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NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCIENCE & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
N C S C E

CONFERENCE EVALUATION:

MAXIMIZING COLLECTIVE IMPACT THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Prepared for the
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the Maximizing Collective Impact Through Cross-Sector Partnerships planning meeting conducted by RK&A, Inc. (RK&A) for the National Center for Science and Civic Engagement (NCSCE). The meeting, which took place in March 2017 and was funded through the National Science Foundation's Advancing Informal STEM Learning Program (NSF-AISL 1612376), brought together individuals from NCSCE's SENCER/SENCER-ISE network, NISE Net, and other networks to leverage the expertise and insights of participants and imagine and articulate ideas for cross-network projects. The following summary highlights key findings that may help SENCER as it explores collaborations with other networks.

> **The findings presented here are among the most salient. Please read the body of the report for a more comprehensive presentation of findings.**

MEETING EXPERIENCE

Results show participants had mixed feelings about the meeting experience. On the one hand, they enjoyed the chance to learn how other networks function, and they felt comfortable sharing ideas, thanks in no small part of the efforts of the meeting organizers and facilitator. On the other hand, several said the meeting did not evoke any new or different insights about what makes for successful collaborations between two networks. This may be in part due to the structure of meeting activities (e.g., spending most of the first day on individual network presentations).

THOUGHTS ON SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

Despite the mixed feelings about the meeting experience, participants offered many elements they believe make for successful collaborations, based on their collective professional experiences. Two key ideas rose to the top:

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke of the importance of relationships for creating and maintaining successful collaborations. They discussed this from many angles, from the need for honest and open-ended conversation upfront (i.e., "getting to know" other networks without presuming collaboration will occur) to implementing clear communication routines both during initial talks and throughout collaborations. While some discussed the value of network leaders developing close relationships with one another, others said it is important for people in

different roles within the networks to have a voice in shaping potential collaborations. However, a few also cautioned against entering into partnerships that are dependent on individual relationships, as staff turnover can adversely affect collaborations. Time is central to all of this; relationship building takes time, so it is important not to rush into collaboration.

NEED FOR CLEAR GOALS AND PURPOSE

Additionally, participants repeatedly spoke about the importance of clarifying goals, both for individual networks and potential collaborations. A few said successful collaborations are only possible if each individual network has a clear sense of its own internal goals for the future (e.g., over the next few years); this allows another network to clearly understand what it can offer a collaboration. Once internal goals are in place, participants said successful collaborations depend on two networks coming together and establishing a shared set of goals that are future-oriented and align well with the individual goals of each network. Further, they cautioned against succumbing to pressure to pursue network collaborations due to external factors (e.g., funders). For a collaboration to be successful, its goals must emerge naturally out of a mutual need that ignites both networks' passion and that is best addressed through collaboration (as opposed to as individual networks).

MOVING FORWARD

Overwhelmingly, participants believe there is immense value in participating in a network, both personally and organizationally; it acts as "professional development," creates a community among like-minded individuals and organizations, and helps organizations pool their resources to achieve broad impact. All of this bodes well for SENCER as it contemplates collaborating with other large networks; if participants did not see value in network participation they surely would not be supportive of collaborations between networks. Participants offered a range of potential collaborations for SENCER to explore moving forward, most of which are networks or organizations that they feel share SENCER's core goal of civic engagement. Positively, their suggestions are quite diverse—from technology companies to land-management agencies to conservation networks. As SENCER evolves its thinking on potential collaborations, it might want to think critically about which, if any, of these potential collaborations might address an important need that an individual network is not capable of adequately serving alone.

STUDY BACKGROUND

The National Center for Science and Civic Engagement (NCSCE) contracted RK&A, Inc. (RK&A) to conduct an evaluation of the Maximizing Collective Impact Through Cross-Sector Partnerships planning meeting, which took place in March 2017 and was funded through the National Science Foundation's Advancing Informal STEM Learning Program (NSF-AISL 1612376). The meeting brought together individuals from NCSCE's SENCER/SENCER-ISE network, NISE Net, and other networks to leverage their expertise and insights and imagine and articulate ideas for cross-network projects. While the meeting focused on exploring the potential for the collective impact of a partnership between SENCER and NISE Net, SENCER also remains open to partnerships with other networks, including those represented at the meeting. As such, this evaluation explores participants' thoughts on the March meeting as well as their thoughts on collaboration strategies that build successful partnerships in general, which will be helpful to SENCER as it moves forward in forging partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

RK&A attended the meeting (in March 2017) to provide context for the evaluation. In July-August 2017, RK&A conducted 12 interviews with meeting participants; three of the 15 participants were unavailable. SENCER provided RK&A a list of meeting participants and their contact information, and RK&A e-mailed each participant individually and scheduled telephone interviews. In the interviews, participants were asked questions about their experiences at the meeting, as well as with partnerships and networks in general (see the interview guide in Appendix A). The interviewer took verbatim notes to facilitate analysis.

