**Educational Online Community Analysis**

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**Introduction**

The Pennsylvania Association of Educational Communications and Technology (PAECT) is an organization whose purpose is to increase the professional learning networks, professional development, and leadership within its community of membership (PAECT, n.d.b). The community is built on the pillars of "Connect, Develop, Lead, and Advocate" and provides services and supports for their members to help them in their journey of educational technology discovery. The organization has been around for over twenty years and currently has approximately 2000 members. In addition, PAECT is the state affiliate for The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), and The Consortium for School Network (CoSN) (B. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2022).

PAECT is divided into seven regions within Pennsylvania and includes a region comprised of out-of-state members. Membership is tiered and consists of free and paid options (B. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2022; N. Hill, personal communication, February 17, 2022). Free members receive a weekly newsletter, email blasts about information and events, and the Big Deal Book, a collection of research and information about educational technology provided by CDW. In addition, paid members receive access to online webinars, the Kyte Learning professional development system, and discounts or free admission to hosted events (PAECT, n.d.c). The organization connects its users through various tools, including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and their membership site developed using Wild Apricot (N. Hill, personal communication, February 17, 2022). In addition, they run the Keystone Technology Integrator program for the state (B. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2022).

**Goals of PAECT Online Community**

The PAECT online community seeks to accomplish and promote professional development, professional communications, and professional leadership in educational communications and technology in the Commonwealth(PAECT, n.d.a). B. Smith, the newly appointed President (personal communication, February 17, 2022), indicated that PAECT's mission allows community members to focus on improving educational technology. N. Hill, past President (personal communication, February 17, 2022), added that helping teachers drive education through collaboration allows teachers across the state to connect and push technology and equity forward.

Educators, technologists, librarians, school administrators, and technology directors from Pre-K to higher education work together to uphold PAECT's four pillars, "Connect, Develop, Lead, and Advocate." The pillars provide their community members the resources required for goal attainment (B. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2022; N. Hill, personal communication, February 17, 2022). Kraut and Resnick (2016) explain that individuals must contribute resources to the groups' needs to succeed in an online community. PAECT's collaboration and networking with regional leaders and members at large aid in providing their community members with the resources required to move forward (PAECT, n.d.a). Regardless of the technology tool or program (Google, Mac, Apple, Google Drive, Microsoft Office) is favored within the community, the common foundation is formulated on its pedagogical approach (N. Hill, personal communication, February 17, 2022). Increasing commitment to an online community requires a balance of creating bonds between the members and the community itself.

**PAECT Accomplishments**

PAECT has sought to accomplish these goals by growing its online community and supporting community members. Kraut et al. (2011) explain that it is essential that members of a community identify with the overall mission and goals of the group. N. Hill (personal communication, February 17, 2022) explained that PAECT's community members collaborate globally by sharing ideas, resources, and motives for technology improvement. Surveys allow community leaders to collect data from their community members for improvements. Enthusiasm for member support is provided by including their community members' likes, wants, and needs for growth. For example, N. Hill (personal communication, February 17, 2022) indicated that virtual book studies, specific keynote speakers, and discussion topics are provided to their community members based on collected survey responses and posts from the community forum. Meetings are held virtually, hybrid-model, or in-person based on the number of participants attending meetings or professional developments.

PAECT is structured similarly to Wenger et al.'s (2009) community approach. It describes a community of practice (CoP) as a learning community connected by a common interest and defining member identities by their roles and relationships in the group's activity. The community develops its own culture and communication methods, and members learn by observing and modeling individuals within the community. The appointed regional officials work together to ensure that the community provides a safe environment for individuals to learn through observation and interaction with experts and discussion with colleagues and community members. The importance of social relationships through the equalization of roles between educators and learners in a community often maximizes the participation of community members but may also create a sense of discomfort and insecurity (Kraut & Resnick, 2016). Therefore, a learning community must develop a high level of trust among participants to be functional and applicable to every member of its community, which seems to resonate with PAECT's community members' similar motives, collaboration, and uniformity for growth and goal attainment.

**Metrics to Reach Goals**

Kraut et al. (2011) indicate that communities should create names and taglines that highlight their mission to increase identity-based commitment. Throughout PAECT's existence, both interviewees stated that they utilized surveys to measure feedback on individual events. However, they lacked input on whether they are helping their members attain the pillars of their mission, "Connect, Develop, Lead, and Advocate" (B. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2022; N. Hill, personal communication, February 17, 2022). While the metrics attained on individual activities and events have helped them develop new ideas to attract and retain members, B. Smith (personal communication, February 17, 2022) indicated he would like to perform more surveying during his presidency that assesses these broader concepts.

PAECT is structured similar to how Wenger et al. (2009) describe a community of practice. Both N. Hill and B. Smith (personal communication, February 17, 2022) indicated that they rely on conversations and networking with the leadership in all regions and levels of membership to ensure they provide their community with the resources they require to move forward. N. Hill (personal communication, February 17, 2022) stated, "When we transition, we also call for new participation as far as bringing on new committee chairs and new committee members," showing how they try to keep the membership involved in the organization and bring new ideas into leadership. Both interviewees indicated that their organization has been growing steadily since its inception; however, N. Hill (personal communication, February 17, 2022) suggested that membership participates at varying levels. Since allowing members to join for free, they have seen increased membership, but not necessarily increased participation.

