



Our Opportunities to Collaborate: In-Person and Virtual, Local and Global, the Society Welcomes New Connections

William (Bill) Gropp, President, IEEE Computer Society

Forrest Shull, Past President, IEEE Computer Society

With a fresh appreciation for “normal,” we are again meeting in person, making new connections, and even enjoying some of the new platforms, perspectives, and strategies that emerged to support our activities during

the COVID pandemic. As 2022 draws to a close, IEEE Computer Society President William Gropp talks with Forrest Shull (2021 Computer Society President) about the advantages we gained this year, and how we can continue to build on them in new collaborations and activities.

FORREST SHULL: I looked over what we talked about in our interview at the start of your term. At the time, we were still wondering how COVID was going to affect things.



Now you've had the wonderful opportunity to bring the Society back into the real in-person world again. How did that go this year? What kind of things do you think worked well?

WILLIAM GROPP: I'm really happy that we've been able to meet in person again. It was great for the Board meetings, and particularly for making them more strategic. Having the leadership focus on more strategic issues has been a continuation of the direction we've been going in over the last few years. But it would be very hard to do some of the things that we did to get the leadership engaged at this level with a virtual tool. That's why we see so many conferences now trying to go back to in-person, and often succeeding at it. We see far more attendees coming to take advantage of in-person conferences, and I really do see us working to take advantage of that.

I'll also say that there are a few things that I would like to have done better this year. I know how to do them when I meet with people in person, and our hybrid world this year made them more challenging.

Some highlights for me this year, in terms of things that I liked and things I regret: My first international trip after COVID was going to the IEEE Region 9 meeting in Mexico City. That was fabulous. It was really great to see that broad spectrum of volunteers because that was IEEE Region 9, not Computer Society (CS) Region 9, but all of Region 9. Meeting with the CS volunteers, the people from the chapters in that region, was fantastic. At the same time, when I first thought about being president, one of the things that I was most looking forward to was traveling to Asia and meeting with our members in one of our most rapidly growing areas, and that still just hasn't been practical. We're on a good path to getting back to those in person meetings. But we're not quite there yet for some things. It does slow down our

William (Bill) Gropp is the 2022 IEEE Computer Society president and Director of the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL 61820 USA. Contact him at wgropp@illinois.edu.

Forrest Shull is the IEEE Computer Society past president and the lead for defense software acquisition policy research at Carnegie Mellon University's Software Engineering Institute, Pittsburgh, PA 15213 USA. Contact him at fshull@computer.org.



William Gropp

Forrest Shull

ability to react, work with our members, and connect with our members.

SHULL: Very good point. I often think of it as a two-way street, too. It's really good for the members to have the Society leadership come and be able to join them and see all the things that they're doing. But, as president, I often felt like these are the things that get me energized.

GROPP: Oh, yes.

SHULL: To go there and to be able to be in person and hear about all the things that make them excited. For both sides, I hope that we continue to expand and do more in person again.

GROPP: I was really proud that we were able to hold one of our board meetings in Europe. I'm hoping that I have established a new tradition of not holding all the board meetings in the U.S. We are a very international Society. I think our future is to be more international.

SHULL: Yes.

GROPP: The Board of Governors meeting in Glasgow worked very well in terms

of the business of the board. It wasn't really much more difficult than managing the meeting in the U.S. I think as we're emerging from COVID, it's an opportunity to reexamine some of the assumptions we've always made about where we hold meetings and how to keep our leadership engaged effectively.

IT'S NOT JUST THE TALKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING AT CONFERENCES

SHULL: That's a perfect segue into my next question. One of the things that you've really been working on with Grace Lewis, the VP for Technical and Conference (T&C) Activities, is what will future conferences look like as the world is opening up again? That pendulum is swinging back the other way, right underneath us. What have you seen so far? Where do you think things are likely to end up?

GROPP: Given our production schedule for articles, this interview is actually taking place in mid-September. At this point, I'm really looking forward to our November board meeting

when we will be discussing the works of these ad hoc committees and groups looking at the future of conferences. But what I've seen so far is that certainly the in-person component of our conferences is really important. We're also seeing ways to make at least some of the experience available virtually, which provides broader engagement.

