



Impact Planning, Evaluation & Audience Research

Randi Korn & Associates, Inc.
2417 B Mount Vernon Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22301

Formative Evaluation: SENCER-ISE

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a formative evaluation of Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities-Informal Science Education (SENCER-ISE), an initiative of the Nation Center for Science and Civic Engagement (NCSCE). SENCER-ISE is currently funded by the National Science Foundation (DRL #123743) and the Noyce Foundation and support partnerships between informal science and higher education institutions. This evaluation looked primarily at the collaborative infrastructure of SENCER-ISE, which includes a website; the SENCER Summer Institute (SSI), an annual, invitational, and intensive residential program with sessions focused on the role of civic engagement in learning and how learning can best be accomplished; and communications with project staff and/or advisors. Following an introductory section with background information, the report is, preceded by a brief background section from the SENCER-ISE staff is structured for ease of use as follows:

- 1. Executive Summary**

This section is intentionally brief and intended to be shared with high-level staff and executives.

- 2. Discussion of Findings and Recommendations**

This section discusses the results of the study that RK&A finds most salient to improving the collaboration and provides explicit recommendations to that end

- 3. Evaluation Background**

This section provides context for how the evaluation process unfolded and is intended particularly for those outside of the process who may have questions.

- 4. Findings**

This section describes the methodological protocol and a comprehensive presentation of findings from the evaluation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON SENCER-ISE (THIS SECTION WAS PREPARED BY SENCER-ISE STAFF)

First Steps

SENCER-ISE II (now referred to as SENCER-ISE) enables NCSCE to explore and evaluate ways to support sustainable partnerships between informal science and higher education professionals around issues of civic consequence. The current program is an outgrowth of the SENCER-ISE I initiative, also funded by the NSF (DRL #1001795) and the Noyce Foundation, which in March 2011 brought together individuals from higher education and informal science education to gauge interest in and possibilities for developing cross-sector partnerships. Cohort 1 refers to those partnerships funded through NSF monies and Cohort 2 to those partnerships funded by the Noyce Foundation.

In January 2013, NCSCE issued a competitive Request for Proposals for potential SENCER-ISE partnerships and after a review process offered Civic Engagement Partnership Support awards to ten partnerships at \$50,000 each, payable over three years. In addition to these start-up funds, SENCER-ISE provides awardees technical assistance such as identifying audience outcomes to guide evaluation, resource materials on relevant topics in formal and informal science education, and opportunities to interact with members of other partnerships and the larger SENCER network of faculty and administrators.

The *goals* of the SENCER-ISE program are to:

- ◆ Form partnerships between higher education and informal science education professionals around compelling civic issues and examine whether these partnerships can bring about a transformation in STEM educational practices,
- ◆ Create durable partnerships between educators from these sectors and by so doing provide models for others in the wider educational community to follow, and,
- ◆ Instill in college graduates and ISE audiences the idea that informal science education institutions and activities are credible, accessible sources of high quality “life-long learning” on matters of science, public policy, personal well-being, and public welfare.

Before SSI began in July of 2013, an orientation program was held for the first six partnerships (Cohort 1). The orientation included a working session on evaluation that was a follow up to an earlier evaluation webinar and discussions on planning and the nature of the partnerships. The orientation for Cohort 2 took place in October of 2013 with similar programming. Cohort 2 partners were required to attend SSI in July of 2014. The couple of partners who could not attend either of these summer institutes will be at the 2015 institute.

The goals of SENCER-ISE are multifaceted and include assistance from SENCER-ISE staff for the partnerships and also an opportunity to learn from them about how partnerships work so they can serve as models for others. Reporting and partnership participation requirements were provided in a Memorandum of Understanding when the sub-awards were made. The requirements for participation have evolved to meet the needs and concerns of the partners. From the beginning, the partners have received annual “Milestones,” which were intended to provide guidance on upcoming activities, dates when reports were due, targeted months for calls, and times when they might be contacted by the external evaluators. The “Milestones” have been amended to reflect changes in the reporting process, confirmed dates for meetings, and other information.

Infrastructure Supports

In conceiving an infrastructure to support the partnerships, the SENCER-ISE staff looked at the literature on barriers to sustaining partnerships between non-profit institutions. It was decided to provide a small amount of start-up funding, build communication vehicles (such as a website) and provide some partnership services (such as planning sessions, evaluation training, and a central infrastructure to organize some activities) to meet some of the known challenges to maintain equitable partnerships between higher education and informal science education institutions.

- Website. The SENCER-ISE website (www.sencer-ise.net) was originally conceived as both a publicity piece where we could share information about the project with other educators and the public and a communication tool where the staff could post information for the partners (Milestones, for example) and the partners could post their materials that were in process and also communicate with each other across partnerships. A separate part of the website was designed for the latter purposes.

-WeEx Calls. The WebEx calls were not part of the original proposal but at the Cohort 1 orientation, it was decided that the partners could provide progress reports through electronic calls instead of preparing quarterly written reports. Along with the WebEx meetings, individual calls are held with the partners as a way to focus on the needs of a particular project and partner.

To date, three WebEx calls have been held: November 2013, March 2014, and November 2014. The topics for each call were:

November 2013. This first call focused on the Cohort 1 partners. During this call, they provided updates on their progress since the SENCER Summer Institute. They were asked to discuss key accomplishments, obstacles encountered, emerging insights, and next steps.

March 2014. This call included partners from both cohorts. The agenda was developed from suggestions culled from the partners during the individual partnership calls. For this call, the partners were also asked to give brief and informal updates on their projects. Discussion topics included evaluation implementation, project implementation logistics, and how the partnership fit into the individual institutions.

November 2014. This call also included partners from both cohorts and again the topics were chosen from areas of expressed interest from the partners during the individual calls and from follow up to an exercise at SSI. Marsha Semmel and Dave Ucko, who had joined the project as Senior Advisors, were on the call and contributed greatly to the discussion. Topics included evaluation, lessons learned, and sustainability and institutionalization.

As the formative evaluation shows, some aspects of the infrastructure have worked better than others. For example, a project website can serve as a public relations tool but not as a basis for communication. Video calls can be beneficial if they are focused not just on reporting on a regular basis but on a topic of interest, have a limited number of participants, and serve as a professional development activity.

Next Steps

Nine of the partnerships are still being maintained. For these, the SENCER-ISE infrastructure will continue to offer support where needed and communicate with the partnerships through the scheduled individual partnership call, targeted and voluntary video calls that will serve as professional development activities, and opportunities for project dissemination through NCSCE symposia and publications, and other sources. The website will be updated so it can serve as the “face” of the SENCER-ISE initiative, both for the partners and for others interested in cross-sector partnerships.

April 2015

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) interviewed 20 participants about their experiences in the SENCER-ISE project and particularly about its infrastructure. Participants include those from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 as well as those who work in Higher Education (HE) and Informal Science Education (ISE). Below we have highlighted strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improving the SENCER-ISE infrastructure. See the “Discussion of Findings” for more robust explanations.