**Conclusion**

The Pennsylvania Association of Educational Communications and Technology (PAECT) has been servicing educators, along with other successful organizations such as AECT, COSN, and ISTE since 2004. PAECT has proven to excel in providing support to instructional providers through an online community where membership is specified to teachers, educational technologists, librarians, and school administrators from pre-k to higher education (PAECT, n.d.c). PAECT has led the digital advancement field by "connecting, developing, leading, and advocating" on behalf of its members, technology, and growth in education. Connecting with PAECT's weekly newsletter, Education Technology Today, its members have access to many resources, including upcoming events, articles, cutting-edge technology, gadgets and information, and website links (PAECT, n.d.d). Although all membership levels are not entirely free, there is no cost associated with receiving weekly newsletters. Educators can propose articles for newsletters, regardless of their membership.

Additionally, providing technology in schools is the educational philosophy of PAECT. Based on research and data, "technology has become a vital component for the success of the entire educational enterprise." PAECT advocates for student access to technology as a nonnegotiable societal value. PAECT believes that all schools should be future-ready. Unless schools have digital learning opportunities, students will not be ready to succeed in college, career, or citizens (PAECT, 2014). Overall, PAECT has been a successful organization. Educators, administrators, and technology educators have benefited from their work, webinars, and videos.

However, their community could improve considerably if technology stewards apply documented research theories targeted at the development of the community. According to Kraut et al. (2016), if individuals are not actively involved with their participation and contribution to their online community, there will be a lack of development. Therefore, PAECT does not provide a free open forum that welcomes low-quality administrators or productions. By maintaining a tiered membership approach, with the possibility of joining for free, thoughts of member participation in the online community have been steady with no improvement.

Kraut et al. (2016) advise organizational leaders to motivate their online members to contribute and participate within the community. When stewards know their online members' skills and attributes, specific contributions can be executed utilizing their interests and strengths (Kraut et al., 2016). Lastly, Kraut et al. (2016) express messages with an intense fear appeal, authoritative persuasion, familiarization, and social proof as practical and effective techniques to activate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Considering these recommendations, PAECT requires increased participation movement and sponsorship contribution for its high-quality online community to thrive and succeed.

**Group Collaboration**

**Alex Alexandre -** Completed the conclusion section of the paper, which analyzed the organization's success, offered recommendations based on the data collected, and revised and edited the document. Included references.

**Frank Ciccitto (Leader) -** Scheduled, conducted, and transcribed two interviews with the PA Association for Educational Communications and Technology (PAECT) President and Past President using Otter.ai and completed the introduction section, which included a summary about the organization and discussed the metrics used by the organization. Included references.

**Kristina Harb -** Provided supported where needed in sections of the paper. Collected andorganized the paper's contents and references, created a group collaboration page, and revised and edited the document.

**Deniz Ismailoff -** Completed the section of the paper discussing the organization's goals and accomplishments within the online community and revised and edited the document. Included references.

**Note:** Met as a group to create and compile interview questions and assigned roles for the group project. Checked in periodically with each other throughout paper completion and conducted a final meeting to conclude the paper.

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**Appendix A**

**Interview Questions**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your role?
3. Could you tell me about your organization and mission?
4. What is the role of the community/organization?
5. What are the online components of the community?
6. How has the community changed to meet the goals/objectives set forth by the community?
7. How do you assess the community's needs?
8. Who is responsible for introducing new resources? Technology?
9. How do you recruit and retain members?
10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your online community?
11. What methods have you employed to improve weaknesses?
12. Do you feel your community/organization has been successful?
13. How do you foresee the community growing?

**Appendix B**

**Interview Transcription - Ben Smith, PAECT President**

Frank Ciccitto 0:04

All right, and do I have your permission to record this?

Ben Smith 0:10

Sure.

Frank Ciccitto 0:12

All right. So if we could get started, just give me your name and your role in the organization?

Ben Smith 0:17

Sure. I'm Ben Smith. I'm the assistant director of technology for the Lincoln intermediate.

Frank Ciccitto 0:22

Okay. And what is your role in PAECT?

Ben Smith 0:27

I just became the President of the organization. In addition, I serve as a representative to the PETE&C board. And I'm also the PETE&C program chair.

Frank Ciccitto 0:41

Okay. What was your role in the organization prior to becoming President?

Ben Smith 0:48

We have an officer succession model. So you get elected as Vice President, you serve for two years, you serve for two years as President, and then two years as past President. So that's the model. But prior to that, I served on the board as the sponsorship chairman, so I had a non-voting role on the board that I served in for, I think, three years or four years prior to becoming vice president.

Frank Ciccitto 1:19

Okay. And is that an elected position, or is that just volunteers?