Today, I think there's a greater understanding that a lot of what people get out of conferences is not just the talks. For example, for early career professionals, networking opportunities can be very important. We need to continue thinking more about how we emphasize and improve how conferences serve those diverse needs. Because

experiments that can help chart an effective path forward.

SHULL: Yes.

GROPP: One of the other things that's clear about the future of conferences is that no one has any idea what the final answer will look like. But a lot of people have ideas of things that might work or that might be a component of it. I am proud of the way that we've run on the order of 200 conferences this year. That's a lot of opportunities to experiment and to learn from each other.

SHULL: That's a great sign, actually, that the system is working well, it

Society has provided additional funds for our chapters this year, for the first time in a while, to give them a bit more leeway to try things out themselves. Where do you see that going? How did things work out this year?

GROPP: One of the things that I've really wanted people to focus on this year is collaboration. We have five program boards, and each program manages itself. But the reality is that there's lots of opportunities for collaboration across the program boards. That is something that I've been pushing this year, and I've been really happy to see how that's been embraced.

I think membership is a perfect example of that because one of the strengths of being a member is your ability to participate and network across all of our activities. One area of concern for leadership in membership is things like conducting chapter meetings, bringing in expert speakers, or recognizing people who interact with the chapters. That has been one major effort. But our leaders have also been talking about how we manage the sort of tricky issues between conferences and chapter meetings, for example, in a way that is positive and synergistic, as opposed to clearly delineating that this is yours and that is mine.

I'm really happy to see that we've gotten started on this, and I'm very confident that we'll continue to work on taking advantage of the linkages between different activities. I think it has been important to invest in the chapters and encourage them to look for connections with other parts of the Computer Society, with our professional education activities, standards, publications, and conferences. We've particularly seen connections with publications, for example, experimenting with having a chapter select a paper and read it and talk about it. Those are the sorts of things that build up the connections among our volunteer communities and provide value for members.

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there is that tendency to say, "Well, it's a conference. We have to get all these papers presented and reviewed and so forth." That is important. A lot comes out of that, but a lot comes out of the other engagements and the other interactions that happen. In looking at both, how do we improve in-person conferences and how can conferences learn from what other conferences are doing?

Some conferences have put more effort into that and have tried out some new and innovative things. Also, we now have more experience with what we can do without placing too much of a burden on the volunteers or on the staff, in terms of providing at least some of that value for remote attendees. It's instructive to see what options we can offer for people for whom the cost, or the schedule, or perhaps just the culture and environment isn't conducive for them attending in person. This is another direction that a number of the presidents have been pushing, and I have been glad this year to see how we can support these various

allows people to come to the fore who are willing to experiment and do what they can to serve the community.

GROPP: The Computer Society staff has done a great job of supporting this culture of experimentation by providing a lot of information and shared knowledge about the various tools available to conference organizers and making it possible for people to experiment. That staff support is important but sometimes overlooked. It's easy to come up with ideas that we would like to try out, but to actually get all of the pieces that you need to conduct the experiment can be a challenge. Having staff with a wealth of experience, who can point you in the right direction and help you select the appropriate lab equipment, as it were, is really critical.

SHULL: Continuing the topic of experimentation, let's talk about member engagement. This is another area, where there were huge changes as we went all virtual, and now some things are starting to open up again. I know that the

FOCUS ON STRATEGIC DIRECTION

SHULL: When we did the interview to start your term, the article title became “Succeeding Together.” You had really made a fine point of this idea of working across stovepipes and bringing the different lines of effort together. In terms of results, what stands out? You’ve mentioned a couple of things already, but is there something that stands out this year as a particularly big success, where you got to see a lot of different groups coming together?

GROPP: Some of what I’ve been most personally involved in is working with the Board of Governors to set strategic direction for the Society. The board has a lot of statutory obligations, so it’s important to structure our meetings to make the best use of our time together and really focus on the impactful things. This is something that the presidents have been moving toward over time, so I’m not taking credit for all of this, but I think I have helped advance the needle further. We’ve really moved to a model where we use e-mail or separate smaller meetings to deal with a lot of the important but more routine business, so that we can spend our valuable time together on activities that support interpersonal interactions and effective brainstorming.