INFRASTRUCTURE	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	SUGGESTIONS
WEBSITE	<p>Interviewees liked that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about their project is featured along with other projects. The website provides context for SENCER-ISE. SENCER-ISE staff help update the website. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewees did not feel that the website supports their daily SENCER-ISE project work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The website is fine as is—interviewees appreciate what exists and do not foresee themselves using the website in-depth for project support even if it was modified greatly.
WEBEX CALLS	<p>Some interviewees liked:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting on progress during the calls rather than writing progress reports. Hearing updates from other partnerships. 	<p>Some interviewees said calls:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacked focus to be useful for project support. Were too long and included too many people to be useful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify the goals as some perceived the calls as solely for SENCER-ISE’s benefit. Limit the call length and number of participants (potentially by topic).
COMMUNICATION	<p>Interviewees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Know that they can reach out to SENCER-ISE staff at any time. Appreciate that SENCER-ISE staff are highly responsive. 	<p>Some interviewees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Said they received too many emails and communications from SENCER-ISE. Disliked that there was not an explicit project timeline for reporting out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear expectations for what project participation means, such as grant requirements, time required for these tasks, format for reporting, and timeline for reporting.
SENCER SUMMER INSTITUTE (SSI)	<p>Some interviewees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoyed the sessions and found them relevant. Enjoyed connecting with their partner(s) as well as other partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewees from both cohorts said SSI was too long. Some interviewees wanted more working time with their partner than given. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorten it. Better articulate the sessions in the program. Consider implementation as a “mandatory” event as some were frustrated by lack of attendance at mandatory events.
WORKING SESSIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewees greatly appreciated opportunities for partners to work together on their project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some interviewees did not attend the in-person meetings making the sessions futile. A few did not value the focus of the working sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As noted above, consider mandatory status: Is it mandatory? How might that be enforced? How can you be flexible but achieve the goal of the working sessions?

2. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Participants value SENCER-ISE, particularly for the funding that supports their projects. However, participants had mixed feelings about the SENCER-ISE infrastructure, which largely stemmed from a lack of understanding about whom the infrastructure was intended to support—partnerships in their projects, or SENCER-ISE as the grantor and also a researcher. The following discussion looks at the elements of the infrastructure in-depth and provides specific recommendations.

WEBSITE

Unquestionably, the value participants place on the website is for communicating about their SENCER-ISE project with the public, including colleagues, project support, and other funders. Participants felt the website was strong as a public relations and marketing tool, not only because it describes their project, but it connects their project to the larger network that is SENCER-ISE. Additionally, participants value SENCER-ISE's help in updating the website, with the majority saying they simply passed their materials on to Hailey to update the website.

Where the website falls short in terms of SENCER-ISE's intentions, is that it is not serving as a resource for participants. That is, few recalled browsing the website beyond their initial visit to see descriptions of other partnerships prior to the WebEx calls. Notably, participants had no intention of using the website in a deeper capacity for communication or resources even if SENCER-ISE were to dedicate more attention to it. Participants generally perceive websites as static and thus not dynamic enough to be a communication tool or a useful resource; for these reasons, participants strongly discouraged SENCER-ISE to expect they use the website in ways other than they already do.

RECOMMENDATION

- ◆ Since participants have no desire for the website to be anything more than it is, SENCER-ISE should not dedicate additional effort to the website but simply maintain it as is.

WEBEX CALLS

Participants often talked about these calls as an obligation for the benefit of SENCER-ISE and not to the benefit of participants and their projects. For instance, feedback solicited from open-ended questions about the helpful and challenging aspects of the WebEx calls focused largely on assessing the effort of the process, which included praise for SENCER-ISE's flexibility in allowing oral reporting as part of these calls (versus writing) and complaints that the calls were too long and included too many people. Had participants seen these calls as personally beneficial we would have expected more feedback on how the calls supported their projects. Furthermore, when participants were specifically asked about how the calls might support *their collaboration*, there were notable pauses suggestive that they had not expected the WebEx calls to be for their benefit. Participants had many suggestions to this end though, including that the calls would be more personally meaningful to them if they were focused on specific topics relevant to a few partnerships, were shorter, and included fewer people to allow for conversation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Clarify the goal of these calls as some perceived them as solely for SENCER-ISE's benefit.
- ◆ Limit the call length and number of participants (potentially by topic) to foster more personally relevant conversations.
- ◆ Allow partners to report orally on WebEx calls with fewer participants, as noted above.

COMMUNICATION

Participants felt great support from the SENCER-ISE team in terms of regular communication. Regardless of whether they had actually reached out to the SENCER-ISE team for support, participants knew that the team was there to support them at any time; additionally, some of those who had reached out to the team said that the “moral support” and “cheerleading” they received from the team was one of the greatest assets of the SENCER-ISE project.

However, some participants said they received too much communication from SENCER-ISE, with some noting particularly in relation to the amount of funds received. Some also expressed frustration at what they perceived of as excessive communication because it was a result of SENCER-ISE not providing an explicit timeline and protocol for reportings ahead of time; for instance, one participant said they received emails before reporting deadlines, whereas a timeline in advance of the reminder would have been preferred.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Set clear expectations for what project participation means, such as grant requirements, time required for these tasks, format for reporting, and timeline for reporting.
- ◆ Continue the great work the team is already doing to support partnerships.

SENCER SUMMER INSTITUTE (SSI)

The mandatory participation and length of SSI colored some participants' experiences negatively. While some enjoyed the sessions and connecting with partners, more complained that SSI was too long and that they needed more time to work with their partners. Additionally, some were frustrated that SSI was mandatory but yet their partners or others were not present at SSI—considering it a double-standard and thwarting their ability to move their project forward in a meaningful way.

Overall, Cohort 2 participants responded much more positively than Cohort 1 participants to SSI given some of the modifications SENCER-ISE made between the two years, particularly regarding the sessions. Both cohorts noted that SSI skewed more Higher Education (HE) than Informal Science Education (ISE), but ISE participants from Cohort 2 noted that it was more the impression they received from the session descriptions versus their actual experiences at SSI (and for that they were pleasantly surprised by the SSI experience).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Shorten the SSI requirement. Overwhelmingly, participants felt like the time out of the office was too much or there was not enough respite in the schedule to maintain their enthusiasm.
- ◆ Better articulate the sessions in the program.

- ♦ Reconsider the designation of SSI as a “mandatory” event, as some were frustrated by lack of attendance (e.g., either enforce its mandatory status or removed the mandatory designation).

WORKING SESSIONS

Overall, working sessions were greatly appreciated; participants said that any time that partners were brought together physically, it was a unique opportunity to work together. Particularly Cohort 1 interviewees valued the working sessions they experienced at SSI. To lesser extent, Cohort 2 participants appreciated the working sessions; in part, there seemed to be more absent or remote partners, but a few others felt the working opportunities provided were not in line with their needs.

RECOMMENDATION

- ♦ As noted above, reconsider mandatory status: Is it mandatory? If so, how might that be enforced? How might SENCER-ISE be flexible while achieving the goal of the working sessions?

CONCLUSION

Grantees appreciate being part of a large network that is SENCER; they also greatly appreciate the funds they received that allows them to support their passion—creating programs (for the public in some cases and college students in other cases). The Website provides grantees with easy access to information about SENCER-ISE if they should need it, as explaining SENCER-ISE to others is difficult because it is an unusual initiative. One of the primary strengths of SENCER-ISE is the quality of interactions between SENCER-ISE office staff and grantees. For example, grantees appreciate the responsiveness of SENCER-ISE’s main office and know that if they have a question, someone is there to help them at any time. The staff’s responsiveness is evident in other ways as well. Grantees voiced feeling overwhelmed by the initial reporting requirements of the project so the SENCER-ISE staff responded by reducing the amount of reporting responsibility and instituting WebEx calls with the whole group. The flexibility and responsiveness of the SENCER-ISE staff is commendable.

The root of most of the challenges that grantees have with the SENCER-ISE infrastructure is a lack of understanding about whom the infrastructure is intended to support and in what ways. Overall, the modifications that SENCER-ISE can make to improve the infrastructure, as noted in the body of this discussion, are relatively minor but may have the potential to greatly enhance participants’ experiences with SENCER-ISE.

