

**To: Chair of the National Sea Grant Advisory Board**

**Site Review Equity and Fairness  
A Report by the Evaluation Committee of the National Sea Grant Advisory Board**

April 2020

**Committee Members: Dr. James Murray, (Chair), Dr. Anders Andren,  
Dr. Gordon Grau, Ms. Judith Gray, and Ms. Deborah Stirling  
NSGO Staff Support: Ms. Susan Holmes and Ms. Elizabeth Rohring**



## **Charge from the Director**

Pursuant to an April 27, 2018 request from Dr. Jonathan Pennock, the National Sea Grant Advisory Board (NSGAB) has established an Evaluation Committee (EC) to oversee evaluative activities related to changes in the Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (PIE) process. Dr. Pennock asked the NSGAB to help coordinate the quadrennial evaluation of the programs of the National Sea Grant College Program. The EC tasks included: 1) assigning an NSGAB member for each of the 34 site reviews; 2) reviewing the site review reports and associated materials to verify that each program was held to the same standards (equity and fairness); and 3) identifying individuals to serve on the Independent Review Panel (IRP). The IRP will provide an external evaluation of the effectiveness of the National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) and the National Sea Grant College Program overall.

Dr. Amber Mace, NSGAB Chair, asked NSGAB member, Dr. James Murray, to chair the EC, and Murray consulted the NSGAB's Executive Committee to add four additional individuals to the EC: Dr. Gordon Grau, Ms. Judith Gray, and Ms. Deborah Stirling of the NSGAB, and Dr. Anders Andren, Wisconsin Sea Grant Director (retired). Collectively the EC members participated in 18 site review visits during the review cycle.

The EC, assisted by staff at the NSGO, appointed NSGAB members to co-chair 33 of the 34 site review visits, surveyed the Sea Grant network for the purpose of evaluating the site visit process, reviewed all 34 site review reports and Director's responses to determine if the reports were fair and equitable, and provided a list of nominees (approved by the full NSGAB) for consideration for the IRP by the National Sea Grant Director.

To conduct its work, the EC utilized several conference calls and held a full committee meeting in Silver Spring, MD on March 4-7, 2020. Background materials provided to the EC included the 34 site review reports, the Director's response to each site review report, and a summary report compiled by the NSGO that included high-level statistics including standards of excellence results, distribution of performance ratings, distribution of performance scores, and a summary of the Program Directors' response letters. The Chair of the EC assigned primary (~seven) and secondary reviewer responsibilities (~seven) to each EC member with the primary reviewer leading the discussion for their assigned site review reports and the secondary reviewer providing additional information or differing opinions for each site review report. A consensus approach was used to determine the EC's findings. The EC reviewed the site review team (SRT) reports for the purpose of: 1) ensuring the reviews were conducted in a fair and equitable manner, 2) assessing the Sea Grant Director's responses, and 3) assessing contested issues, if any. The EC agreed upon a review criteria that in order to change a report's standards of excellence or performance ratings, the Sea Grant Director in his/her response letter must either demonstrate a clear bias by one or more members of the SRT, and/or demonstrate there were

factual errors presented in the report that clearly led to an erroneous conclusion which affected the scoring.

This report focuses on the task of ensuring the 34 site review reports were reviewed with consistency and that the site review process was fair and equitable to all programs.

## Summary of Data

### High Level Summary Statistics

The 2014-2017 evaluation process produced thirty-four site review reports that include a determination of whether a program met the Standards of Excellence, numerical ratings for performance - based on the program's identified focus areas, a description of findings, recommendations, suggestions, and highlights of best management practices.

The final site review report has sections highlighting findings, recommendations, and suggestions, as well as any "best management practices" identified:

- A *finding* is a conclusion by the SRT based on the site review visit.
- A *recommendation* is a formally prescribed course of action for which the Sea Grant program is accountable.
- A *suggestion* is an idea that is presented for consideration.
- A *best management practice* is a method or technique that has shown results superior to those achieved with other means. The best management practices identified are shared with other Sea Grant programs.

The full guidance can be found on [Inside Sea Grant](#).

Table 1 presents the combined summary results of the major categories under review from the 34 site review reports. Results show that thirty-two of thirty-four Sea Grant programs met all Standards of Excellence. There were sixty recommendations, with twenty-one programs having recommendations while, for thirteen programs, no recommendations were offered. There were 104 best management practices identified across thirty-one programs and for three programs best management practices were not identified.

