

Has Stakeholder Engagement Increased Over the Course of the NH EPSCoR Ecosystems and Society Project?

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One of the goals of the NH EPSCoR Ecosystems and Society project was to identify more effective strategies to strengthen linkages between ecosystem research and key stakeholders. This objective is in line with the goals of the Ecosystems and Society project's sponsor, the National Science Foundation (NSF), to ensure that NSF-funded science achieve broader impacts that benefit society and our world, in addition to advancing knowledge. The five year Ecosystems and Society initiative explicitly stated the expectation that the funded research address a societal need or problem. To ensure this outcome, participating researchers were to engage and communicate with New Hampshire stakeholders, that is, current or potential New Hampshire users or beneficiaries of the NH EPSCoR Ecosystems and Society research. In this particular case, ecosystem stakeholders include individuals or groups outside of universities and colleges who have a professional and/or personal interest in environmental resource utilization, management, or research. The form that this engagement would take, however, was left to the Principal Investigators and their teams to decide. Given the wide diversity of research projects in the initiative ranging from physical science studies of snow albedo to social science projects valuing ecosystem services, any guidance from NH EPSCoR on engagement strategies had to be, of necessity, generic. Because NH EPSCoR was explicit about asking scientists to develop relationships with practitioners, the initiative created an unusual research opportunity for learning about the efforts that were being made and the barriers to them while the researchers were in the process of planning and implementing their research projects. This brief presents the results of an investigation into the relationships between these researchers and their research stakeholders, asking the questions: to what extent and how do academic ecosystem researchers communicate and engage with their practitioner stakeholders about their projects?

In early 2013, the Carsey School of Public Policy conducted a baseline survey of Ecosystems and Society researchers that employed a series of questions designed to understand whether and how stakeholders are participating in scientific research. In 2016, the Carsey School asked EPSCoR researchers the same questions with the intent of identifying changes in behavior that might reveal more effective interaction and communication between scientists and key stakeholder groups.

Data collected in 2016 illustrates increased engagement of non-academic stakeholders throughout the research process. Since 2013, moderate to high stakeholder contributions increased in all three phases of research – *planning, implementation, and dissemination* (see Figure 1).

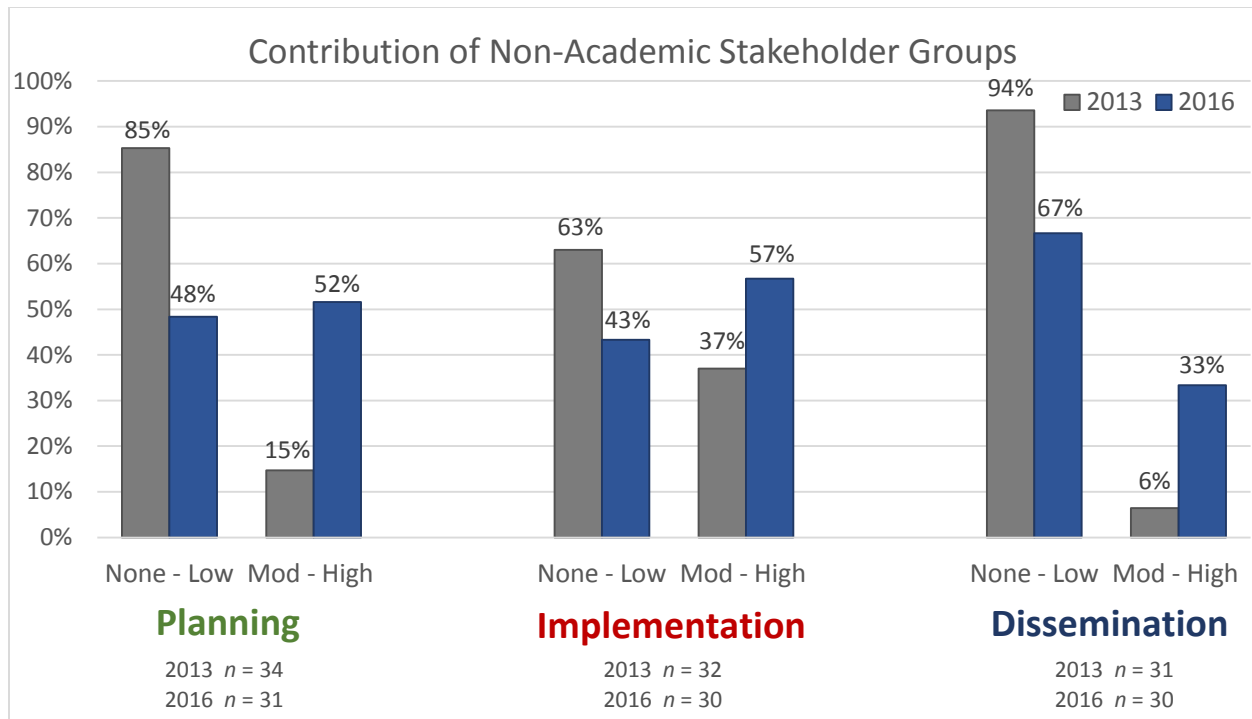


Figure 1. Displays researchers' ratings of stakeholder contributions to EPSCoR projects in 2013 and 2016.

Planning saw the largest gain in moderate to high contributions, increasing by 37 percent since 2013. In 2016 over half of researchers rated stakeholder contributions in *planning* as moderate to high, a stark contrast to 2013 levels which did not exceed fifteen percent.

Implementation had the most stakeholder involvement in 2013 with 38 percent of the researchers indicating moderate to high stakeholder participation, but here again, in 2016 the percentage of researchers denoting moderate to high stakeholder involvement in *implementation* increased by 20 percent to 57 percent of the sample of researchers.

Dissemination of research findings – the research process with the largest proportion of low to no stakeholder contributions in 2013 at 94 percent – increased to 33 percent of the researchers involving stakeholders in *dissemination* of research findings at moderate to high contributions in 2016.

The surveys did not address the reasons for any changes in stakeholder participation, but it can be assumed that the various workshops and structured meetings between researchers and key stakeholders over the course of the Ecosystems and Society project had the desired effects of putting these two groups in contact with each other and of conveying effective techniques for involving key stakeholders in academic research.