

Date: August 15, 2018

To: Phil Blood and Bob Sinkovits, ECSS L2 co-managers

From: Lorna Rivera and Lizanne DeStefano, XSEDE External Evaluation

RE: Findings and Recommendations from ECSS Focus Group conducted at PEARC18

Summary

Lizanne DeStefano and Lorna Rivera of the XSEDE external evaluation team conducted a 1 hour in person focus group with ECSS staff (approximately 20 staff) following the XSEDE All-Hands meeting at PEARC18 on July 26, 2018. The purpose of the focus group was to investigate declining ECSS ratings of XSEDE Staff Climate Study items. Questions from the evaluation team were posed to the group in a semi-structured format and designed to address (1) positive aspects of working in ECSS, (2) domain/discipline coverage of ECSS staff, (3) projects, (4) training, and (5) recommendations for improvement. Additional areas raised by focus group participants include funding, staff evaluations, project/principal investigator (PI) interactions, and communication tools. This memorandum describes each broad theme from the focus group and includes supporting data in the form of participant quotes.

Focus Group Themes

Proposal process

- **XRAS portal:** Participants were highly satisfied with the XRAS portal for conducting reviews and cited its ease of use and reliability.
 - *"I honestly think the XRAS web portal where we do our reviews [is a positive aspect]...I can look at previous reviews and it just works and I don't have to fight with it."*
- **Proposal content:** Staff believe adaptive review proposals should include more computing related details. They view the ECSS request set of 5 questions as sufficient, however.
 - *"I think if we have new proposals coming in there needs to be more attention paid to the rubric."*
 - *"The instructions say if they have funding, they shouldn't go into detail in the proposal about the domain science."*
 - *"In the last set of adaptive reviews that I got there were instructions at the bottom, maybe those should be moved up...it specifies the 3 grounds for rejection."*
 - *"I think the 5 questions [after the full review process] are enough for the ECSS piece."*

Projects

- **Diversity of projects:** ECSS staff expressed appreciation for Level 3 (L3) manager encouragement to pursue projects of personal interest and the flexibility to change projects when appropriate.
 - *"My L3 manager has supported us in going out and talking to PIs that we're interested in working with, so we participate in recruitment."*

- *“Same thing when we review proposals. We are able to suggest ECSS support.”*
- *“I was working with a PI who was interested in a different topic and [my L3 manager] said you didn’t have to stay in the group you can go work with the PI. I really liked that.”*
- **Project selection:** A second round of project selection was proposed by participants to allow additional opportunities to choose projects of interest when their initial preference is not granted. Staff also suggested utilizing Trello for this process.
 - *“The first round [of picking and choosing your projects] is interesting because everyone gets to express but then after that you don’t hear anything unless you get assigned one. You don’t know if there’s a second round on”*
 - *“Throw it [second round] up on a Trello board”*
 - *“It would be good to see another one I didn’t get and be able to pick a different project.”*
- **Project assignment/FTE:** The opportunity to work on multiple projects simultaneously was cited as a strength by ECSS staff, however, some found it difficult to split their FTE when assignments require deep focus such as software development.
 - *“For me it’s switching contexts through the project because it’s 25% and it’s software development. And from an SD perspective it’s better to have a big chunk of time for a short time then working on many projects all the time.”*

Staff development

- **Training needs:** While staff appreciate their 10% FTE allocation for training, many believe this is inadequate due diverse training needs and available time. Focus group participants suggested proposing their own in-person workshop supported by XSEDE Project Improvement Funds (PIF). Others commented on the occasional need to dedicate an extended period of time (i.e. one month) in order to learn more complicated topics such as new software tools or libraries.
 - *“There’s always a need if you don’t have the expertise to be able to read about it and learn. I’m happy that 10% of our time is for training and learning new things. But 10% of 30% doesn’t amount to much. At my own institution I have been encouraged to learn new things if I need to... One new thing this year is XSEDE has a travel budget for every person... it would be nice to know what my continuing education budget is.”*
 - *“We could propose a workshop for ourselves to learn something”*
 - *“It’s not always going to a conference and attending a tutorial. It could be picking up a new software tool or library and you need literally a month to sit down with it and figure it out.”*
 - *“I heard Nancy say that if someone wants to go out for training and travel she was really supportive.”*
- **Staff evaluations:** A standard mechanism to demonstrate ECSS work to their local institutions was requested by staff, particularly for those who work part-time on XSEDE.
 - *“...maybe for those that are part-time on ECSS projects if there was some way to relay that back to the institution of the ECSS person. Because I don’t think that’s really captured in the process at the institution or through XSEDE. I think that would be more powerful.”*
 - *“I asked Nancy for the pdf that has the questions she asked the PI and I take that back to my PI. Nancy basically forwarded the whole pdf.”*