Table 1: Combined summary results of the major categories under review from 34 site review reports.

| Site Review Report Results                             | Totals       |
|--|--------------|
| Number of Programs who met the Standards of Excellence | 32 out of 34 |
| Total Number of Findings                               | 548          |
| Total Number of Suggestions                            | 298          |
| Total Number of Recommendations                        | 60           |
| Programs who have recommendations                      | 21           |
| Programs who don't have recommendations                | 13           |
| Total Number of Best Management Practices (BMPs)       | 104          |
| Programs who have BMPs                                 | 31           |
| Programs who don't have BMPs                           | 3            |

Table 2 shows the distribution of recommendations between the Standards of Excellence and national focus area categories.

Table 2: Breakdown of the number and type of recommendations from 34 site review reports.

| Recommendations                        | Number of Recommendations |
|--|---------------------------|
| Total Number of Recommendations        | 60                        |
| Standard of Excellence Recommendations | 58                        |
| Focus Area Recommendations             | 2                         |

### Standards of Excellence Results

According to the federal regulations on eligibility, qualifications, and responsibility of the Sea Grant College Program, 15 CFR 918.3(b)(1)-(9), a Sea Grant program must meet the criteria that are encompassed by the Standards of Excellence categories. The site review visits focused on those aspects that fit within four broad categories of the Standards of Excellence:

- Program Management and Organization (organization, program team approach, and support)
- Stakeholder Engagement (relevance, advisory services, and education and training)
- Collaborative Network Activities (relationships and coordination)
- Performance Review (leadership and productivity)

The combined results of the Standards of Excellence recommendations show that the majority of recommendations fall within the management and organization category, followed by the stakeholder engagement category, the performance review category and finally the collaborative network activities category (see Table 3).

Table 3: Total number of Standards of Excellence recommendations and the number of recommendations broken down into Standards of Excellence categories.

| Standards of Excellence Categories      | Number of Recommendations |
|---|---------------------------|
| Total Number of Standards of Excellence | 58                        |
| Management and Organization             | 34                        |
| Stakeholder Engagement                  | 12                        |
| Performance Review                      | 9                         |
| Collaborative Network Activities        | 3                         |

### Determination of Performance Rating

This evaluation looked into the program’s progress towards its own program strategic plan by the four national focus areas. The review assessed impacts, accomplishments, and success in reaching the performance measures. The national focus areas are:

- Healthy Coastal Ecosystems (HCE)
- Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture (SFA)
- Resilience Communities and Economies (RCE)
- Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development (ELWD)

The combined results show that there were only two recommendations provided to programs under the national focus areas. Both of these recommendations fell within the Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development national focus area (see Table 4). The likely reasons for the limited amount of recommendations for focus areas are probably related to how the evaluation is set up. In the Standards of Excellence component of the evaluation, programs addressed key criteria in order to show that they met the Standards of Excellence.

Recommendations made by the SRT require the program under review to take action to address (a) specific issue(s) raised during the review. With regard to performance ratings, the provision of recommendations is not required. Instead, each program that participated within a national focus area, as identified in their 2014-2017 program strategic plan, received a rating.

Table 4: Number of recommendations by national focus area.

| Focus Area Summary                               | Number of Recommendations |
|--|---------------------------|
| Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development | 2                         |

The SRT assessed each program by providing a rating for each national focus area identified in the program strategic plan and based on Sea Grant appropriated funds. The SRT used the following rating scale:

- Highest Performance - exceeds expectations by an exceptional margin in most areas/aspects (1)

- Exceeds Expectations by a substantial margin in some areas/aspects (2)
- Meets Expectations in most areas/aspects (3)
- Below Expectations in some areas/aspects (4)
- Unsuccessful in most areas/aspects (5)