If I had to pick what was maybe the most exciting couple of hours in my presidency, it really would be the brainstorming sessions at the board meetings where people were thinking strategically about what the directions the computing community should be taking, and the directions the Society should be taking. A goal of my time as president has been ensuring that we continue to do that, that we do it strategically, and then follow it up with thinking about how we implement those plans.

SHULL: Speaking of big strategic decisions: I think one of the main ones that we’ve been working on for a long time

now, is Open Access. Today, we have Plan S in Europe. In the U.S., we have the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) memo that came out this year. It’s clear this continues to be an important issue worldwide. I know you’ve been putting a lot of thought on this. I wondered if you wanted to share where you think the current discussion is and where things are headed?

GROPP: Yes, I think this is like the future of conferences. It’s easy to take an extreme ideological position that, in a perfect world, would sound really good. For example, in a perfect world,

Well, there used to be a model in which the subscribers to the journals paid for that. In an Open Access, author-pays model, those people are disadvantaged. Is that what we want to do? There are a lot of unintended consequences. I’m not saying that the unintended consequences are an excuse to stay with the status quo, but I think that there is more of an understanding that it’s more complicated. It’s making us start to look at these things. And, of course, we recognize that the previous status quo had its own drawbacks.

When we were recording this, the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) had just come

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all conferences should be hybrid and the experience you should get should not depend on whether you’re there or not. That’s a great, easily articulated vision, but not practical with today’s technology. The same things hold for Open Access. It’s really easy to say that all the content should be free and available to everybody. But that doesn’t actually work because even if you go to an arXiv-only model, people forget there actually is somebody paying for arXiv.

There are a number of people who point out that somebody has to pay for it. The question is, who is subsidizing whom? People have been looking at the subsidies required for Open Access and the pros and cons. Some of the cons are starting to emerge. I think that that’s good. For example, Plan S is great for well-funded researchers who have government money that covers Open Access fees or similar costs. But what if you’re not an established researcher? What if you don’t have a grant? What if you’re trying to publish so you can get those grants? Now what? Who pays for you there?

out with an editorial on this, pointing out that some of these proposed Open Access models really do advantage the better funded and the more established institutions and authors. Is that really what we want to do?

The reality is that nobody has a perfect solution. People are trying different things. Again, there’s a lot of experimentation going on, and I think that that’s great. As you alluded to, we now have a more mature understanding of the issues. We’ve moved past the sort of ideological pure positions to thinking about what we can do going forward. We’re seeing that in some of the things the Computer Society is trying in terms of providing different kinds of Open Access journals and read-and-publish models. But read-and-publish models, again, are an example of how some institutions can manage to pay to participate, while others can’t. What do we do for them?

We know that Open Access won’t be simple, but it is addressing real issues. I’m looking forward to what we will have as the next steps for

experimentation. Like the future of conferences, an important thing about addressing those problems is acknowledging that they are hard, complicated problems with shifting boundary positions.

What we need to be doing is not trying to solve the problem once and for all but figure out how to move forward as quickly as possible to explore different ideas and to better understand and to solve the problems we can. Creating an Open Access journal is a solution for some authors. But we need to continue to work on understanding how we will serve authors that might not have funding.

SHULL: Right.

GROPP: I feel that we've set the right tone in terms of saying, Open Access is here. We're going to have to do things with it. But, at the same time, nobody really knows what it's going to look like. We need to be one of the leaders in exploring different ways to address those issues.

SUPPORTING THE GROWTH OF PEOPLE IN THE PROFESSION

SHULL: Your point about unintended consequences was important. The Computer Society is not just a publisher. We have this mandate to serve the larger community. Making sure that we're doing something that can accommodate the global professional community is somewhat different than the goal of some of the other scientific publishers.

GROPP: One thing I'd like to really emphasize here is that it's really important for us to support the growth of people in the profession. For example, we need to support the early career professionals. If we were just concerned about attracting and supporting big names who could attract the most attention for a given conference, we would make other choices. But we

really have a mission to support and advance the profession and the community. That's why I bring up these issues about the unintended consequences of the starting researcher who may not have those grants. It's why I talk about the importance of in-person presence at conferences for networking. That can be an important opportunity for the early career professionals to connect with more senior people in their field to get their insights and advice, and frankly often to get opportunities. That is one of the things that distinguishes us as a professional society from other organizations.