Ben Smith 1:24

Yeah, it's an appointed position. So only our voting officers are elected. So each of our regional chairs, and then President, Vice President, Corresponding Secretary, Recording Secretary, Treasurer, those are the voted on positions that are they vote, and they're voted on, everything else is appointed with the approval of the board. So the board does have a say that they get to vote on accepting you or not, but you're appointed to that position.

Frank Ciccitto 1:54

Can you tell me a little about PETE&C and what the mission of the organization is?

Ben Smith 2:01

Yeah, so PAECT is?

Frank Ciccitto 2:05

That's what I meant, PAECT. Yeah.

Ben Smith 2:09

Nice. Yeah. So PAECT is it's actually the state affiliate of a couple of organizations, which is kind of interesting. So they're the state affiliate; I think the primary way that we are we recognize ourselves is by being a part of ISTE. But we also are the state affiliate for COSN. And for ACET, and the AECT is, where PAECT actually came from. So you know, if you go back into our historical archive, you'd find that there were sort of a few different organizations that came together and formed PAECT to represent the educational technology community. And because of that, we sort of we have connections out to higher education, connections out to tech directors, and to network managers through like the COSN piece. And then to educators and coaches through the ISTE. For PAECT, our mission is to provide the community for those people that are in those buckets that I just mentioned, to focus on educational technology and the way to improve education. And then, we have four pillars of Connect, Lead, Develop and Advocate. And so, those four pillars guide the work that we do.

Frank Ciccitto 3:33

Okay. So, as I mentioned, this class is on online communities. So obviously, many communities and organizations are kind of a hybrid approach where they have in-person events, they have online events, and they have connections through newsletters and such. What are the online components that PAECT, utilizes to keep that community together?

Ben Smith 4:01

So the way we are divided is into regions. And we have just recently, and we used to be six regions, now there's a seventh region, I'll explain in a moment. Our six regions are geographically divided across the state. So we have northeast, northwest, central, southeast, southwest, South Central, right. So those are the six regions. And then most recently, we added an out-of-state region because we recognize that we have members who want to be a part of this group that we have from outside of the state, and we wanted to have a place for them to convene in a region. Each of those seven regions has a regional director. They're a voting member of the board. And they are the ones who provide the, I think the social and communal, the community aspect to their region and to the organization as a whole. Whereas the remainder of the officers of the board, work with those regional directors to have to sort of guide the ship, provide the fiscal certainty for the organization, and to make decisions on behalf of the organization. So when I go back to the community part, each regional director is engaging their folks in face to face, online meetings, emails, and activities. So there's a lot that goes on like goose chases that take place. Last night, for example, we had a gathering of a PETE and C conference analysis. So I could just get a group of folks doing that. I know, in our region, they do a coffee type thing in one of the little areas, because it's a big area, but you know, they'll do like coffee, or they'll do a dinner, or something like that, to bring people together. So, so yeah, I'll say make sure I answered all the parts of your question. I kind of dove into some of the details there.

Frank Ciccitto 5:55

So, as the pandemic has changed the way everyone meets, have you seen PAECT changing the way that they get together and are organized? Or is it just a continuation, and you're just getting back to in person things.

Ben Smith 6:18

Um, I think that we've seen a fundamental shift in the way that people can get together. So as an example, last night was a statewide meeting, as we really didn't have that opportunity. Like only at our conference, you know, people aren't going to drive four or five hours for dinner, and drive, you know, a bunch of hours back home. So that way, that's why we had the regional approach, what the pandemic has given us the opportunity, we look for the opportunities there, there it is that we can connect via technologies like zoom and, and others. And so it's had even an impact on our board meetings, whereas our board meetings used to be all face to face. Now we are doing some board meetings virtual and so that allows us to do our work a little bit differently, and maybe value the time that we have for our families and things like that a little bit more as well.

Frank Ciccitto 7:09

Do you guys utilize any kind of newsletters from the statewide approach? Or is that all regional type.

Ben Smith 7:18

So we do have statewide, we have a newsletter that goes out in a more formal way and structure so people can submit items there. And then the big book ideas comes out. And so we're trying to rarely connect with members, each regional member, each regional board member can also send their own information out and they do that in bursts, I think to their membership, so whereas the statewide newsletter is more of a regular thing, the regional communications are at the discretion of the Regional Chair.

Frank Ciccitto 7:54

Okay, so you you've been a member of this organization for a while now, obviously. How do you think the community has changed over time to meet the goals and the objectives of what the community members have asked?

Ben Smith 8:12

You know, it's kind of interesting to ask, like, how has it changed? Because if I go back, and I think about some of the people who founded the organization, I'm not in their peer group, they're a little bit older than me, which I'm glad to say okay, but there's folks that include people like Kyle Pack, and Jim Bolton and Sean McDonough and some of those folks that that established the organization. At that time, they really created a collective, where people cared about one another, cared about their jobs, their education, the role that technology plays in it, and how they could make the state the world learning a little better. In that regard. I think the people have changed, but the mission hasn't or that or that aspect, that communal aspect of it hasn't changed, and because what I see is that we have new faces, but they are just as passionate, and just as energetic about it. And so what we've been able to do is actually grow our membership over time, as more people recognize that here's a community that has the same kind of personal philosophy or goals or whatever that that piece that pulls somebody in, we have that it brings them in and a part of that is our special event for Keystone technology integrators. Are you familiar with that?

