
Findings from spring 2021 EDSIN community member interviews

Overview

During May and June 2021, CSCCE staff conducted nine 45-minute interviews with members of the EDSIN community with the goal of ascertaining perceptions about the community and its purpose, and possible next steps for its growth. We carefully selected participants to gain a representative range of perspectives across career stages, organizational affiliations, and current engagement levels within the community. We asked a series of questions regarding their current roles and responsibilities, relationship with EDSIN, current needs, and the value they obtain from EDSIN membership.

Of the nine people we interviewed, four were junior faculty members, one was a postdoc, one was a PhD student, and three were administrators and leaders from a university, a federal agency, and an infrastructure organization. Two had attended the 2019 EDSIN conference. At least four are currently engaged members of the community, meaning that they are active in the EDSIN Slack workspace and/or regularly attend meetings such as the monthly community calls.

Key takeaways

Several themes emerged from the interviews, which are described below as five key takeaways about EDSIN's mission, activities, and leadership.

1. CLARITY ABOUT EDSIN'S MISSION, BUT NOT ABOUT ACTIVITIES

All the interviewees were able to articulate in their own words what they thought EDSIN's mission was. Several focused on EDSIN's unique ability to bring researchers together from a variety of academic backgrounds and career levels around shared core values regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. Despite general alignment about the mission, however, most could not say what they thought the community was actually "for" in terms of the community's activities and projects. One participant commented, "I think EDSIN is still in this growing and planning phase." Another suggested that "a bi-weekly [digest] with a list of activities or actionable information" would help them gain a better understanding of what was happening in the community.

Some suggestions that emerged from the interviews regarding EDSIN's activities included: more clearly codifying regular community programming; hosting an annual in-person conference; sharing and creating resources; and facilitating connections between members. Below are additional notes regarding each of these topics.

Codifying regular community programming

- EDSIN currently hosts monthly community calls - virtual webinars open to all members of the community that last between 60 and 90 minutes. At least two participants expressed minor confusion about EDSIN's regular programming and said that having consistent times for community meetings would make it easier for them to participate. One person commented, "I think we haven't had a super consistent meeting schedule and that is a bit of a hindrance. If it's not on my calendar, I'm not going to show up."
- Those who currently do not regularly attend EDSIN events cited time zone differences, the COVID-19 pandemic, and professional responsibilities such as teaching schedules as barriers to participation.

Hosting an annual in-person conference

- Nearly all of the participants remarked on the value of in-person interaction and indicated interest in future annual events similar to the Boulder conference in 2019 (8/9 interviewees). Those who attended the 2019 conference found it extremely valuable, with one stating, "It was life changing. People were honest, welcoming, vulnerable and open. I saw a side of science that is typically not seen at a lot of other conferences."
- A few participants acknowledged the challenges of hosting in-person events such as staffing, funding, safety concerns due the COVID-19 pandemic, and making the conference accessible to participants with different budgets. When asked how such a conference could be paid for, several said that they have access to professional development funds at their organization or institution that they could potentially use to attend. One person said that EDSIN would need to ensure that, "a scholarship was available for those who don't have access to professional development [funds]." Another participant suggested seeking corporate sponsorship.

Sharing and creating resources

- Six out of nine participants said EDSIN is a rich place to find and disseminate resources related to DEI best-practices. Two participants who generate DEI-related content have found the EDSIN Slack workspace to be a particularly useful way to share their work with a broader audience.
- When further prompted, interviewees indicated that resources co-created by EDSIN members could be useful: "If EDSIN were to produce tip sheets, it would be helpful. Having someone sharing out in-person is often more helpful but it would be good to have resources to share around too." One commented that members could potentially generate such resources during an in-person meeting or conference. Working groups could be another venue for generating such resources. Interviewees suggested the following potential resource topics: guidance for minoritized students who are seeking mentors; developing inclusive curricula; and conducting participatory research.

Facilitating connections between members

- Finding and sharing professional opportunities such as jobs, funding, mentors, collaborators, and speaking opportunities is another theme that spanned the interviews. Participants reported successfully finding these opportunities via EDSIN – both during the in-person conference and in the Slack workspace.
- Most of the participants (8/9) indicated that they felt a deep connection to only a few EDSIN members, yet were aware of the potential to build additional meaningful relationships across the network. One person stated, “There are a few people that I've interacted with on and off...and there are a couple of really good friends that I met at the conference. But I'm not really as well connected as I'd like to be.”

2. DR. CRALL HAS ACCUMULATED SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL CAPITAL THAT HAS BEEN CRUCIAL TO THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF THE NETWORK

It is clear that the stewardship of Dr. Alycia Crall has been critical in establishing and maintaining the EDSIN community - nearly every participant recognized her contributions without prompting. Dr. Crall's impact has included making personal introductions between members, deeply listening to members to understand their needs and perspectives, and creating an environment where transparent, member-engaged decision-making is the norm. Members also highly respect her approach to DEI work. One participant said, “I've found Alycia to be an interested person and very aware of what she can and cannot do and what the community has the potential to do.” Another said, “Alycia [does] all of the legwork...she's just amazing – how much energy she has!”

