

EPSCoR 2020 – Are We Listening?

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Good morning!

It's a pleasure for me to welcome you here to Arlington. As you know I'm a relative newcomer to the Office of Integrative Activities at NSF. You have a busy schedule today and tomorrow, and I want to catch as much of it as I can – however we have a National Science Board meeting starting tomorrow, and some preparation going on for that today, and so I apologize in advance that I can't be here for all of the time.

Let me digress with a little personal background. Until I joined OIA in January of this year I had spent my entire career in metallurgy and materials science, either as a researcher and educator or a research administrator. I came to NSF in the 1980s from Wayne State University as a program director in the Division of Materials Research. EPSCoR was a young, \$2M program back then involving just 5 States, and to the best of my recollection it had a fairly low profile. In contrast, there are now six EPSCoR-like programs in other agencies and the NSF EPSCoR program investment has grown to \$115M in 2008. I was struck by some of the more recent NSF-EPSCoR vital statistics in the 2020 report:

- 27 jurisdictions, comprising
- 20% of the US population
- 25% of the research/doctoral institutions nationwide, and
- 18% of the employed scientists and engineers

And yet these 27 jurisdictions receive only about 10% of all NSF research funding! (There's an exclamation point on the end of that sentence!)

In her letter to Jerry Odom in February 2006, NSF Deputy Director Kathie Olsen encouraged a 'bottoms-up' approach from the community to help develop a new vision for EPSCoR. The EPSCoR 2020 workshop held here in Arlington just over two years ago was the first major step in that process.

As you know the community made 6 major recommendations in the EPSCoR 2020 workshop report.

So where are we now? What was your message to us, and are we listening?

You'll hear much more about this from Henry Blount in a few minutes, but I want to give you a brief summary here. Let me add that I have worked with Henry in many capacities at NSF over the years – this man is a listener; he is also a straight shooter who will tell you exactly what he thinks and why.

In the EPSCoR 2020 report, Strategic Priority #1 is to provide more flexible EPSCoR Research Infrastructure Improvement Awards, focused on infrastructure development for basic competitive research.

- Are we listening?
- In the FY08 competition, NSF increased the maximum duration of RII awards to 5 years. And the new RII program announcement just released for the FY09 competition raises the annual funding cap for RII Track I awards from \$3M to \$4M.

Strategic Priority #2 is to infuse EPSCoR goals into all the NSF's programs and initiatives. Specifically, the report recommends relocating EPSCoR to an Office within the Office of the Director in order to maximize its research focus and cross-directorate interactions.

- Are we listening?
- In 2007 EPSCoR was relocated to the Office of Integrative Activities (“OIA”) within the Director’s Office.
- OIA supports the efforts and policy of the Director and Deputy Director to promote unity and alignment in support of the NSF mission. My office can mediate among and between NSF’s disciplinary directorates and offices, and we play a key role in fostering cross-disciplinary research and multidisciplinary programs.
- For example, my office coordinates and oversees NSF’s Science and Technology Centers program, and it also administers and oversees the annual competition for Major Research Instrumentation awards. The STC proposal solicitation was announced at the end of June – both STC and MRI solicitations are linked to the NSF EPSCoR web page.
- The relocation of EPSCoR to OIA strongly underlines the research focus of EPSCoR together with its education and capacity-building

activities, and it significantly raises the visibility of EPSCoR activities across NSF.

Strategic Priority #3 is to revitalize and extend other components of EPSCoR, including co-funding, planning grants, and outreach. A specific recommendation is that co-funding should not be limited to the research thrusts identified in current RII awards.

- Are we listening?
- In my view the concern about the limits on co-funding is a perception based on past practices and not on present-day reality. EPSCoR co-funding is *not* restricted to the topical areas identified in the current RII award. I'll put Henry on the spot about this.
- Meanwhile the EPSCoR office is supporting a vigorous program of workshops and outreach visits, and plans to do even more – again, more from Henry later this morning.
- By the way “outreach” is something of a misnomer. I know for sure that I learned more from my hosts during visits to some EPSCoR states earlier this year than they learned from me. And with your help I plan to continue up that learning curve.

