



Recognize. Empower. Connect.  
Honoring emerging leaders who are redefining education.

Quarter 1 / 2026



### CONTRIBUTE & CONNECT

- Are you interested in contributing an article for the [NexGen newsletter](#)?
- Are you attending an event between July and December? [Let us know](#) and we will share in upcoming newsletters.
- [Have a new idea?](#) We would love to hear from you.

### CONTACT A NEXGEN LEADER

- [Katelyn Focucci](#)
- [Victoria Veneziano](#)
- [Drew Wodarski](#)
- [Heather Tuley](#)

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## Networking as Relationship-Building: How Connection Helped Me Grow My Career

[EMILY ISLIP](#) | SMITH SYSTEM | Product Portfolio Manager



Networking is often described as the process of interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional contacts. While that definition is accurate, I've come to view networking in a simpler, more meaningful way: relationship-building.

Early in my career, I focused on doing strong, meaningful work. I believed that dedication, quality, and consistency would naturally open new doors. While that foundation was important, I eventually realized that progress isn't driven by performance alone.

As I grew, I began to understand the power of connection. By saying yes to new opportunities, meeting new people, and stepping outside my comfort zone, my perspective expanded. I learned that growth happens at the intersection of hard work and relationships, and that sometimes a single conversation can create unexpected opportunities.

My passion for learning led me to join the first cohort of the ECLPS program. Although I wasn't sure what to expect, I was eager to participate. What stood out most was the diversity of the group, professionals from across the education community, each bringing unique perspectives and experiences. Those relationships continue to shape my career today.

Through ECLPS, I met Heather and Jolene. While some might label this "networking," I see it as authentic connection. They encouraged me to push beyond my comfort zone, supported my growth, and opened doors I hadn't imagined. Their guidance played a role in my being selected for the NexGen Award two years ago, an experience that helped me better recognize my own potential. Soon after, I was invited to participate in the Bold Women session. Sharing my story, and seeing it resonate with others, was incredibly empowering. With a strong support system behind me, I gained confidence in presenting, sharing my knowledge, and engaging more fully in the industry.

Today, I see networking as an investment in people. I value learning from others, sharing what I know, and building relationships that support collective growth. And who knows, my next conversation might lead to the next chapter in my journey.

## Know Your Strengths and USE Them: Authenticity in the Workplace

[VICTORIA VENEZIANO](#) | METEOR EDUCATION  
Southwest Studio Learning Experience Coordinator



At Meteor Education, we use CoreClarity strengths as the foundation for how we connect and collaborate. In our first weeks as Meteorites, we uncover what we do best and how we most meaningfully contribute to our teams and clients. With that awareness, we learn to

## Networking Re-Evaluated: How A4LE Chapters Drive Innovation in Learning Environment Design

[DREW WODARSKI](#) | MIEN ENVIRONMENTS  
Regional Account Manager



In an industry where "networking" can often feel like a buzzword, its true power as an essential tool for progress is being championed by organizations like the Association for Learning Environments (A4LE). Far from mere mingling, A4LE chapters use networking as a tool for discussing the latest research in learning environment design, professional growth, and continuous improvement. A4LE is broken down into regions and chapters, check the website to see when/where you can get involved.

leverage our Top 5 strengths and lean on colleagues where we may be less strong. It's an ongoing practice that reveals our superpowers and transforms how we relate to one another.

Professionally and personally, knowing what you do well can, *and should*, be leveraged. Whether you're selling, creating, discovering, or designing – *relationships* will be the core of your success.

If you're looking to grow yourself *or* grow your book of business, knowing how you most valuably contribute will make your work more joyful, your connections more genuine, and the speed of your success more rapid.

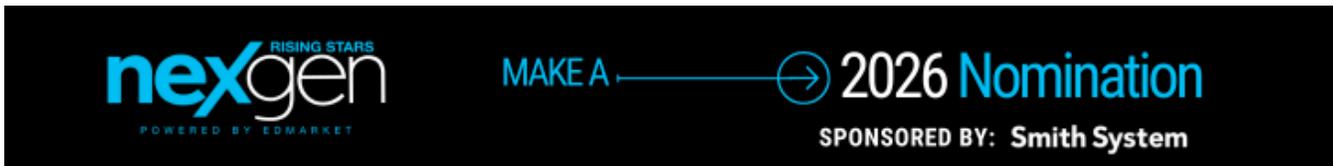
There are many great personality tests, but **CoreClarity** is a personal favorite, and professionally acclaimed. Another option is **Via Character**.

We hope you will take one of these tests to make our virtual session this month more interactive. I can't wait to hear your results!

A key function of the local A4LE Chapter is to break down the information silo that can often isolate educational institutions, architects/designers (A&D), vendors, and manufacturers. Through organized events such as regional A4LE tours, chapters create a platform to showcase innovative projects tackling 21st-century challenges. A recent example of this is the A4LE Rocky Mountain Region Tour I attended. Many local districts, architects, and vendors toured a brand new K-12 project together. The original engineers and architects were on hand to answer questions and discuss the specific roadblocks they encountered during the process.

These gatherings allow the entire educational community to convene, collaborate on future concepts, share critical research, and ultimately push the boundaries of what is achievable in learning space design. For those looking to forge new connections and gain diverse perspectives, many chapters also host quarterly Meet and Greet events. Don't be shy, get out there and connect with industry professionals.