Frank Ciccitto 9:05

Yes.

Ben Smith 9:06

Yeah. So I think that that event itself draws people together, we bring 100 people together for what is that for me when I went back in 2005 was the best professional development experience of my life. It causes people to want to pay it forward, to become involved and to get back involved in it. And so there's that, that piece of paying it forward that is sort of built into the culture of the organization. Great.

Frank Ciccitto 10:10

So, obviously, you've talked about how your core mission has kind of stayed the same, but the way you guys communicate. And well, let's start with this the membership, I noticed you guys have a tiered membership. Now, what was the reasoning behind going with a tiered membership? What are you hoping to accomplish with that?

Ben Smith 10:37

So when we, prior to the tiered membership, we have one membership level, it was a paid membership. And so we had this group of people that participated. And the reason that we went to the tiered membership after talking with a number of other similar associations is, we found that we could do member recruitment out of our free memberships, and that we could reach far more people. So you know, we have a lot of elements that that are free, like the newsletter and the communications and, and the pieces that that take place. By having the tiered membership allows us to serve those people that really want to engage and participate with sort of a flat fee. So we haven't increased our membership fee in a long time. That just it's sort of the level at which you want to know, so do you want to just receive information? Or do you really want to participate like in our, our online and, and face to face events? So as an example, a lot of times those face to face events are free for the premier members. And the cost to a free member to attend is really kind of close. So you're like, if you want to participate in that way, you could just become a premium member, if that makes sense.

Frank Ciccitto 11:57

Yeah, that does. Approximately how many members do you guys have right now?

Ben Smith 12:03

I think we're at about 2000 members.

Frank Ciccitto 12:08

Okay. So, obviously, 2000 members is a lot of people's opinions. How do you guys assess what is needed for the organization? To change? Like, how do you assess the changes that are going to be taking place?

Ben Smith 12:25

Well, I think the good thing is that we have a fairly large board having the executive committee of six, and then seven regional directors, we want to really know how those regional directors should be communicating with their constituents, you know, that that regional group, and the I think what we try to do is to allow them to connect with us, talking to the members and bringing those issues to light at a larger level. The other thing that we do is we have an open call for participation. So this year, we did that. And I was a little bit concerned, for my presidency, I mean, going through the pandemic, so many educators are stressed and busy. And yet, we probably had our largest amount of new applicants that wanted to participate on the board level, at that, you know, whether is at the committee level or whatnot. And so that was really encouraging to me. And then what we said is, anybody who wants to work can work. And so we took everybody that applied, and we've given them some role, and that allow them to grow within the leadership. So if you start to think like, I want to be somebody who contributes to leadership, you can start out in a committee role, much like I did, and then move your way up.

Frank Ciccitto 13:48

So who is responsible within the organization for introducing new tools that will be used throughout the organization? It's obviously a technology and education committee or organization, so everyone has their own favorite tool and thinks their way is the best. How do you guys find who ultimately makes those decisions for the organization?

Ben Smith 14:18

So interesting question for me, because we don't have oversight on like, what's the best tool and as an example, like, I'm a Google/Mac person, right? I use all Apple products. Google Drive is the tool of my choice. And we have, you know, our vice president. He's a Microsoft and office person. Like he uses teams, and he uses OneNote, and things like that. And so you might ask, like, hey, which like, what does the organization say like is their preferred technology? We don't actually talk about it that way, we talk about it from a pedagogical approach, when you start to think and focus on pedagogy and things that are in like the ISTE standards for students, for educators, for administrators, when you focus that way, the tool that you actually use to accomplish it is irrelevant. Because your focus is again on the pedagogy. And I think that's actually what probably draws the organization together. So while we may have spirited debates over is Mac or PC better, or is Google or Office better, at the end of the day, it's really about how you use the tool and not what tool you use. So we don't have an oversight committee that says, this is what we're going to recommend. And I think our membership is, is tied into recognizing that if we're offering professional development, it's going to be tied to pedagogy. And you might learn a tool, but what you're really going to come out of that with is a sound pedagogical foundation and strategy that you can use, and a potential tool that will be available.

Frank Ciccitto 16:03

Great! How do you recruit new members? And we'll start with that, how do you recruit new members?

Ben Smith 16:12

Some of it's through word of mouth and the events that we're having outreach to some of the other partner organizations, we try and make sure, like we run a Student Showcase. And so we try and get information out to teachers who will participate through our conference. You know, we have a booth at the conference, and you have 2000 people at the conference, we're trying to get people to recognize, like, what are little niches within that organization? And so it's through those types of events that we try and grow our members.

Frank Ciccitto 16:44

Okay, and then how do you retain membership?

