



# Not Part of the Plan

David Alan Grier

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**When we consider expanding the Computer Society or IEEE, we ultimately face some aspect of the immigrant experience, of moving across cultural boundaries.**

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**T**he taxi reservation system didn't anticipate this kind of problem—it wasn't part of the plan.

After letting me reserve a car to go to the airport, it failed me when a giant flatbed truck unexpectedly blocked the street. Worried about missing my flight due to the congested local streets, I scrolled through pages of applications, looking for any way to contact my driver. Finally, I tried a desperate hack to a message screen and transmitted my phone number. A moment later, the driver called and was able to find a way to adjust to the unforeseen circumstances.

As the taxi sped toward the airport, the driver apologized for the delay. I assured him that he wasn't at fault, but he seemed more ready to curse the darkness than to light a candle. I stopped his complaints and asked if the delay would suggest to his supervisor that he was trying to get a ride outside the system. The driver laughed and said he didn't think it would be a problem. After a moment, he asked, "Are you in software or something?" When I said that I was, he asked, "Are you with IEEE?"

My role with IEEE seemed out of place to him. Although he regularly drove political leaders around town and occasionally transported

celebrities to and from their hotels, he had never carried an engineer. He excitedly told me that he was studying to get certified as a network technician and hoped to get an IEEE Computer Society certificate within a few months.

His story suggested the difficulties we face in getting our educational materials into the hands of those who could benefit from them. Our vision posits that our potential students live in a rational world, in which they have sufficient resources to support their study. My driver lived in a world in which time and space and money were tightly constrained. Any incident, no matter how minor, could disrupt the supply of any of these things. His study time could be claimed by his mother, who needed extra care. His study space in the living room might be taken to house a cousin. His test fees could be claimed by a sister's dowry, a brother's tuition, or a family emergency. Nonetheless, after three years of study, he was close to getting his first certificate. "I'll drive through Monday," he said. "Monday is always a good day. I'll give the money to my wife and go into our bedroom. I won't come out until I've passed the certification test."

Traditionally, professional societies have grown most rapidly when their profession is viewed as

a path of advancement. Electrical, computer, and software engineering have helped families move from poverty to affluence, from farm to city, from undeveloped countries to industrial centers. Yet, if my driver's experience suggested anything, it implied that we might be living in a world with more barriers to advancement than we believe. It's one thing for a farm child to save enough money to leave a distant town and head to the big city. It's something entirely different, in our highly connected age, to break the bonds upon us and find the freedom to get ready for a new career.

As we pulled up to the airport, the driver realized that he had failed to start his meter. He would have to explain the trip to his supervisor. As I paid the negotiated fare, I said that I hoped he wouldn't get into any trouble. "Don't worry," he responded. "Many drivers have trouble learning to follow the system."

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