Strategic Priority #4 is to restore the focus on the “E”- for *Experimental* - in EPSCoR by using EPSCoR as a testbed for new strategies.

- Are we listening?
- Here I want to salute Henry for moving quickly to open up a new kind of opportunity. This builds on the results of the EPSCoR Cyberinfrastructure workshop held last fall in Kentucky, and we are referring to it as “RII Track 2”. The RII Track 2 competition just announced is designed to support regional or thematic partnerships among EPSCoR jurisdictions that will enhance discovery, learning and economic development through the use of cyberinfrastructure.
- You will hear more about these and other CI opportunities at this meeting from Henry, from Jose Munoz in NSF's Office of Cyberinfrastructure, and from Ed Seidel who will take over as Director of NSF's Office of Cyberinfrastructure in September. As you probably know, Ed directs Louisiana State University's Center for Computation and Technology – and he's familiar with the challenges that go hand in hand with life in an EPSCoR state. You'll also hear from Sirin Tekinay tomorrow. Sirin is a co-chair of the NSF working

group that developed and continues to guide our major initiative on Cyber-Enabled Discovery and Innovation.

Strategic Priority #5 calls for the development of ‘state strategic S&T business plans’ for state EPSCoR programs, and for NSF to encourage jurisdictions to develop longer-term plans that fully integrate EPSCoR into the process.

- Are we listening?
- Here the ball is in your court. The new NSF RII Track 1 solicitation requires you to set your proposal clearly in the context of your jurisdiction’s science and technology plans and goals, and here I quote:

“The project description is the centerpiece of the RII Track-I proposal. It should describe the current status of the jurisdiction’s academic R&D enterprise, the jurisdiction’s science and technology plans and goals, and how the infrastructure for which NSF support is being requested will enable successful pursuit of those science and technology plans and goals.”
- I might add that from what I have seen on the ground so far, I have been very favorably impressed with your efforts to integrate the EPSCoR enterprise with science and technology planning at the state and jurisdictional level.

Finally, **Strategic Priority #6 of the EPSCoR 2020 Report calls for the creation of a shared understanding and definition of success.** This means developing a common view of what should be understood as success for EPSCoR, including metrics for educational and economic outcomes.

- Are we listening?
- Well, this is clearly work in progress. It’s important, and it doesn’t admit of easy answers. EPSCoR has been around for 30 years and we certainly don’t have the answers at this point. We have to work on it together – “we” being the NSF EPSCoR program and you, the EPSCoR community.
- Certainly it’s not realistic or even sensible to expect that every state gets 1/50th of available NSF funds. Is “graduation” from some arbitrary share of NSF funding the appropriate measure of success? The EPSCoR states represent about 20% of the US population. So

should we normalize funding levels by population levels?? Should we adopt some measure of the economic health of a jurisdiction?

- These are serious and thorny issues, and we must continue to explore them together and search for the right solutions. Again I'll defer to Henry who will at least provide you with some hard numbers this morning. I think you will agree that we are making some progress.

I have taken up enough of your time for now, and I'll turn the meeting back to Henry. In closing, let me preach to the choir just a little. The potential of the under-represented states and jurisdictions to help build and maintain the research, education and workforce that will ensure economic health for the whole nation is undeniable. That potential is enormous, and we neglect it at our peril.

“We live in interesting times” – especially this year - and that means we have the opportunity to work together to make things happen. This meeting is an important part of the process. I have already mentioned there will be a number of presentations related to cyberinfrastructure and cyber-enabled discovery today and tomorrow. You'll also hear from Jeff Nesbit who directs NSF's Office of Legislative and Public Affairs, from Marty Rubenstein about NSF budget planning, from Craig Robinson about the National Science Board's report on cost sharing, from Fae Korsmo in the Director's Office about NSF's efforts in broadening participation, and from our own staff here about current activities in the EPSCoR Office. Tomorrow you'll have the opportunity to meet with Kathie Olsen and grill us about anything you like. And of course *we* want to hear from *you*.

I hope we can make good use of the next two days both formally and informally, to continue the dialogue and move things forward.

Thank you!