Ben Smith 16:48

So I think that, you know, just in terms of retaining, just start with like the free members, you know, they have to opt out, in a sense. And so we want to make sure that we are being thoughtful about how we communicate, how much we communicate, so that we aren't, we don't want people to say like I've had enough of this organization, I'm going to, I'm going to leave. So I think just trying to engage the free membership population in a way that it becomes meaningful without being onerous to them. For the second tier for the premium membership, we want to make sure that we're offering enough opportunities for them to engage so that they sense the value in that money that they're putting into to the membership. So, that's through the events that we run, the pieces that we do, the advocacy that we're that we promote, and all those pieces, making sure they understand that this is where that membership dues that fund is going for. And so we really try and be mindful about the fiscal responsibility we have as stewards of the organization.

Frank Ciccitto 17:56

So, you spoke to your strength about where PAECT strength of taking a pedagogical approach to things and is there any other big strengths that you would say exist within the organization that that you'd like to mention?

Ben Smith 18:17

I'm going to go back to that sense of community. The Keystone technology integrator, KTI, piece is a great example of that, because going back to 2004, from 2004, to 2010, it was run by the state. So the Department of Ed did that. And then there's a little gap in there because the state decided they weren't going to fund that anymore. And, PAECT picked up that ball, we were able to work with some great sponsors to be able to bring that back. And there were a lot of different hands in that. But I go back to that event, that event is tied into a creating community. And I haven't ever talked to anybody who went to KTI and came out and said, that was not a good experience, or, and very rarely do I talk to people and say that wasn't the best experience they've ever had, in a professional sense. So I think that that's one aspect we have is building community because I can tell you I even work with people who still talk to their campers or their cohort, right? They created lifelong professional and personal relationships. So that personal relationship building is one of the other things I think that makes us a unique organization. And then the other one I would say is our role in advocacy. So we have an advocacy chair, she was actually just nominated for Teacher of the Year. She was in the finalist for Teacher of the Year this year. And so like her passion and her drive, that's what really pushes that advocacy piece forward. And so knowing that we are advocating for teachers, for kids, for offline learners, those people, I think that also helps us to sort of set ourselves apart.

Frank Ciccitto 20:06

Do you feel that the Keystone integrators has bought up its own community? Because of how connected those cohorts are?

Ben Smith 20:18

For sure they have I mean, I know that in some ways they have their own, like, there's the KTI community that might be separate from PAECT. But everybody who goes to KTI becomes a member of PAECT. And as the organization that sponsors we hope they see that connection, and we even have a PAECT day as a part of the summit for those that attend so. So while there probably are those pieces that are unique to KTI, I think it's just a lot a subset of the larger organization.

Frank Ciccitto 20:53

So what weaknesses do you think exist within the organization?

Ben Smith 20:59

So I, I think the things that that serve as weaknesses are the fact that we're an all-volunteer organization. So we're relying on educators who spend their whole day focusing on students and school, and then outside of that, they're now trying to generously donate their time to try and keep the organization moving forward. And so that means that we don't have, we don't have that person who's going and talking to vendors, and bringing in dollars that would support some of our initiatives. We don't necessarily have those folks that have a background in running an organization. Like they're passionate about education, but what we're really trying to do is make sure we're fiscally solvent and directing our funding in the right way. And so those are areas that I think we could improve on. But our board is, really passionate. And so because of those fiscal layers, and the fact that we don't have that dedicated person who drives it all for that also means subsequently that maybe not all of our initiatives can get off the ground as easily. And so it puts a little more strain on those regional directors to be able to engage the membership. So I think that's its sort of a, there's a couple of layers there. But that's probably our biggest pain point. Okay.

Frank Ciccitto 22:26

And do you see yourself as I mean, as vice president, and now President come out with ways to address those weaknesses? Anything additional that you want to say about that?

Ben Smith 22:40

Yeah, we're, we're actively engaging in what it might look like to have a part time staff member and what that that role might be. So it might be in terms of leadership, it could be in terms of secretarial it could be, you know, there are a lot of different ways, but so we've formed a group to start exploring that. And the other part that we've done is that we, we've taken a portion of our budget each year and set it aside. And so we're getting to a point now where we can look at that set aside and say, what do we want to do with that? So we're at a maybe at a tipping point here over the next several years, where we're going to have to come to grips with it, but we are taking steps towards that. And we'll be engaging in some strategic planning this spring to try and really hone in on what do we want for the organization?

Frank Ciccitto 23:31

Okay, just two more questions. So up to this point, do you feel that PAECT has been a successful organization community? And let's start with that. So you feel it's been successful up to this point?

Ben Smith 23:51

So I'm gonna say, Yes, I think we've had some great leadership over the past 20 or 30 years, to the point where we've, grown our budget, we've grown our membership base, and we've, you know, in terms of those metrics, yeah, that shows that we're a successful organization, and we're healthy financially. I think that the one place that we probably have to explore more of is how good a job have we done in terms of Connect, Develop, Lead and Advocate, which are our core pillars. I don't know that we have a good set of metrics right now on that. But, again, you're talking to the person who's the President of the organization, I feel we've been successful. That's what's drawn me to the organization and the opportunity to lead and so that that's the one area we probably need to explore.