In-depth interviews are open-ended and encourage interviewees to express their opinions, understandings, and the meaning they construct. They are valuable because they allow participants to express themselves using language and concepts of their choosing (as opposed to the language of the evaluator or researcher). Additionally, the interviewer is able to ask probing or clarifying questions to better understand participants' experiences.

The interviews produced descriptive data that were analyzed qualitatively, meaning that the evaluator studied the data for meaningful patterns and, as patterns and trends emerged, grouped similar responses. Where possible, partners' verbatim language (edited for clarity) is included to exemplify trends.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

RK&A interviewed 12 individuals who participated in the Maximizing Collective Impact Through Cross-Sector Partnerships planning meeting by telephone in July-August. All have worked as part of SENCER/SENCER-ISE, NISE Net, or another large informal education network.

Specifically:

- ♦ Five have worked only with NISE Net;
- ♦ Four have worked with other large informal education networks (not SENCER or NISE Net);
- ♦ Two have worked with both SENCER and NISE Net;
- ♦ One has worked only with SENCER.

OVERALL MEETING EXPERIENCE

When asked to reflect on the meeting experience, participants said the meeting organizers and facilitator created a positive environment where everyone felt comfortable sharing ideas. Additionally, all said they enjoyed learning more about how SENCER, NISE Net, and the other networks function as well as thinking about how their network was similar to or different from other networks. More specifically, a few felt reassured to learn that networks face common challenges, such as managing communication among members who are dispersed nationwide. A few others enjoyed the large-group discussion on what each network could offer a potential collaboration as well as the small-group discussions on topics related to collective impact. Another found it helpful to think about how networks operating in different sectors might collaborate, and how this might differ from a collaboration between two more "homogenous" networks.

However, though they enjoyed learning about the various networks represented, several also said they did not come away from the meeting with any new or different insights about what makes for a successful collaboration between two networks. A few suspected this was because an entire day (of a two-day meeting) was devoted to simply sharing the work and stories of each individual network; while interesting, it did not prompt them to think deeply about how networks might interact with one another and what would help or hinder collaboration.

> "Certainly, I noted similarities and differences in the circumstances of [the] networks [represented] and what they were doing, but I'm not sure [it] focus[ed] much on how those networks revealed clues to how two networks might work together. What they were doing was interesting, but it is not clear to me that they suggested models of how two well-established networks might end up working together."

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL NETWORK COLLABORATIONS

Participants identified a few elements they believe need to be in place for a successful collaboration between two large networks.

- ◆ **Common purpose and goals:** The majority said the most fundamental element of a successful collaboration between networks is a shared understanding of the purpose and goals of the collaboration. Participants spoke of defining a "mutual need" that both networks are passionate about addressing as well as developing a "collective" and "future-oriented" narrative for the work they will do together. A few said this helps ensure buy-in and support from leaders and network members, which is essential since collaborations require significant time and effort. Two also said it is important to define clear metrics for how the collaboration will measure success of the shared goals; as one put it, "a feedback loop [of] evaluation, research, and assessment."

- ◆ **Effective communication:** More than one-half said having a mechanism for sharing information and resources is essential to successful network collaboration. They stressed the need for regular communication among leaders and members, both digitally and in person. Related to this, a few said it is important for leaders to establish personal relationships for a collaboration to be successful; as one put it, "it seems to really help if you can break down the formalities and work to understand each other better." Another said it is important to have people in different roles from both networks at the table when defining the collaboration.

- ◆ **Clear roles and responsibilities:** Several explained that successful collaboration requires mutual knowledge and understanding of each individual network's mission, culture, and distinctive assets; this allows both networks to leverage their synergistic assets in collaboration. After this understanding is achieved, it is important to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and expectations for the collaboration to ensure success.

- ◆ **Funding:** Two said network collaborations require adequate funding to be successful.

"[It takes] trust [and] strong knowledge of not just who is involved but also the culture of the respective networks—so understanding the[ir] norms and cultural practices. And alignment and shared vision, a strong sense of bringing distinctive assets to the table while being able to synergistically leverage them. Clarity of roles is [also] one of the most important things. And finally, really strong communication norms and infrastructure, so having clear routines around how information is shared across the networks, how decisions are made with regularity. The last thing is a collective narrative, a sense of where we are coming from and where we are going to together. It is sort of a future orientation and narrative."

EXPERIENCE WITH MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Participants were asked to describe multi-institutional partnerships they have been part of over the course of their careers and to discuss what made these partnerships successful or difficult.

