

# Benefits of Collectively Navigating the Waters of Distance Learning

**Marci Powell**

**I**t was a scorching hot Texas day on the San Marcos River as our group plunged into the water. Typically on a canoe trip, it takes awhile before someone accidentally flips over but that day was different. The devastating flood from just weeks before caused an extremely swift current. Six of our 10 canoes capsized upon entry into the treach-

erous waters. Once recovered, it was immediately decided that our most experienced would become a point man to lead the way.

The flood waters that had risen 40 feet above flood stages were now near level; but still, it was quite eerie to see uprooted trees and debris lodged sideways in tree tops high above the river. As we navigated the rapids and newly-formed dams caused by downed trees, we took comfort in knowing our point man was guiding us safely by looking ahead.

One of the greatest benefits of navigating through a changing environment as a group is tapping the resources and strengths from within. Our canoeing entourage overcame rough waters successfully by finding expertise from within. As distance learning professionals, we understand that our environment is changing. We find ourselves facing many challenges. We look to others who have navigated the waters ahead of us to guide the way. We find success when tapping into the resources and strengths of our collective experience. Our national and state distance learning associations

provide a gathering place of expertise—a pool of experience. Networking among professionals is truly one of the greatest benefits derived from being part of our groups. However, benefits of being a member of USDLA and its subsidiaries runs much deeper.

The USDLA continuously defines additional value-added services to chapters and to all individual USDLA members. As an association of associations, USDLA has two primary goals: to assist in the building of strong local and state chapters and to expand national services in order to increase the value of individual USDLA membership.

Not only is there a powerful network among distance learning practitioners, but a powerful network exists of business and industry leaders. Since its inception in 1987, USDLA membership has included educators and trainers as well as technology vendors in the interest of promoting distance learning applications and technology. USDLA has created and sponsored the forums, trade shows, conferences, and other events that have fostered many educational and cor-



Marci Powell, Education Advocate,  
SBC, 4119 Broadway, Room 460,  
San Antonio, Texas 78209.  
Telephone: (210) 633-5602.  
E-mail: marci.powell@sbc.com

porate alliances that have driven the quantum advances in distance learning and telemedicine. Vendors have often chosen USDLA-sponsored events as the forum for new product introduction and launches. USDLA can help practitioners in contacting multiple vendors of a specific technology and more importantly, can reference institutions and programs that are users of a specific technology.

Valuable information on distance learning is provided through electronic newsletters, the USDLA website, this magazine, other magazine articles such as our *Newsweek* column. Likewise, these forums provide opportunity for chapters and members to present information. Links directly to chapter Websites allow prospective members who are searching the Web for information regarding distance learning to be linked to the nearest chapter. Current research and statistics relevant to the field and its growing number of practitioners is available, as well as information on scheduled meetings, conferences, major industry events, and other special events.

In addition to conferences—including the VNU Training & Online Learning, International Forum for Women in E-learning, and Nova Southeastern University/Fischler School Annual Conference, USDLA has worked closely in the past with ICDE, International. USDLA executives have consulted

with numerous distance learning officials in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. There is interest on the part of many countries to form local chapters of the USDLA. As these international chapters become a reality, the national organization will become the members' link to the worldwide market.

The USDLA continues its program of national awards and recognition to individuals, institutions, agencies and companies with outstanding achievements and contributions in the field of distance learning.

Chapters and affiliates of USDLA are entitled to legal information obtained from the specialized law firm retained by USDLA. A major benefit of USDLA membership is the connection to a non-profit organization. Chapters are given guidance to establish and maintain their own nonprofit status with respect to IRS filing and submission of annual forms.

The USDLA is looked upon by Congress as the authoritative voice that speaks on behalf of the distance learning constituency. Whether it is the 1996 Telecommunications Act or any others, the USDLA is called on to represent its diverse membership. The USDLA has often been called on to give congressional testimony. Several chapters have their own public policy committees while also serving on the national committee.

The list could go on and will continue to expand as we grow. We are here to address the needs of our members. Like the ever-changing distance learning environment in which we live, it is our desire to work as a group to navigate the rough waters. USDLA serves as the point man leading the way. Addressing the needs of our members is of great importance to us. We encourage members to share their needs and desires with us. Each month there is a regularly scheduled audio conference among chapter presidents, the USDLA Executive Committee, and the USDLA administration. This forum ensures that chapter issues and concerns are discussed and dealt with on a national level.

I encourage you to make sure your needs are being expressed nationally either directly to headquarters or through your chapter. A point man is not efficient if he is not serving the good of the whole. USDLA can only accomplish its two primary goals: to assist in the building of strong local and state chapters and to expand national services in order to increase the value of individual USDLA membership, if we keep the communication lines open and know your needs. As we navigate the waters of distance learning, help us continue to meet your needs making our overall association beneficial for all.

**"THE USDLA IS LOOKED UPON BY CONGRESS AS THE AUTHORITATIVE VOICE THAT SPEAKS ON BEHALF OF THE DISTANCE LEARNING CONTITUENCY."**