Frank Ciccitto 24:44

Do you guys assess currently, like through surveys are anything on the health of the organization like you're saying, or is that something that you're looking to do in the future?

Ben Smith 24:56

We probably do a better job of serving the organization on an individual basis like, do you like this event or this activity? We have not done a good enough job. That's probably why I say we don't have the metrics on Connect, Develop Lead Advocate to say, hey, yeah, we're doing, we're engaging our membership where they want to be. That's something we're looking at, can we develop those metrics going forward? Rather than relying on saying our budgets growing and our memberships growing, so we must be doing a good job.

Frank Ciccitto 25:29

And how do you foresee this community growing in the next 5-10 years?

Ben Smith 25:36

So I think that if I focus in on again, those pieces I talked about, we'd like to have more engagement with additional members. We want to grow our membership, especially amongst leaders in organizations. So we want to grow the number of teachers, but we also want to look for, like the curriculum developers and the technology director. So I think that's an area where we could grow is in bringing leaders into our organization, who are like minded and want to move us forward. The second area is that I think we need to grow in our relationship with those vendors. Because we know that the vendors, you know, while they're trying to sell, they're also the ones that move the field forward. And so we want to be able to work with them as a partner to advocate with them, and talk about those pieces and be out on sort of that bleeding edge with them. So that's another area where we probably have to grow, and I think we will over the next five or ten years.

Frank Ciccitto 26:38

Cool. I appreciate your time. Thank you very much. I'm going to stop the recording

**Appendix C**

**Interview Transcription - Nicole L. Hill, PAECT Past President**

Frank Ciccitto 0:00

Okay. All right. So do I have your permission to record this?

Nicole Hill 0:10

Yes.

Frank Ciccitto 0:11

Okay. So like I said, we're talking about online communities. So if you could first give us your name, and what your role is in the organization.

Nicole Hill 0:21

Okay, so I'm Nicole Hill, and I am just now the past President of the organization. So I handed over the reins to Ben Smith who is the new President, incoming President, and I will be the past President for two years on our board.

Frank Ciccitto 0:40

And I talked to Ben earlier today and went through the interview with him. So what can you tell me about the organization and PAECT's mission and why it exists?

Nicole Hill 0:56

So I think, for us, it's about helping teachers and helping drive education. And being that piece of collaboration and allowing teachers across the state to connect, and, you know, push technology, and equity forward.

Frank Ciccitto 1:24

Like I said, this is about an online community and online organization. And obviously, PAECT is more of a hybrid organization, there's lots of in person events and meetings and such, what are some of the online tools that you guys utilize to keep your community going?

Nicole Hill 2:36

And I'm definitely not as eloquent or well-spoken as Ben is. So just keep that in mind.

Frank Ciccitto 2:43

It's all good. Everything's good. So I don't know what you heard since we got disconnected. But so like I said, this course is about online communities. And PAECT is more of a hybrid type community. There's lots of in person events. But you're also connected through various tools on the internet and newsletters and such like that. Can you give me some of the online components that you utilize in PAECT to keep that organization connected?

Nicole Hill 3:13

Our first is our membership, and everything is run through wild apricot, so our webpage, then our members have the ability to kind of connect a little bit in that website, as far as they have their accounts, they can sign up for events, things like that all through that membership. It allows our regional directors to be able to have a central location for their events and calendar. And anybody that wants to sign up for any of the events would go to that calendar page. And you can sign up through the membership page. In addition, of course, we have Google that we utilize for the board and our committee chairs and anybody that is working within the organization. We use Zoom for any of our meetings that we would do virtually, of course, since COVID. I mean, in the two years that I was President we met face to face one time, so we were you know, we went complete virtual and our regional directors and professional development crew, everybody went complete virtual for the two years pretty much, you know, side by side from you know, a few things here and there. So, we use like everybody has, for those different regions. There is a Facebook group, some of them use Instagram, and we have Twitter as well. So we have it for the state level. And then each of our regions including you know our newest, which is the out of state region, because we do have out of state members as well that connect and do those kinds of things. So Laura runs everything, you know, for the out of state region, virtually, she does twitter chats, you know, they've done different zoom activities. And a lot of a lot of our regions have done virtual, and then with the virtual stuff that has allowed them to kind of collaborate and tie in some of those regions as well, where you know, when it's face to face, it's just kind of that area that that they're living in.

Frank Ciccitto 5:34

So do you think a lot of these tools are only implemented because of COVID?

Nicole Hill 5:40

We used them all prior to, but we kind of transition completely to virtual whenever, whenever COVID happened. So in the past, you know, and coming in as vice president for two years, you know, those meetings, we've met five times a year in person and State College. But we always meet monthly via zoom like and take care of just like we do like a virtual check in on a Wednesday night, once a month when we're not meeting in person.

Frank Ciccitto 6:19

So how has the membership changed the goals and objectives that were set forth by PAECT?

Nicole Hill 6:33

How did our members change it?