SUCCESSFUL MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Participants described a range of successful multi-institutional partnerships, including collaborations with local universities and museums, international research partnerships, and a national internship program involving universities and informal education partners, to name a few. When asked what made these partnerships successful, they reiterated many of the same qualities they believe generally make for successful network collaborations; in particular, having a shared purpose, clearly defined responsibilities, having a strong understanding of each organization's distinctive assets, social trust, and clear communication. Several other trends emerged that were distinct to a few individuals:

- ♦ **Flexibility:** A few spoke about being open to change as a key aspect of successful partnerships, both in terms of a willingness to renegotiate goals and responsibilities and also allowing for flexibility in how partners work to achieve goals.

- ♦ **Time:** Two spoke about time as crucial to a partnership's success. Specifically, one said having a clear timeline is important, while the other explained that strong partnerships need time to develop and cannot be rushed.

- ♦ **Shared events:** Two explained that in their experience, successful partnerships have hosted regular events that bring together leaders and others involved in the partnership to celebrate and coalesce around shared goals. For example, NISE Net hosted "Nano Days," a national celebration of nanoscience at member organizations nationwide.

- ♦ **Equality:** One said it is important for partners to contribute to and receive equally from the partnership for it to be successful (e.g., all voice their ideas to shape goals, contribute equal financial amounts, or receive the same financial benefits).

- ♦ **Passion:** One explained that passion for the goals and purpose of the project is key to any partnership's success.

"There is a lot of innovation and creativity that happens out in the distributed network rather than just in the leadership. The willingness to see that, understand that and share that with the network I think is a particularly key element. People need to love networks for them to be successful. They need to love the partners. Love is not too… I'm using that word very deliberately. It really is based on a lot of people's passion is what makes these things work and seeing value for individuals and for organizations."

Partners also shared several qualities that, in their experience, have made for difficult or problematic partnerships. For the most part, the characteristics they named were the opposite of those named for creating successful partnerships; namely, poor communication, especially due to lack of regular in-person meetings; unclear goals and responsibilities; and, lack of time, especially due to grant requirements that may rush relationship-building. A few other trends emerged that were distinct to a few individuals:

♦ **External pressures:** A few said partnerships are often unsuccessful when they are forced into existence by external pressures (e.g., project funding requires having a partner), as opposed to when they emerge naturally around a mutual need both partners want to address.

♦ **Staff turnover:** A few said that in their experience, partnerships have faced difficulties when key partnership staff leave their organizations without properly onboarding new staff; new staff taking over their duties may lack passion for the partnership and misunderstand its goals. As one put it, "partnerships often take time and rely on individuals but individuals are not permanent."

♦ **Organizational differences:** Two said they have been part of partnerships where differences between organizations' cultures and structures have led to difficulties; for instance, different teaching philosophies in K-12 and higher-education organizations.

"Alliances that have not worked well, there was not that facilitation or mechanism where people come together and share. They may have been a part of something with a common label but they viewed their primary emphasis as helping [audiences] at their institutions, and they didn't see that somehow being informed by the work going on at other places. So, I would say, it was difficult in the sense that the infrastructure, mechanisms, or processes weren't there to build a strong network. The dots weren't connected sufficiently so that people could say 'wow, this is something that brings benefit to my institution.'"

VALUE OF PARTICIPATING IN A NETWORK

Overall, participants said there is tremendous value in participating in a network, from both a personal and an organizational perspective, and that the two are not mutually exclusive. Most said one of the major benefits is connecting with a community of peers who are passionate about the same issues and problems—"the best and brightest thinking about the next thing." In fact, several spoke of participating in networks as a form of professional development that inspires them to innovate rather than "reinvent the wheel." They explained that networks expose them to a wide variety of perspectives, bodies of knowledge, and experiences, which pushes them to stretch their thinking and take risks in their work. None of this is separate from the benefits of network participation on their organizations, since broadening their perspectives on familiar topics and problems allows their organizations to grow and develop. More broadly, however, participants said participating in networks is valuable for organizations because they are able to pool their resources (e.g., funding, time, and expertise) and achieve greater impact than they could if acting alone. A few also said participating in networks bolsters organizations' reputations on the national level, which is potentially helpful when applying for grant money. Finally, one said the presence of many "substantive" collaborations within a field serves to strengthen the field overall.

"From a personal direction, [being part of a network makes] you a part of a community. I look at being a part of a network as being a part of professional development. You are growing, you are learning from some of the best people out there, and to have access to those people is an amazing thing. I'm not sure it is that different from an organizational point of view. That is, I think organizations are organisms, they need to develop, they need to grow, [and] they need to stay in touch with the best work that is going on a particular field, so I think that opportunity is provided through these networks. Otherwise one tends to think what I am doing at my institution is great, it is cutting edge that kind of thing, but when it is put in broader context, it gives a very different perspective. [Networks] allow one to calibrate in a different way and it provides support as you try to make change. When you recognize that many people in many different places are confronting many of the challenges that you are confronting and they have also worked through some of those issues it can be helpful."