Similarly, I know that individual researchers could say, "Okay, I could publish my stuff by just putting it up in arXiv." This is true. But doing so doesn't ensure the health of the community. How do we ensure that new ideas have a place to germinate and grow before somebody's willing to say, "Ah, I see how I can fit that into my program, or how I can fit that into my product"? What I've really enjoyed over the last couple of years that I've been in the Computer Society is the recognition that that is an important part of our mission. It's something that isn't as easily captured in the metrics about how much we publish, or how much revenue we generate.

SHULL: That's a perfect springboard to talk about diversity and inclusion efforts. You've already mentioned diversity in terms of serving both early career and established professionals. How do you think things went this year in terms of continuing to build a more diverse and inclusive Society?

GROPP: I think it went well. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is something you have to keep focusing on.

And, I feel we've done that. I think Computer Society President-Elect Nita Patel's done a great job with the Diversity & Inclusion Committee. I think the commitment from the Computer Society to provide funding

for people who have innovative ideas for how to improve this was a great idea, and it's one that I'm continuing. By the time this article comes out, we will have done another call for proposals in that area. There's an increasing awareness of these issues, as we are looking at all of our activities, and memberships of our boards and committees. Having said that, we all know that we need to continue to do better. I would say I'm happy with what we have done, but we have more to do.

SHULL: How has your experience this year been for you? For readers who might be contemplating running for Society leadership positions, what have you gotten out of the experience this year?

GROPP: It's been great. It's not that there haven't been the usual sorts of challenges. One of the things that presidents usually discover, and I'm sure you did, is that wow, we have a lot of appointments to make for Society leadership positions. I took that as an opening—we've got all these appointments to make, how do we improve how we do that? How do I use that as an opportunity to give more opportunities to people? Again, I think we've made a good first step there. I'm hoping that we'll continue to look at that as a way to give more people opportunities to rise in the leadership of the Computer Society.

That is one of the things that I really enjoy, helping other people excel. Being a Computer Society President gives you a lot of opportunities to give others opportunities to show what they can do. I've been very happy with how people have taken advantage of those. I really have had fun with that. I'm proud of how people have taken advantage of those opportunities. That's really what I wanted to see. Because in the end, none of us can do everything. I really enjoyed this opportunity to accomplish a lot in this collaborative fashion by working

with people who have great ideas, often better ideas, than I had for a lot of these things. I've really been amazed at the suggestions that have come up. That's really cool.

SHULL: What have I not asked you about that you would like to talk about from this year's experiences?

GROPP: One of the things that is going to be a real joy for me is the awards that will be presented at Supercomputing (SC22). The people who win these awards have done so much for our profession.

Regarding awards, the president's only input is maybe setting up the committees that go off and look at these things. So, it is very serendipitous that I happen to know the three awardees at SC, in my technical area. They are Ian Foster for the ACM/


IEEE Computer Society Ken Kennedy Award, Torsten Hoefler for the Sidney Fernbach Award, and Satoshi Matsuoka for the Seymour Cray Computer Engineering Award. I published with all of them. They are all friends. It was just really special to be able to let them know they received this well-deserved award. I'm really looking forward to making this presentation at SC.

I'm really glad that this year we're going to be able to hold an in-person awards ceremony for the last couple of years of award winners. As we get back to in person, that's going to be another perk of being president.

SHULL: Thank you for the time today, Bill. It is a pleasure to hear about these highlights from your presidential year, and hopefully hearing about these types of experiences will get

more people to consider stepping up and being part of our senior leadership positions.

I want to end by saying, thank you, Bill, because as we have gone through this huge period of turmoil with COVID, I think you've been much more than a steady hand on the tiller. Your term has really helped us manage the transition, while continuing to think about where we're going from here, and how we continue to grow and expand strategically to better serve the community. Thank you for all the time you've put into it this year.

GROPP: Thank you, Forrest. Thank you for setting me up for this too because you had a very difficult job in the depths of the pandemic. That is one of the reasons that I'm very positive about our future—we have people who step up and just do a fantastic job. 



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