Frank Ciccitto 6:36

Yeah. So the idea in a community is that, you know, there's leadership, but they, the membership is what drives the pushing forth of new goals.

Nicole Hill 6:53

Right, So usually every two years whenever so like, whenever I took over as President, although I don't think it's a good example, because we were kind of like, oh, my gosh, we just the world is shut down, what are we going to do. But we always send out surveys to our membership, we ask for feedback. We, when we transition, we also call for new participation as far as bringing on new committee chairs, and new committee members. So you know, with Ben taking over, we have all new committee chairs, not all some, some people stay around, but like there are new folks coming into the organization. And we constantly look at that to see where we can pull in, you know, some enthusiasm. You know, right now, like we just came out of PETE&C and we have several members who were really excited about the keynote that that was there. And so they're organizing a virtual book study for the when you wander you're learning. And so all we're doing is supporting them, like they have, you know, a Google Drive folder set up, they have discussion questions going, we're working with them to pick the dates, because they want to do some zoom meetups and discuss the book by the chapter every week. So they kind of have a plan, and then we're gonna support them. So our regional directors are gonna work with them to get that set up on our calendar and let people sign up, and then help them host the meetings once a week starting at the end of March.

Frank Ciccitto 8:31

So like, what I'm hearing is that as new topics and new interests come into the group, they can kind of run on their own, they're still under the umbrella of PAECT, and that's helping organize everything together. But they can kind of run on their own and set up their own type of items.

Nicole Hill 8:51

Right.

Frank Ciccitto 8:51

Okay. How do you, you kind of talked about surveying, what other ways do you assess what the community what PAECT needs,

Nicole Hill 9:03

Having conversations with folks whether you know, at our virtual meetups, or whether it be you know, whenever we get together face to face, and most of the time, you know, people will reach out and I think even Are you a member? Have you seen?

Frank Ciccitto 9:21

I am a member.

Nicole Hill 9:23

Okay. Are you a new member? Are you an old member?

Frank Ciccitto 9:27

So I was an old member, and then over COVID my membership dropped and then I just rejoined up right before PETE&C actually I rejoined up

Nicole Hill 9:38

So how many years have you been around?

Frank Ciccitto 9:43

Probably six or seven.

Nicole Hill 9:47

Okay, so what keeps you coming back?

Frank Ciccitto 9:50

The events, the ideas, I see what you're doing here, like you said, I think Ben hit on it alot, it's the sense of community that the organization has. So I understand, you know, it's these kinds of conversations that can help you bring forth, you know, the new ideas and figure out what they need. That makes sense.

Nicole Hill 10:15

Well, and sometimes, like, I guess my camera's completely off, we feel like we're on silos in our schools, like, sometimes you're the lone person that's pushing and driving the new things. So it's nice when you can come together with these people and have a conversation. And if you're trying to implement something, and I just think, for me, the whole journey with PAECT is to be able to connect with somebody else who's doing that same thing, and pushing the same thing in their district. Whenever, you know, sometimes it's an uphill battle. You know, sometimes you have the support, and sometimes that goes in processes, you know, working through a new principle through a new administration, or, you know, you, find those ideas like, Oh, you're doing that how to have that work for you, or it's just those the little connections. And then I think sometimes people, again, being on the board, as long as I have I've been, you know, I served as Northwest Regional Director starting in 2013. So, you know, I've been on the board for that long, and seeing various people come through, but some of these folks I've worked with, since 2013, on the board, and, you know, we've met five times a year, and you have all of those conversations. So I've had different people say, so I'm curious, because they say, Well, it seems like it's, it's clicky, or you have to be a part of the cool club to be and it's totally not, it's just that sometimes when we're together, it's like we had you know, it's like seeing family I haven't seen for a long time.

Frank Ciccitto 11:54

Do you think the online pieces of the organization like Twitter, Facebook, any of the other things that you referred to, do you think that helps bring the masses of members together more than making it less clicky than, say, a board meeting that you're going to?

Nicole Hill 12:14

Sometimes, sometimes, it just depends, and then you know, the other part is, but we're all busy, and we all have lives, and it's really easy to ignore the Twitter, or, you know, or the, you know, the free online event, because I'm tired tonight, I don't want to get on my computer after I've worked all day, you know.

Frank Ciccitto 12:35

So who do you think is responsible for introducing new resources and technology and stuff to the group? I understand, you know, the organization revolves around educational technology, but more the tools that push the group forward. So during COVID, you talked about, you know, moving over to zoom and doing stuff virtually with that, anytime there's a new way of way of doing things as a group, who's responsible for pushing those things forward.

Nicole Hill 13:11

I think everybody on our team helps out, you know, and brings a different component and different experience. So, you know, we have the professional development team, so they're always looking to see you know, what's coming. We're an ISTE affiliate, so we look, you know, through them to see what they have coming and how we can work together. Like I said, the regional directors, members who whoever, you know, brings an idea forward that we can run with and help support teachers, and that's what we try to do. And then I think also, one of our strong suits is the Keystone technology innovators, and to be able to run that group in the summer, bringing those 100 teachers together in the summer weather and again, in 2020, we went completely virtual, and we ran a virtual conference, you know, not, not the entire week. I think we did like three or four days, but still we ran sessions for teachers KTI summit style.