The core value still remains the shared knowledge. By facilitating the exchange of new, research backed ideas, A4LE chapters are directly helping to advance educational design and student outcomes. Something everyone in our industry should have at the top of mind. I urge anyone in the industry to check the A4LE website for their local chapter's next event and actively engage with the community. I hope to see some new faces at upcoming events!



The banner features the 'nexgen' logo with 'RISING STARS' above it and 'POWERED BY EDMARKET' below. To the right, it says 'MAKE A' followed by a blue circle with a white arrow pointing right, then '2026 Nomination'. Below that, it says 'SPONSORED BY: Smith System'.

## Using Mentorship to Drive Your Career

[KATELYN FORCUCCI](#) | PD BY MIEN | Chief Education Strategist



**As a first-year educator, I was wide-eyed and ready to change the world. I thought I knew it all; boy, was I wrong. All the theory in the world could not prepare me for the 175 unique, precious gems of high schoolers I worked with every day. If it weren't for Robin Finley and Dawnne Hughes, I would never have made it. They helped me laugh through the hard times and celebrate the amazing times. Robin and Dawnne offered three critical features of successful mentorship: their advice, their friendship, and their time. I would not be the educator I am without them.**

When I first stepped into the corporate world, I felt a little lost. I thought success was a linear result of my own sweat, late nights, and the sheer ability to outwork everyone in the room. I was wrong again. Working with amazing people, like Dr. Christina Counts, I found friendship and mentorship again, just as I had loved as a classroom educator. My mentors have taught me to lead fearlessly and empathetically, to fail gracefully, and to never give up- the best skills of what to do and what not to do to succeed.

Now, looking back from a mid-career vantage point, I see that mentorship isn't just a nice-to-have professional perk. It is the single most effective way to compress time and accelerate growth. For young professionals, mentorship is the bridge between theoretical knowledge and the messy, unwritten reality of a career.

### The Gift of "Sidestepping" Mistakes

The most immediate value a mentor provides is the ability to learn from mistakes you haven't made yet. In my early twenties, I was prone to what I call "Suzy Snowflake Syndrome." Everything was wonderful, and everything was fine- even when it wasn't. Dawnne shared with me her story about taking everything on her plate, how it finally toppled, and the brutal downfall of the situation. She taught me how to set clear boundaries and the importance of taking time for myself. Learning from her and sidestepping what could have led to a lot of frustration and burnout is what I will forever be grateful for.

A mentor acts as an encyclopedia of what not to do. They provide a safe space to fail in theory, so you don't have to fail in practice. By sharing their scars, they help you avoid the pitfalls that would otherwise take you years to identify.

### Understanding the Playbook

University teaches you how to analyze data, but it rarely teaches you how to present that data to a hostile stakeholder. It teaches you how to write a report, but not how to read the room during a tense quarterly review. It teaches you the benefits of collaborative and active learning in a lecture hall.

Mentors provide the institutional Cliff Notes. They help you understand the culture, the power dynamics, and the nuances of professional etiquette.

As a former mentee, I remember my mentor explaining the *why* behind a sudden pivot. That context transformed my frustration into strategic alignment. Suddenly, I wasn't just a cog in the wheel; I was part of the instructional solution.

### Expanding Your Network

Perhaps the most tangible benefit of mentorship is the borrowed authority it provides. When a respected leader takes you under their wing, their network often becomes yours. A mentor doesn't just give advice; they initiate introductions and make connections. Expanding your network and building relationships is key to mentorships.

For a young professional, being vouched for by a veteran is like receiving a golden ticket. It opens doors to committees, high-stakes projects, and networking circles that would normally take years to access. They act as your silent advocate in rooms you aren't yet invited to enter.

### From Mentee to Mentor

Eventually, the dynamic shifts. As I grew in my role, the relationship evolved from a teacher-student dynamic into a peer-level partnership and friendship. I began providing my mentors with fresh perspectives on emerging tech and instructional shifts—what we now call reverse mentorship. Mentorships are not a one-way street. They require communication, vulnerability, and the desire for both parties to learn and grow.

As a young professional, don't wait for a formal program to find a mentor. Look for the person whose work style you admire and ask for fifteen minutes of their time. The vulnerability of asking for help is actually a signal of high potential. Surround yourself with good humans; mentorship isn't secluded to just one. Having multiple mentors is also important and admirable.

To my younger self, and to those just starting: You can certainly hike the mountain alone, and you might even reach the top. But with a mentor, you won't just get there faster—you'll actually enjoy the view along the way.

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## NexGen Call To Action

*Utilizing LinkedIn*

- Polish your LinkedIn profile
- Post a value-driven update
- Connect with 3 new peers

## NexGen Virtual Zoom Sessions

*(All Cohorts Invited)*

- March 19, 2026, 3:00pm EST
- June 18, 2026, 3:00pm EST
- September 17, 2026, 3:00pm EST

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## 2026 On-Site Events

*Will you be there? Let's connect!*



**A4LE Southern Region Conference**  
April 20-23, 2026 / Austin, TX

# NeoCon

**NeoCon**  
June 7-10, 2026 / Chicago, IL



**EDspaces**  
October 28-30, 2026 / Kansas City, MO

[Click here to visit A4LE Events Page](#)

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