3. EVALUATION BACKGROUND

This evaluation is the third evaluation that Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. has conducted for the SENCER-ISE project.¹ This evaluation, a formative evaluation, explored how well the SENCER-ISE project has supported participants in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 and in what areas it might improve. Participants include both Informal Science Education (ISE) and Higher Education (HE professionals).

Specifically, the objectives of the formative evaluation will explore partners’:

- ◆ Perceptions of the value of the project infrastructure for supporting their partnership, including successful and challenging aspects. The infrastructure includes:
 - Website resources, including communication to encourage its use and technical support for how to use the web site;
 - Webinar (WebEx calls);
 - Access to and frequent communication from SENCER staff;
 - SENCER Summer Institute (SSI); and
 - Working sessions (at SSI or Orientation meeting).
- ◆ Suggestions for improving the support provided by the project infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

RK&A evaluators conducted in-depth telephone interviews with participants in Cohorts 1 and 2 during the summer of 2014 to explore their experiences with SENCER-ISE to date. In-depth interviews encourage and motivate interviewees to describe their experiences, express their opinions, and share the meaning they constructed from an experience with the interviewer. The interview guide was intentionally open-ended to allow interviewees the freedom to discuss what they felt was meaningful (see the Appendix for the interview guide). Throughout the interviewing process, the evaluator asked probing question to obtain more detail.

The SENCER-ISE team provided RK&A with a list of participants representing all 10 SENCER-ISE projects. The evaluator contacted participants by e-mail to schedule interviews via telephone. Interviews were audio-recorded with interviewees’ permission and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

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. Findings are reported in the next section of the report within thematic sections; trends are reported from most- to least-frequently occurring. Where possible, participants’ verbatim language (edited for clarity) is included to exemplify trends. Within quotations, the evaluator’s comments appear in parentheses. Interviewees are identified as ISE or HE and by cohort.

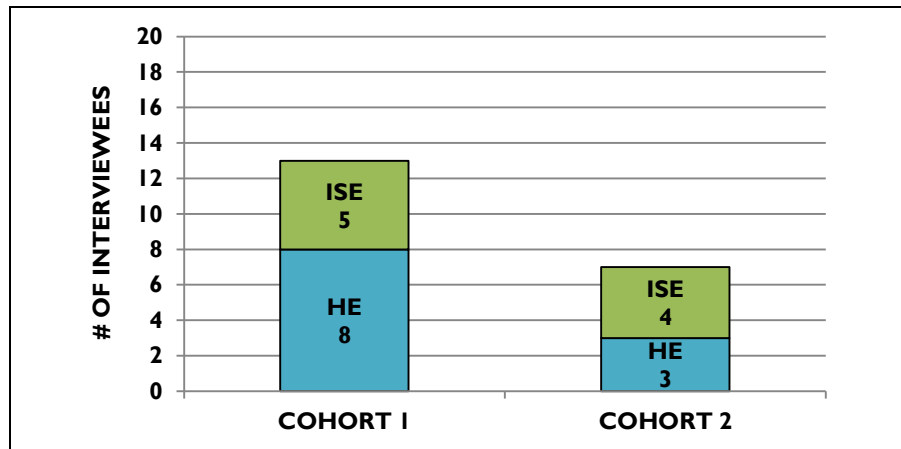
¹ The first evaluation of SENCER-ISE took place in 2011 (Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2011). SENCER-ISE Conference: An Evaluation. Washington, DC: National Center for Science and Civic Engagement). The second evaluation is part of a larger summative evaluation that will be completed at the end of the grant; results were from a questionnaire administered to Higher Education and Informal Science Education professionals who were starting in the SENCER-ISE project (Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2013). Summative Evaluation: SENCER-ISE Pre-study Questionnaire. Washington, DC: National Center for Science and Civic Engagement)

4. FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

RK&A interviewed 20 participants in the SENCER-ISE project between June and September 2014. Interviewees represented all 10 partnerships. Almost two-thirds of interviewees are from Cohort 1, and the other almost one-third are from Cohort 2. About one-half of interviewees work in Higher Education (HE), and the other one-half work in Informal Science Education (ISE). See Figure 1 for the number of interviewees by profession and cohort.

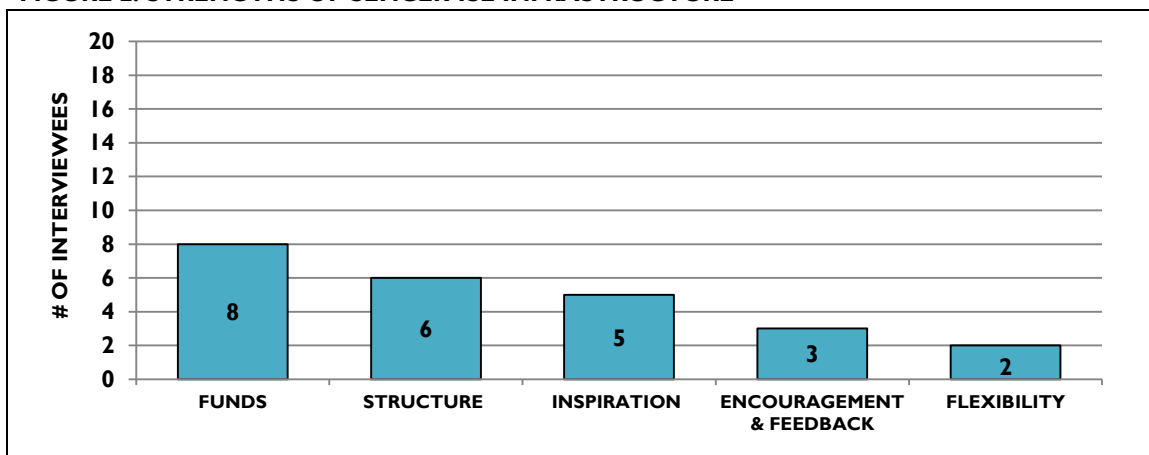
FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES BY PROFESSION AND COHORT



STRENGTHS OF SENCER-ISE INFRASTRUCTURE

When interviewees talked about the strengths of SENCER-ISE and its infrastructure, five trends emerged: funds, structure, inspiration, encouragement and feedback, and flexibility (see Figure 2). Note that a few interviewees described more than one strength. There were no discernible differences in responses by cohort or profession.

FIGURE 2. STRENGTHS OF SENCER-ISE INFRASTRUCTURE



Funds—Funds were mentioned by almost one-half of interviewees. Several of these interviewees said that these funds were particularly important in securing the necessary personnel, be it partners, graduate students, or teachers (see the quotation below). Some of these interviewees mentioned that the funding either supported existing work or was supplemented by another funder. Also, two of these interviewees from Fordham University and the Wildlife Conservation Society attributed their success in securing a NSF grant through the groundwork laid through the SENCER-ISE project funding.

(What has SENCER provided that has been the most helpful in supporting your partnership up to this point?) I guess I would say that it would be . . . the most crass answer, which is [the funds] to be able to pay teachers a little bit of money to be involved in the work of creating teacher lessons plans around scientific protocols has been huge. We do a lot of work with teachers; they donate their own time—they work for free in return because they know that the experience will enrich what’s going on in their classroom. But to have a little bit of money to offer teachers for things has just really helped as far as getting commitments from them. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Structure—Almost one-third of interviewees said that the structure of the SENCER-ISE project was its greatest strength. These interviewees talked about structure in various ways. For instance, three interviewees said the SENCER-ISE project helped them formalize a previously informal partnership, including by creating time for them to work together. Two talked generally about the check-in framework because it helped them maintain momentum (see the quotation below). Another interviewee described the orientation meeting as particularly important for “forcing” the partners to define goals and objectives.

