proximity to the NAIT conference dates so that students have the opportunity to express their appreciation to Advisory Committee members for their financial assistance.

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

In addition to the valuable publicity for our students and university, the exposure to a conference experience can result in a myriad of benefits for the students, the department, the university, and for NAIT. The spin-offs for all involved can include possibilities such as grooming a future faculty member, a student chapter that is dynamic and

goal-driven, and NAIT's recognition and reputation increases. I would urge NAIT to commission a study to research the effect that active student organizations have upon individual departments. My brief review of recent NAIT articles revealed that not much research has been conducted in this area. The NAIT Accreditation Handbook mentions problem-solving in the standards but a student organization is not an individual standard or Program Requirement. However, based upon my membership

on ten accreditation team visits, I have detected a strong correlation between a department that has an active student organization and a department that demonstrates substantial compliance with the accreditation standards.

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