Frank Ciccitto 14:21

Yeah, Ben kind of talked about how strong of a program the KTI thing was, especially when you guys over took it from the state. How it was such a great program professional development wise and getting people together. And I talked to him about how you think that's almost its own organization and cohort itself. It falls under the PAECT

Nicole Hill 14:54

It is but it builds that community like and then most of the Folks that have come through KTI are, like most of us on the board have come through, KTI. And that is what sparks that. I don't even know if I want to say, drive or motivation, but it gives you the confidence to continue to lead and lead from the middle. And so that is where our four pillars come from, you know, Connect Lead Advocate Develop. And so you start that, and I just think it continues, and then we see that grow. And so the folks that are doing the book study, they were all KTI, you know, not this, I think two of them are just this past year one was the year before. But again, they're staying connected to the organization. They want to keep building, they're building within their district one said she was on Monday night, she's going to our board meeting, and she's going to present to her board about PAECT, and about the Keystone technology innovators in her experience.

Frank Ciccitto 16:02

How do you recruit and retain members?

Nicole Hill 16:06

So all of the events, word of mouth, social media, whatever we can do to, you know, bring people in?

Frank Ciccitto 16:15

And what do you do to keep them in once they are in?

Nicole Hill 16:18

So again, hopefully, you're continuing to provide content that they are looking for, and the connection to the community.

Frank Ciccitto 16:31

What do you feel? What do you feel the strengths and weaknesses are of PAECT?

Nicole Hill 16:40

I think one of the things that that's good and bad, though, is the fact that we're all volunteers, you know, this whole organization is run by volunteers, we all have our own day jobs. And we do this kind of, you know, and put in all of our blood, sweat, and tears just in our personal time. So that is good, because we all have a stake in it. And we really want to see things move forward. But then it's bad, because there are organizations that have paid people to do all of the day to day tasks that we do on top of.

Frank Ciccitto 17:25

So in that respect, what have you done to improve that? Like to me, I get what you're saying, the positive part of it. But the weakness part of it, how do you deal with that? And how can you improve that going forward? Aside from paying people.

Nicole Hill 17:44

Right, exactly, well, and we are looking like we've done different things where we've paid people not as an employee, but as like a contracted out for different positions. And that's kind of been it, you just try different things and see what works. It's tough, especially because when somebody is a volunteer, and they are going to you know, they can make a commitment to do something and then you know, something doesn't get done because, you know, family and life and, and whatever else. It's not like you can fire anybody or you can reprimand them for not following through because they're volunteer. So we just really work hard at trying to bring people in that have the passion and the drive to want to see us move forward.

Frank Ciccitto 18:48

So how long? I don't think I asked you this, how long have you been in PAECT? Like part of it?

Nicole Hill 18:55

Probably since 2007, or 2008. So when I first started teaching, so I was an elementary educator, like my undergrad is elementary ed, my master's is in reading. But I just had the passion for technology. And I ended up in a middle school. And I worked as an AmeriCorps for a year. And then my principal was like, you're really good with this technology stuff. We have this position open in the communications lab, and I was like, I can't I can't do this. Like you've got to be crazy. But I did that as a long term sub for one year. And then I was hired on but I immediately started looking for oh, I have to learn all of stuff. How can I learn it and got connected with PAECT. Went to Pete and C, went to in 2009 was my first ISTE conference and that was NECC at that point. So I mean everything that I've done and learn to where I am now is the The Director of Instructional Technology and Innovation came from PAECT and ISTE, and being involved in those programs.

Frank Ciccitto 20:08

So I guess you feel the community has been a success?

Nicole Hill 20:13

Yes. I would not have learned what I have learned without being connected to these people.

Frank Ciccitto 20:20

Do you think the general membership gets sees those benefits? Or do you think you're like an anomaly?

Nicole Hill 20:29

I think many of our members see those benefits, but some don't. You know, it just again, it's how much are you connected? Some people get the email, don't even open it. You know what I mean? Like, because we send out a newsletter every week. Not everybody opens that newsletter, not everybody is. So it has to be the membership driven as well, they have to want to participate.

Frank Ciccitto 20:59

How do you see the organization growing in the future?

Nicole Hill 21:05

Hmm, well, we've grown leaps and bounds since I came in as the vice president. And again, some of that was changing up our membership, allowing some free membership, the tiered membership for what we have, I think, running the Keystone summit every summer, and bringing 100 new educators in every year that helps drive our membership. Again, but some of those folks they come, they spend the week at Summit, they go home, they go about their business, you know, and they're members, but they're not active. So it just depends on how that goes. And we just keep doing, we have these conversations. I mean, that was the conversation that we had probably at every board meeting. How do we build the community? How do we build capacity?

Frank Ciccitto 22:04

All right, I'm gonna stop the recording. Thank you very much.