Giving us a structure to keep on task. . . . So actually giving us some quarterly deadlines, as much as they may seem challenging at times, I think that helps us to keep moving forward. And, it also allows us to have discussions about how we are going to press forward in the next quarter to get some of these milestones accomplished, so it helps in the . . . overall strategic planning by saying you really should be thinking quarterly. [HE, Cohort 1]

Inspiration & Learning—One-quarter of interviewees said the greatest strength of SENCER-ISE was inspiration and learning through connecting with colleagues, particularly at in-person meetings, learning from other partnerships in-person or on the phone, and hearing from presenters at the SENCER Summer Institute. Interviewees were largely from both ISE cohorts (see the quotation below).

The second thing is just the model programs that are also part of SENCER. I went to their meeting last May and just learned about some of the other projects and other ideas that are out there. My university partner went with me, so it was good to see what was out there. That meeting was very traditional from the SENCER standpoint without the ISE audience. It was very much members talking to faculty members, but as kind of a systemic-thinking ISE professional sitting in there, I just began to see multiple connections. So I was able to make some sense out of university people talking to university people knowing, ‘Oh, here’s some places I could plug in.’ But then again, we learned from the five other partners about specifically what they were doing in their projects, which is just good resources and good connections. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Encouragement and Feedback—A few interviewees described the “moral support” and feedback that they received from SENCER, specifically from Haley, Ellen, and Alan, as the greatest asset. While

not mentioned as an explicit strength of SENCER-ISE, “cheerleading” and “moral” were commonly mentioned throughout the interviews as something interviewees appreciated.

There’s a lot of communication that comes out of the SENCER-ISE office, and that’s very helpful. In one sense, just to keep the project front and center in our minds. But also, it’s nice to know that they are supportive. So I guess in some ways, it’s just sort of like the moral support is helpful. [HE, Cohort 1]

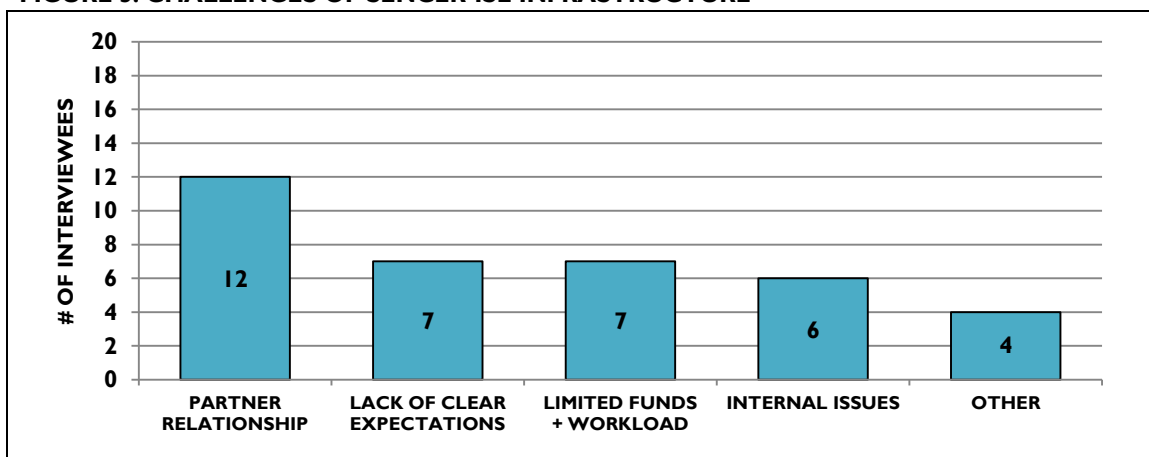
Flexibility—Two interviewees, both ISE professionals, said that the flexibility of SENCER-ISE was the greatest strength. Both of these interviewees mentioned SENCER’s flexibility in reporting structure based on feedback from participants (see the quotation below). While not specifically mentioned as a strength, the flexibility in reporting by SENCER-ISE was mentioned by several other interviewees.

I would have to say one thing is flexibility. I found SENCER to be a fairly inviting group and flexible group. . . . I don’t remember the details, but there were some early reporting requirements that I think a number of us thought were a little onerous, a little much. I remember the SENCER folks sort of readjusting, and as I remember, the first report was modified; it ended up being our action plans that we had been working on already as a team. That sent a nice signal that it really is a collaborative and a partnership, and they were there to support and help. [ISE, Cohort 2]

CHALLENGES OF SENCER-ISE INFRASTRUCTURE

There were four major trends within the variety of challenges interviewees’ named: partner relationship, lack of clear expectations, limited funds plus workload, and internal issues (see Figure 3). A few others name other miscellaneous issues. There was significant overlap with the challenges given, particularly between the lack of clear expectations and limited funds plus workload, but there were few differences by profession and cohort.

FIGURE 3. CHALLENGES OF SENCER-ISE INFRASTRUCTURE



Partner Relationship—More than one-half of interviewees said some aspect of their relationship with their partner was most challenging. Several mentioned general communication issues between partners; for instance, one noted that his/her partner did not attend any of the in-person meetings, which would have provided an opportunity to work together on the project. A few mentioned scheduling issues,

which had implications for communication and generally working together, such as a lull in one partner's schedule was a busy point in the others (see the quotation below). A few others said that they or their partner had changed positions during the partnership. Another said that the work was disproportionately distributed between partners. With all of the aforementioned issues related to partners, interviewees felt that SENCER-ISE was supporting them as much as possible.

We still deal with the challenges of schedules that a college or university runs versus the schedule of the ISE provider. We were very fortunate this year. For our major project, we were able to ask [our ISE partner] to do tasks to support how the project was going forward right before their busy time, and they were mostly done with their portion so that the students could come back and do more. On the other side of that, the students who are part of this [project] did a lot of good homework with a faculty member But a large part of the project happened in the spring, and the students did that for free to finish the project. They were committed enough to make it happen. I mean I could've been on the phone with you telling you that we had a concept, but we didn't end up with a product [because of scheduling]. Instead, we actually have a product because the students help see it through. [HE, Cohort 1]

Lack of Clear Expectations—Almost one-third said that the lack of clear expectations was the most challenging aspect of SENCER-ISE. These responses were often lengthy and were evenly distributed across professions and cohorts. The majority of these interviewees said they did not know how much reporting and paperwork would be required going into the project, often saying it was disproportionate to the amount of money awarded (which will be discussed below at length). Some also expressed frustration at the continued lack of clearly stated expectations for reporting and timelines; these interviewees said that they would receive email reminders in advance of deadlines but would have liked to receive a timeline and guidelines before or at the beginning of the project to plan accordingly. A few also described an initial lack of understanding for SENCER-ISE's motivations behind the project that led to a lot of frustration (see the quotation below).

We didn't know why we were there. A few of the presentations were useful or I thought impressive. . . . But I guess overall what really bothered me the most—and I think I could see it happen to other people because they mentioned it—the dawning realization that we're guinea pigs. We're not here to be taught how to do something or to strengthen ourselves. We're here to be studied. Really whether we succeeded or failed didn't matter because all that matters was how we did what we did and what SENCER could say about we did—this collaboration worked, this one didn't, blah, blah, blah. I had several conversations with people during that week saying, 'I just realized we are subject of the study.' [HE, Cohort 1]

Limited Funds plus Workload—Almost one-third said that the funds awarded were disproportionate to the amount of workload expected by SENCER-ISE. The majority of these interviewees described the administrative work required as being excessive. Some of these interviewees suggested SENCER-ISE reduce some of the administrative work, such as the WebEx calls, and some expressed appreciation for what SENCER-ISE has already done to reduce administrative work, such as by doing report outs over the phone versus preparing written reports. One interviewee suggested that SENCER-ISE explicitly earmark funds for administration so that partners had a clear vision for how much administrative work was required and plan accordingly (see the quotation below).