3. MEMBERS BELIEVE THERE'S A NEED FOR EDSIN STAFF TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY

All of the members who suggested that EDSIN should create more content and programming, including tip sheets, working groups and an annual conference, acknowledged that it would take additional resources, including ongoing staffing, to support these activities. Several interviewees explicitly named the importance of having a community manager, such as Dr. Crall, who is focused on supporting EDSIN. Some ideas that were suggested by interviewees for raising funds to support EDSIN's activities included conference fees, grants, and corporate sponsorship.

4. MEMBERS HAVE RELEVANT PROJECTS AND RESOURCES THAT THEY CAN SHARE BACK TO THE EDSIN COMMUNITY

Nearly every participant was able to describe a project that they are currently working on that is relevant to the broader EDSIN network. These projects spanned a variety of topics including inclusive teaching and mentoring practices, facilitating support groups for persons with disabilities, and building partnerships and collaborations between minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and other universities or organizations. Some of these projects could be topics for future community calls and could potentially seed working groups or special interest groups. Members indicated a willingness

to share their experiences with the broader community, if asked, but hadn't necessarily been sure about how or whether to share their knowledge unprompted.

5. MEMBERS FIND INHERENT VALUE IN NETWORKING WITH THOSE WITH SHARED VALUES

As mentioned above, nearly all of the interviewees have found value in connecting with others in the EDSIN community. Many value being a member of a community with broad membership that spans multiple disciplines, organization types and career levels. Some direct quotes on this topic include:

- "I'm definitely expanding my network, which is really important for an early career researcher. I found two jobs that I'm applying to through [EDSIN]."
- "Someone I had an interaction with at the EDSIN conference invited me to keynote a conference this summer."
- "I met someone at my own institution that I didn't know before and probably wouldn't have met them otherwise."

Many participants commented on the friendliness and warmth of the network: "Folks seem very welcoming - which is not always the norm in academic communities." EDSIN also provides a space to build deep relationships with others who are engaged in culture change, serving as respite for members who may be less supported at their home institutions: "The culture of my department is a bit more traditional - they don't seem to mind what I do as long as there's papers and grants. Organizations like EDSIN lend legitimacy to my participation in DEI efforts."

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

Overwhelmingly, interviewees were enthusiastic supporters of EDSIN and expressed a strong desire to see the community thrive. When asked how they would feel if the community ceased to exist, comments ranged from sadness and disappointment to a strong desire to preserve the existing network in some form. However, despite this strength of feeling, many of the participants also feel that they have not yet tapped into the full potential of the network and currently have only a few deep relationships with other members. A lack of clarity about current programming and who else is in the network is likely contributing to this, as well as the impact of the global pandemic on the ability to meet in-person.

Our recommendations for the next phase of EDSIN's growth are centered around supporting more regular programming that continues to involve and elevate the activities of members, with the goal of deepening the connections between existing members and welcoming new members into the community. To support this work, we see the following as necessary:

FUNDING FOR A COMMUNITY MANAGER

Staffing to support the establishment and growth of the community at this crucial nascent stage is key. Based on our experience, this is likely to be at least a part-time role (20 hours/week), not only to coordinate programming and communications, including the establishment of working groups and co-creation of materials, but also to create and maintain community infrastructure such as a member directory, regular newsletter, and events calendar, and to identify new funding sources.

AN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

If safe to do so, an in-person conference or meeting could harness the abundance of good will among current membership and regenerate the momentum from the initial 2019 conference. Several members suggested that an annual meeting would be welcome and the first version of such an event could include discussions of some of the mission-related topics raised during the interviews, including whether EDSIN should remain focused specifically on the environmental sciences and which areas might be priorities for creation of materials. These discussions might then lead to the formation of additional working groups with members taking on supported leadership roles. Topics that emerged during the interviews that could bring together disconnected members include developing inclusive teaching and mentoring practices and establishing best-practices for building collaborations between minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and other universities or organizations.

If such a meeting is not possible in-person, a virtual conference or the addition of new special interest groups and/or working groups regarding the topics mentioned above could be alternatives. Creating tangible resources (e.g., tip sheets, videos) as outputs from these activities could maximize their impact and serve as the initial content for a repository of resources co-created by EDSIN members.

CLARITY ABOUT COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING – INCLUDING A SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

Several members expressed confusion about current programming, including a lack of awareness about whether or not activities were taking place. We recommend building upon some of the materials and expertise volunteered by members through the interviews to devise and promote a community call schedule for the rest of the year. This would include updates to the EDSIN website to list the events and any working group activities, as well as the creation of a regular community newsletter highlighting recent activity for those who are too busy or unsure how to engage on Slack. A free tool such as Mailchimp could be used for this.

A MEMBER DIRECTORY TO SUPPORT IDENTIFICATION OF CONNECTIONS

An opt-in member directory with basic information such as affiliation, job title and areas of interest and/or expertise may help members find one another more readily. This may be particularly important for newer members who did not attend the 2019 conference, as well as for incoming members who will join as the community continues to grow.