Project/PI interactions

- **Navigating relationships:** Templates for setting initial expectations and goals with PIs were cited as useful by ECSS staff. Some would also like a “customer engagement playbook” to guide disengagement as staff are not always sure when to end their service with a project. Such a handbook could also include recommendations for dealing with projects/PIs who are not sufficiently responsive. Others suggested travel funds to interact directly with PIs in order to form more solid collaborations.
 - *“One of the first things I establish with a PI is the SOW with objectives, goals, timelines, responsibilities by person, etc. I’ve been given a template by my L3 manager and I’ve had PI’s that are great and responsive and others that are not and that’s fine. I go kind of 3 strikes and then at that point I’m reporting to my L3 and they can escalate if they need to.”*
 - *“It would be awfully nice to have a customer engagement playbook that you help regulate yourself with a PI on their project in particular how you...draw something to a nice close. We’ve taken your training wheels off and let us know if you have trouble. Sometimes I wonder should I be engaging more or back off. It would be nice to know where you are in the stage of things, how to report progress and if needed a reference to go to.”*
 - *“The worst PI is the one who is in the middle. Every year we talk about being on someone else’s timeline. And the worst thing is when you have someone who is responding to emails once a week and you’re ready to go with a workflow, etc. so it’s not enough to cancel a project. You have to go back to your L3 and say I think we can keep this going but be aware that this is not going on as quickly as it should.”*
 - *“Direct interaction with the PI would help a lot. If I could have some funding and travel to interact with them face-to-face.”*

- **Value of ECSS to PIs:** Staff believe PIs might take their time more seriously if it was monetized to relay the value of services and financial impact of shifting project goals. Others suggested allowing ECSS staff to rate PIs/projects.
 - *“The PIs don’t really have anything on the line. They don’t have to pay for it and they’re not being reviewed.”*
 - *“That goes both ways...there’s a lot of PIs that really appreciate our time. I think even they would have a hard time putting a dollar amount to that as well.”*
 - *“Our final report doesn’t include what percentage of your engagement with the PI was good but I’ve seen in the PI interview they rate the ECSS staff.”*
 - *“Acknowledgement and value of our time and skill is important and one of the values is that it’s great and you don’t need to pay.”*
 - *“I think people need to think of it as real money. It’s not free it’s FTE. If you want to change this project it will take this much hours, etc. If not then it would cost this much.”*

- **Communication tools:** Currently staff are using various tools and replicating efforts (wikis, Evernote, etc.) when communicating with PIs. Staff would like to see this simplified and uniform across projects, preferably linked to internal communications through JIRA while maintaining view permissions so that PIs cannot see all internal communication.

- *“There’s a disparate piece about being able to share SOW, milestones and all this stuff we’re creating and everyone is reproducing this stuff and using different tools... so we’re not duplicating efforts.”*
- *“I’ve already communicated through mail with different people and someone hooked me up with Evernote so you can write things and use google to store things in there and they can go back and look at it. What are other people using?”*
- *“Inside [center] we have an internal wiki that we use and add them as a PI to that page.”*
- *“There are a limited number of licenses for Jira/confluence. If it’s possible it would be good to include PIs because it would reduce a lot of duplication. The PIs could comment there etc. I don’t think it would be expensive, but it would be a place where we put our private reports. It might be a nightmare for permissions/privacy if the PIs had full read that is.”*

Recommendations

- **Proposal process:**
 - Encourage submitters of adaptive review proposals to include more computing related details.
 - Consider further emphasizing grounds for proposal rejection in XRAS by relocating text to the top of the page.
- **Projects:**
 - Maintain flexibility to pursue and change projects when appropriate.
 - Conduct a secondary selection round for proposals by ECSS staff with Trello.
 - Consider refraining or reducing multiple assignments to staff working on projects like software development.
- **Staff Development:**
 - Pursue an in-person workshop for ECSS staff using L2 or PIF funds, for example.
 - Consider developing a continuing education fund that staff can apply for. Educational funding could support a wide range of activities including short informal trainings to a form of sabbatical where a staff member dedicates 2 – 3 weeks of their entire ECSS FTE to training/education.
 - Develop and publicize a mechanism for staff to request and forward PI evaluations to their local supervisor to incorporate into institutional staff evaluations and ongoing feedback.
- **Project/PI interactions:**
 - Continue to utilize and disseminate templates for engaging with PIs to ECSS staff.
 - Expand available documentation to include a form of customer engagement playbook that describes how and when to disengage with a project.
 - Consider monetizing ECSS services to relay the value and discourage unnecessary shifting of project goals by PIs.
 - Identify and adopt a platform to communicate confidentially with PIs that can be linked to internal ECSS communications while maintaining appropriate privacy permissions. Consider including ratings of PIs by ECSS in internal staff communications.