I think, for one thing, offering a little bit of a larger grant. And maybe earmarking a percentage of that to administrative stuff so the people that are going into the grant are aware of how much of that stuff will be required. [HE, Cohort 1]

Internal Issues—More than one-quarter said that internal issues at their institution were the greatest challenge. Several mentioned the challenge of changing personnel, such as staff who have left the institution or are on sabbatical or leave (see the quotation below). A few others said that it was challenging to manage internal expectations related to their time; for instance, one ISE professional said that the time devoted to the SENCER-ISE project frustrated some other staff with whom s/he were collaborating on exhibits, while another HE professional said that balancing the academic schedule and university expectations with what s/he felt was necessary for the project was challenging. With all of the aforementioned internal issues, interviewees felt that SENCER-ISE was supporting them as much as possible.

I can't say that there's been any challenge in regards to SENCER. It's been just internal and working on our projects. It's just, this has been a lot of work. When we signed up to do this project, we had different staffing. We've had a lot of staffing changes since then. I wasn't an original PI, so I have stepped in to cover, and it's a lot on my plate. It's been a huge amount of work, much more than anticipated and much more than what the funding is covering, but it's been a great experience. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Other Issues—There were a few other miscellaneous responses from Cohort 1 interviewees. Two interviewees felt like they were doing work outside their expertise without enough support, such as developing evaluation instruments and working with various audiences. One interviewee expected more baseline background to contextualize how the SENCER-ISE project is innovative. Another said that nothing was currently challenging but expected challenges as s/he scales up the project in the next year.

INFRASTRUCTURE-SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

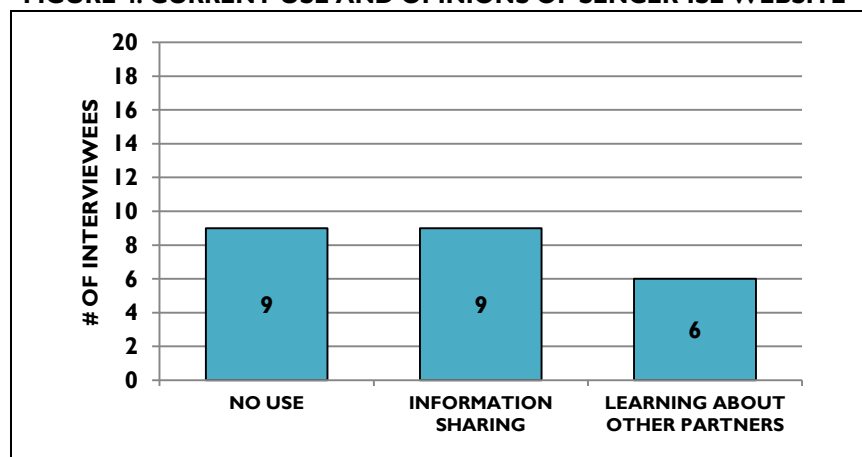
In addition to discussing general strengths and challenges of SENCER-ISE, interviewees were asked probing questions about specific aspects of the SENCER-ISE infrastructure. Each component is discussed in depth both in terms of its current use and potential for supporting the SENCER-ISE work.

WEBSITE

CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS

Overall, interviewees rarely used the SENCER-ISE website and in limited ways (see Figure 4). There were no discernible differences by profession or cohort.

FIGURE 4. CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS OF SENCER-ISE WEBSITE



No Use—Almost one-half said they do not use the website—saying they have visited it once but did not find it useful. For instance, a few said they did not have a need to know what the other partners are doing (see the quotation below), while a few others said they just generally do not use websites. Two said they browsed the resources available but did not find them useful.

I have not been using [the website]. What might compel me to use it is if I believed or had evidence that other people were looking at it, that there was an audience for it. I don't. Part of it, the collaboration between the different ISE teams—they're great people, and they're doing interesting things, but in terms of our work, [knowing what they are doing] doesn't inform our work. If there was a public audience beyond the audience that gets our information from other existing websites then I could see using it but perhaps there's just so many websites now. [HE, Cohort 1]

Information Sharing—Almost one-half said they use the website to talk about SENCER-ISE with others. For instance, some said they have used the website when writing a grant since it has information about SENCER-ISE, their project, and other partnerships' projects. Others said they have used it when explaining their project to colleagues or when trying to put the project into a bigger picture for students, volunteers, and collaborators (see the quotation below).

We haven't used the website extensively. I think what we use the website for more than anything is I have used it to repost things on our Facebook page, just used to show people that we're part of a bigger thing. So I think that that's how it's helpful. There was an article about our project that I reposted onto our Facebook page . . . , and we've put up the information from the website for during trainings for volunteers to see. So I think it's a great PR tool for us to show that we're part of a bigger project. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Learning About Other Partners—One-quarter have used the website to look at other projects. Generally, these interviewees did so at the beginning of the grant or before the SENCER Summer Institute or WebEx calls. Two said they did so when prompted by the SENCER newsletter.

I've been on it maybe three to four times. I went to check out the partnerships for Cohort 2 and just to refresh my memory about the partnerships and the projects for Cohort 1 before I went on the webinars and stuff like that. That's pretty much the extent of it. [ISE, Cohort 1]

POTENTIAL USE

Interviewees did not see potential uses for the website beyond what was available. Feedback included that it was not a viable source for communication or project resources but should be maintained for information sharing.

Not for Communication or Project Resources—Interviewees were unanimous in that they did not see the SENCER-ISE website as a place for communication; one interviewee recalled providing feedback in that regard previously (see the quotation below). Likewise, most interviewees did not see the website as a place for resources; for instance, one interviewee said she prefers using Google to search for resources to browse all that is available.

I think we saw this last year when we met briefly about SENCER. In your front-end evaluation work, [we said we] don't value the idea of a website. And then we went and did an hour-long website training anyway. I've been there once since then. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Maintain for Information Sharing—Some interviewees said they appreciated the website because of its public relations potential and as a resource when applying for other grants (see the quotation below). These interviewees were some of the same as those who have used the website when talking about their project with others, and they did not see a need for anything other than what SENCER-ISE was already providing on the website.