THOUGHTS ON FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

Finally, participants were asked to name potential future network collaborations for SENCER to explore and to offer SENCER advice as it pursues new collaborations.

POTENTIAL FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

Participants shared a range of potentially fruitful collaborations. However, a few were unsure because they have a limited understanding of SENCER's organizational goals and how it operates. Some named specific networks or organizations, while others were less specific:

- ♦ **Portal to the Public:** A few said SENCER should consider working with Portal to the Public, one of the networks represented at the meeting, since Portal to the Public is focused on communicating science from higher education professionals to the public, and this overlaps strongly with SENCER's existing goals and structure.

- ♦ **Industry:** A few suggested SENCER consider working with STEM industry partners, especially in technology and computer science, to help university students better understand the civic and social importance of their work. This could involve working with industry partners to co-develop courses that connect STEM work to broader civic issues, or sponsoring work experiences or internships. Potential areas of interest include ethical computing, privacy, and security.

- ♦ **Civic engagement-focused networks:** A few suggested SENCER partner with other national networks focused on civic engagement, since that is the core of its work; potentially, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Another suggested SENCER discuss partnering with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) or other conservation-focused networks, since those working in conservation also approach their work from a civic engagement perspective. One of these participants also suggested SENCER look beyond civic-engagement-focused networks to all STEM education networks, such as those working in K-12 education.

- ♦ **Museums and science centers:** Two suggested SENCER continue working with informal science institutions and networks. More specifically, one said the Association of Science - Technology Centers (ASTC) might be a useful "connector" and partner.

- ♦ **Federal land-management agencies:** One suggested SENCER partner with federal land management agencies such as the National Park Service (represented at the meeting), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Because these agencies manage public land, their science education efforts are inherently civic in nature, which aligns with SENCER's mission.

- ♦ **Miscellaneous:** One each suggested SENCER partner with the Humanities Action Lab (represented at the meeting), the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, and science communication professionals.

ADVICE FOR SENCER

Participants also offered advice as SENCER continues to explore collaborations with other networks. Responses fell into three categories:

- **Clarify goals:** Several said clarifying goals is paramount to a successful partnership. First, SENCER must clarify its own internal goals, after which it can decide whether pursuing collaborations will help SENCER pursue its goals; a few said this was lacking in the March meeting. If SENCER moves forward with collaborations, participants noted that it is important to enter conversations with a strong sense of what it hopes to achieve from collaboration and clear articulations of core concepts that are central to its work, such as "civic engagement." A few, for instance, spoke about the potential difference in SENCER and NISE Net's understanding of civic engagement and how this variance may have contributed to their decision not to enter into collaboration at this time. Overall, participants reiterated that for a collaboration to be successful, goals must emerge naturally out of a mutual need and benefit both networks. One added that those working outside of academia might initially have trouble seeing how SENCER's goals align with their own, so SENCER may need to be prepared to explain its vision and how others outside academia have worked with SENCER in the past.

- **Relationship building:** Several spoke of relationship building, in many senses. A few said healthy collaborations depend on getting to know the other network before presuming collaboration will occur; the meeting itself is a good example of how other networks might explore potential collaboration opportunities. Others spoke of the importance of understanding and respecting the other network's ways of working as well as the need for frequent communication, not just among network leaders but also among members. Along these lines, one said it will be important to continuously invite members (and potentially others from outside the networks) to critique the developing collaborations to address strengths and weaknesses.

- **Time:** One stressed the need for patience, as relationship building takes time, and networks often encounter a lot of "push and pull" from leadership. So, though SENCER may be excited about particular collaborations, it is important to wait to until the collaboration makes sense for all networks involved.

"One of the things about SENCER is that it is made up of group of individuals and they benefit from being a part of a partnership because they help one another gain legitimacy, if you will. A professor who wants to engage classes on civic issues can find another professor who is already doing that and that helps, but they don't have products they disseminate. It is, in a way, a very loose partnership. I think they need to be able to define what SENCER provides so they know not just what they are looking for themselves but what they offer to another national collaborative. I started by saying that they need to have a sense of what it is they are looking for. That would help them, but they also need to know what they offer, because the only way a partnership works is if it is mutually beneficial. I know they probably think they know what they offer but I'm almost like first conversations should be 'this is who we are, tell me a little about who you are' without saying 'let's figure out a partnership.'"

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Removed for proprietary purposes.