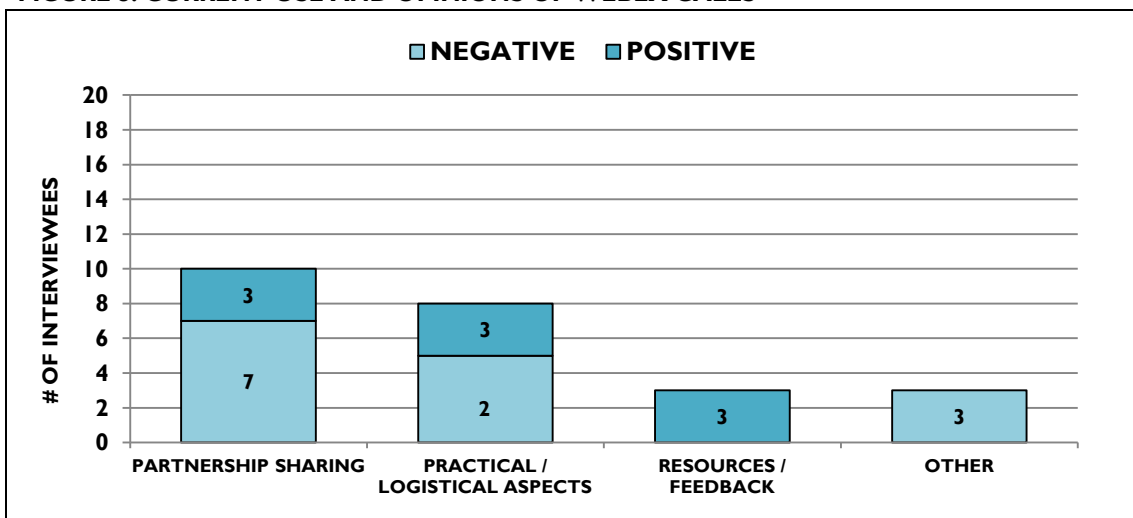
I think people go to find resources when they're writing a proposal, when they're planning a new project, and when they're writing up a project. Because we're right in the middle of implementing the project, it's not a time where you need those resources. . . . So I think it's the timing. I think it will become valuable, it's just people aren't trying to use that right now. [HE, Cohort 2]

WEBEX CALLS

CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS

Overall, three-quarters of interviewees said the WebEx calls were not useful or only moderately so. There were three main aspects of the WebEx calls that contributed to interviewees' opinions: partnership sharing, practical / logistical aspects, and resources / feedback. Interestingly, participants responded to these various aspects in different ways, so Figure 5 identifies these aspects by positive and negative comments (dark colors for positive and light for negative).

FIGURE 5. CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS OF WEBEX CALLS



Partnership Sharing—One-half of interviewees talked about the WebEx calls in regard to sharing what they were working on. The majority of these interviewees spoke negatively about this aspect of the call. Some said they did not feel like they learned anything from hearing what the other partnerships were doing (see the quotation below). Some others felt like there were too many partnerships on the call, which made the calls long and onerous. By contrast, a few spoke positively about hearing from the other partnerships in the WebEx calls because it contributed to their learning and general networking.

It's great to hear what everybody is up too, but it's a blip. It just doesn't have any kind of impact on our project or anything like that. Sometimes it's kind of hard to justify the two hours of just hanging out. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Practical / Logistical Aspects—Almost one-half of interviewees talked about the practical or logistical aspects of the WebEx calls. The majority spoke negatively about this, often saying that the

calls were more for the benefit of SENCER-ISE staff than the partnerships (e.g., keeping tabs on the partnerships) (see the quotation below). By comparison, a few liked the WebEx calls and their regularity because it helped keep their project on task (see the second quotation).

I don't feel like any of it had to do with benefitting us so much as keeping tabs on us, reporting for the programs requirements, or studying us as SENCER-ISE seems like it is constantly looking at the effectiveness of the program. [HE, Cohort 1]

Carving out the time for the [WebEx calls] is always going to be somewhat cumbersome, but it helps us keep on task. It helped us prepare. [HE, Cohort 1]

Resources / Feedback—Three interviewees liked that the calls provided them resources or feedback to integrate into the partnership. However, Cohort 2 participants in particular felt the individual calls with SENCER-ISE staff (versus larger WebEx calls) were more useful in that regard.

Other—A few provided miscellaneous feedback. For instance, one interviewee said his organization prohibited web calls, so he was had to leave the office to participate.

POTENTIAL USE

Participants perceived the WebEx calls as useful if they were focused to support partnership work.

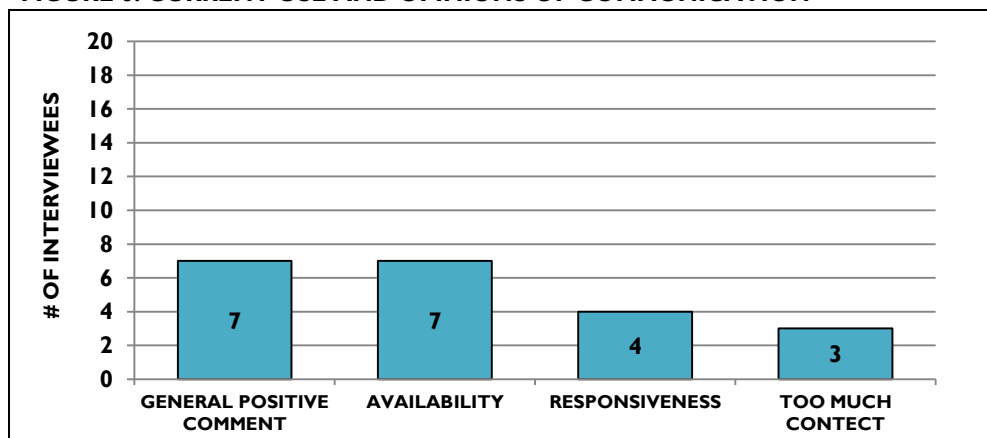
Focused Calls—One-quarter of interviewees thought the calls would be particularly useful if they were more focused on a topic or on a group of partnerships that could problem-solve issues together (see the quotation below). The desire for focus was also alluded to through interviewees' assessment of the WebEx calls being "clunky" given the number of people.

I think if we had like breakout groups that were around a certain topic area—some of us are interested in evaluation, some of us are interested in the instruments, and some of us had other questions. So if we just had smaller groups around a certain topic, I think it would have been better. [HE, Cohort 2]

COMMUNICATION IN GENERAL

Interviewees spoke mostly positively about communication from SENCER-ISE (see Figure 6). Four trends emerged, the first three positive and the last one negative: general positive reactions, appreciation for the availability of SENCER-ISE staff, appreciation for their responsiveness, and perception that there was too much communication.

FIGURE 6. CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS OF COMMUNICATION



General Positive Comments—About one-third provided general positive comments about communications. These comments often identified specific SENCER-ISE staff, including Hailey, Ellen, and Alan, as being “terrific,” “great,” or “supportive.”

Availability—About one-third valued that the SENCER-ISE team was so available to them. Some said they were in frequent contact with the project team (see the quotation below). Others had not utilized the SENCER-ISE staff but appreciated knowing that they are available.

I have been in touch with Hailey on a monthly basis about workshops and about what we’re doing here, just asking questions about long distance things. I just was on the phone with them today. I’m going to be with them in a session at the conference in Asheville, so mainly just the idea of them being there [has been helpful]. [ISE, Cohort 1]

Responsiveness—Almost one-quarter of interviewees appreciated how responsive the SENCER-ISE team is (see the quotation below). These interviewees described staff as responsive both to high-level project questions as well as practical matters.

I think they’ve been incredibly responsive. They’ve been highly-communicative but not over the top. They’re in a difficult place. They’re trying to herd a bunch of cats around the country, and they also have specific things that they have [to do] that are deliverable, so I think that they did a really good job. [HE, Cohort 1]

Too Much Communication—A few said the communication was too much for them to keep up with. Two of these interviewees said that the communication could be more concise and limited. Another interviewee said that the communication was out of proportion with the grant expectations (see the quotation below).

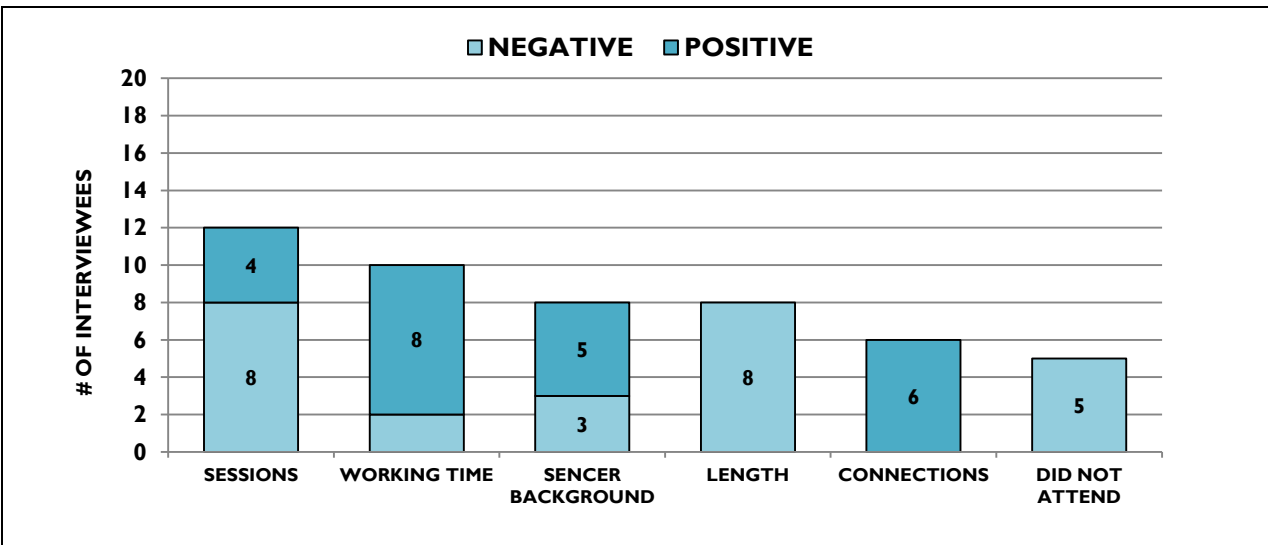
In terms of communication, I think this is what adds to the sense of the constancy or the expectations that are on us. . . . There are just constant emails coming from SENCER. At least it felt like that for a long time. So weeks ahead of when these things were happening, we’d be notified of it, and then we’d get reminders. It just felt like and we had nothing going on for our project at the time, so when we’re just trying to do the basic planning and get things lined up to get this really going off the ground, we’re getting constant requests for feedback and participating and reporting. It just seems really out of proportion with not just what it offered to contribute to our project but also what we were being compensated for. [HE, Cohort 1]

SENCER SUMMER INSTITUTE (SSI)

CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS

Three-quarters of interviewees attended the SENCER Summer Institute (SSI), while one-quarter, all HE professionals, did not. Of those who attended SSI, feelings were varied about how well aspects of the Institute supported their partnership. As a result six trends emerged (see Figure 7), and of these trends, some were talked about both positively and negatively so those distinctions are noted (dark colors for positives, lighter for negative). There were a few discernible differences in responses by cohorts given the changes that were made between years; these differences are noted in the narrative

FIGURE 7. CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS OF SENCER SUMMER INSTITUTE



Sessions—More than one-half of interviewees talked about the SSI sessions. Of Cohort 1 interviewees, the majority had a negative opinion of the sessions, primarily because the responses were from ISE professionals who did not feel like their field was represented (two HE professionals noted this as well). A few others generally said the sessions were not particularly relevant. However, there was a marked shift between Cohort 1 and 2. Fewer interviewees talked about the sessions overall, but two of three interviewees had highly positive things to say. Notably, the interviewees who had positive remarks were both ISE professionals who, based on their review of the program, did not think that sessions would be relevant to them but were pleasantly surprised by the quality (see the quotation below).

Oh, wow—everything about SSI was helpful. I went with very low expectations, because when I read the agenda, I thought it looked like it was all for Higher Education, and yet every single day there was something that I thought, ‘Oh, that was really worth being at.’ I loved the keynote about communicating by the Yale law professor, Dan Kahan. It was about how to communicate—why it is that people don’t believe that climate change is happening, even when they know the science. It’s not just a matter of communicating more science, and that was not only fascinating, but sort of helped me think a little bit about some of the things we’re doing here around difficult topics. I went to a session on synthetic biology, . . . and I knew nothing about synthetic biology, so it was a really good session. We went to a session on how to write grants for NSF proposals. We looked at NSF proposals and sort of dissected them and that was fantastic—really, really helpful. Literally every day there was something that we went back and looked at each other and went, ‘Well, that was worth going to.’ That really helped us think about our work on a broader scale—a little bit about our partnership and a little bit about this particular project—but also our bigger work, you know, thinking about the impact that we can have across our institution. [ISE, Cohort 2]

Working Time—One-half of interviewees talked about having time to work with their partner. All Cohort 1 interviewees who talked about planning time said it was one of the most important aspects of SSI; interviewees valued having the time to work in-person with their partners. In the SSI attended by Cohort 2, planning or working time was mostly absent (relegated to an orientation meeting to be described later); as a result, two ISE interviewees from Cohort 2 lamented the lack of planning time and said they skipped sessions to do that planning work on their own (see the quotation below).

I think a collective thing that everyone had talked about when we were there was how we really would like this to have been more of a work session. Like, here are some directives, or do you guys have things that you need to work on or talk about as a group? And it was more like mixing up the cohorts and having people talk about their experiences that way, which felt just about evaluation about how things are going. What I really wanted to do was sit with my partner. . . . And the most productive thing was when we just skipped one of the sessions and our team just met and basically planned one of our big events coming up in a couple weeks. We just sat down and planned it, because we hadn't had the time to do it, and we needed to finish it. It was really great to just take that hour and just do some focused work on the project because we were all physically there with no email, phone calls, or anything. [ISE, Cohort 2]

SENCER Background—Almost one-half of interviewees talked about receiving more background on SENCER. The majority of interviewees, particularly from Cohort 1, appreciated the background they received about SENCER at SSI; these interviewees appreciated having context for what SENCER is and the work that it does, which they felt that they had not received before (see the first quotation below). However, a few of these interviewees also noted that they felt as if they were being “indoctrinated into a cult” and were being forced to “drink the Kool-Aid”—not necessarily in a bad way but in a way that made them feel a little uncomfortable (see the second quotation).

The helpful thing about it was learning about SENCER, learning about the goals of SENCER, learning about the SENCER approach on civic engagement, . . . and [hearing from] people around the country that use SENCER in their work. [HE, Cohort 1]

I think this is true of a lot of people—we didn't really know what we were at SSI for. We really didn't know much about SENCER, period. And about ISE beyond that and what the Summer Institute was about. There was a lot of discussion among other people that felt like they were being indoctrinated into a cult. Because there is this really active, engaged community that have known each other for quite some time in many cases, and they feel really strongly about SENCER. There's this project, and we just kind of got sucked into it, with not really any sense of what was going on or why we were there and how it related to us. [HE, Cohort 2]

Length—The majority of Cohort 1 participants said SSI was too long; these participants felt that the sessions could be cut back dramatically. Two participants from Cohort 2 also felt the conference was still too long even after it was reduced; one of these interviewees talked about the days being too long, while the other talked about the length as in number of days.

Community and Connections—A few interviewees spoke about the importance of making connections at SSI. These interviewees were primarily from Cohort 1, and some of their reasons overlapped with their rationales for enjoying the background on SENCER. That is, these interviewees appreciated feeling like they are part of a larger community of practice (see the quotation below).

I felt the entire Institute was great. I think, for me, it was beyond saying, ‘Oh, I love one specific thing from the Institute.’ It was more a matter of the whole time I felt that—I think the way the partnerships are supported, there is a lot of inclusion and letting people bring to the table their thoughts and their ideas and feel valued for them. I think that the SENCER Institute does that really well. [ISE, Cohort 1]

POTENTIAL USE

Interviewees' comments and suggestions for SSI were primarily in response to the experiences they had versus what the overarching goals of SSI were. For that reason, suggestions were scant.

More Working Time—A few interviewees noted that it is important to have working time at any occasion that partners are brought together since it is a unique opportunity to be together with focused time. Interviewees’ overall comments suggested that the greatest value in these meetings is time with their partner more than hearing from guest speakers.

Even Shorter Still—SSI was shortened between Cohort 1’s participation and Cohort 2’s. Yet, interviewees still said SSI was too long (see the quotation below). Even interviewees who did not outright suggest shortening the amount of time implied this sentiment by talking about how time-consciousness they are because of other responsibilities.

It was [valuable], but it was really long. I go to meetings within my discipline that are international meetings, but even when they’re that long for an international meeting, they give you a day in the middle off, so that you can explore but also refocus your mind and your energy. And, they don’t require you to be there the entire time. There was no option to come for a day or two. The pressures of my job and the other things that I’m doing, and the size of this award, that was an unrealistic expectation [to be required to be there for so long]. [HE, Cohort 2]

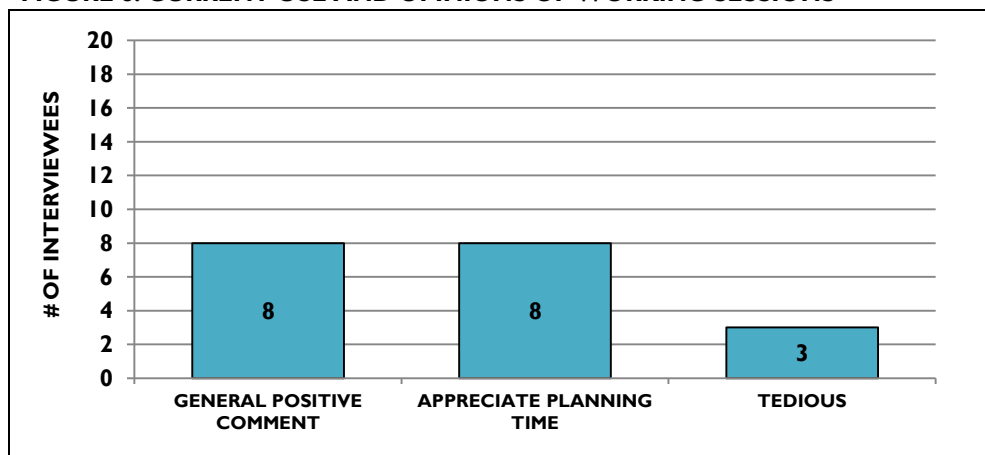
Should be Mandatory for All or Not Mandatory—A few interviewees expressed frustration that at the SSI Institute, the orientation was mandatory for Cohort 2 partners, and yet, there were many partners that were not present (see the quotation below).

I felt like we were told you must be here and then half the people didn’t come. And I gave up a lot of other meetings, and I put some things on the side burner that were really important in order to be there. I felt like it was mandatory in order to get the grant, and yet other people didn’t come. I was looking forward to getting to know all of the individuals at these other institutions. And really I got to know maybe two people. So I don’t know if it was the timing—there wasn’t a Doodle poll that figured out when the best time for everybody to come was. Or if they didn’t really make people follow through on the mandatory, I don’t know. I know people are busy. I’m busy, too. [HE, Cohort 2]

WORKING SESSIONS

Interviewees reacted positively overall to the working session. Three trends emerged: general positive feelings, appreciation for planning time, and perception that the working sessions were tedious (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. CURRENT USE AND OPINIONS OF WORKING SESSIONS



General Positive Comment—More than one-third provided a general positive comment. Some of these interviewees gave unspecific comments such as it was “great” or “helpful” but without expanding upon what was helpful. Some of these interviewees said the time would have been good if their partner had been present (see the quotation below).

It would have been better for me had [my partner] been with me. . . . All of the work around goals and objectives and all of that kind of stuff really had to be redone when the new partner came on the scene. [HE, Cohort 1]

Appreciate Planning Time—More than one-third said they appreciated the dedicated planning time; all interviewees liked that this time had explicit connections to their projects. For Cohort 1 interviewees, who had working sessions at SSI, they said it was the best part of SSI (see the quotation below).

I would say for me the pre-part [of SSI], whatever we call that, was most useful in terms of figuring out what our project was and the tools and the expectations that we went over in there, particularly on the first day. . . . Doing some project planning, including the evaluation. And learning about where this came from in terms of how it connected to the broader SENCER work, the context for the SENCER ISE awards, and getting a sense of the scope of what was possible and what was expected. [HE, Cohort 1]

Tedious—A few interviewees said the sessions were a little tedious. One said it was because his/her partnership had already covered aspects of the working sessions, such as identifying outcomes, another because the tasks were not aligned with their needs, and another because the activities swayed more academic than practical (see the quotation below).

I think it was helpful to think about our objectives and trying to really hone in on who our audience is and what our objectives are. I do think one of the things that was challenging near the end of that is that it began to feel like a bit of an academic exercise. We know what we need, and we’ve got it down on paper, but wait, the language isn’t quite right.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experience with the SENCER-ISE project and Civic Engagement Partnership Support Awards. My questions are primarily about your experience with the collaborative infrastructure—the web site, SENCER Summer Institute, and communications with project staff and/or the advisory board. At the end of the project, you also will be completing an online questionnaire, at which time you can provide feedback about the evaluation webinar and working session at the Summer Institute.

To ensure accuracy, I will be audio-recording this conversation; however, your comments are confidential. Your honesty is appreciated and your name will not be associated with any of your comments. Is it okay if I audio-record?

[Once agreement is reached] Remember, I do not work for SENCER and all that you say, positive or negative, is helpful.

Press record and announce ID#:

1. So far, what has SENCER-ISE provided that has been most helpful in supporting your partnership?

Can you tell me more about how that has helped support your partnership?

2. What has been your biggest challenge so far?

What, if anything, has SENCER-ISE provided to help you address this challenge?

What (else), if anything, could SENCER-ISE provide to help you address this challenge?

3. I'd like to ask you about specific aspects of the collaborative infrastructure that SENCER-ISE has created to help partners with their projects.

First let's talk about the web site. How, if at all, have you used the web site so far?

Can you tell me more (or provide an example)?

[Probe about: resources section, partners' pages, etc.; whether they have contributed to postings]

What has been the most helpful aspect of the web site so far? Why is that?

What has been the most challenging aspect of the web site so far? Why is that?

[**If not already mentioned**] In what ways, if any, has the web site helped support collaboration (communication) with others (including your partner)?

4. Next, let's talk about another aspect of the collaborative infrastructure—the SENCER Summer Institute that you attended in early August 2013.

What was the most helpful aspect of the Institute? Why is that?

What was the most challenging aspect of the Institute? Why is that?

[If not already mentioned] In what ways, if any, did the Institute support collaboration (communication) with others (including your partner)?

Would you say the Institute was a valuable experience given the time you invested? Why or why not?

5. Finally, I would like to ask you about communication—another aspect of the collaborative infrastructure. What, if any, communication have you and/your partner had with SENCER-ISE staff or advisors?

What has been the most helpful aspect of this communication so far? Why is that?

What has been the most challenging aspect of this communication so far? Why is that?

[If not already mentioned] In what ways, if any, did this communication support your partnership?

6. What, if any, suggestions do you have for improving the support that SENCER-ISE is providing to your (and other) partnership(s)?
7. Is there anything else about the SENCER-ISE project that you would like to mention?