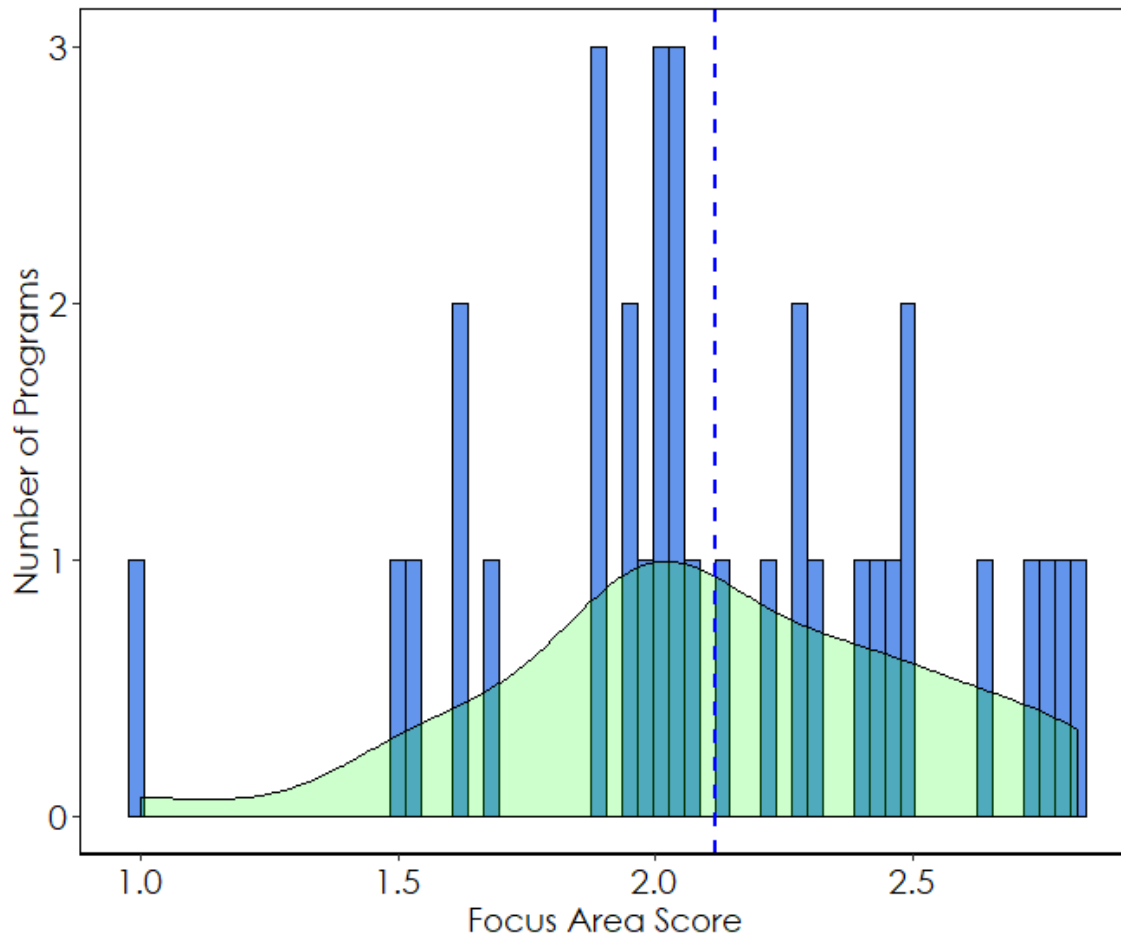
Table 5 presents the combined results of the national focus area ratings and shows that the majority of programs either exceeded expectations or met expectations in the Healthy Coastal Ecosystems (HCE) focus area. About half the programs exceeded expectations in the Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture (SFA), Resilient Coastal Communities and Economies (RCE), and Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development (ELWD) focus areas.

Table 5: Total number of ratings per national focus area from 34 site review reports.

| National Focus Area Rating Scale  | HCE | SFA | RCE | ELWD |
|---|-----|-----|-----|------|
| Number of Programs that ranked 1: Highest Performance exceeds expectations by an exceptional margin in most areas/aspects | 4   | 4   | 8   | 8    |
| Number of Programs that ranked 2: Exceeds Expectations by a substantial margin in some areas/aspects                      | 13  | 18  | 16  | 19   |
| Number of Programs that ranked 3: Meets Expectations in most areas/aspects  | 17  | 9   | 10  | 7    |
| Number of Programs that ranked 4: Below Expectations in some areas/aspects  | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0    |
| Number of Programs that ranked 5: Unsuccessful in most areas/aspects  | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0    |

Figure 1 shows the focus area scores grouped by the number of programs which received those scores. The figure suggests the overall scoring by the SRTs was evenly distributed and that the programs are performing on average at a level that “exceeds expectations by a substantial margin in some areas/aspects.”

Figure 1. Program distribution of total focus area scores for 34 Sea Grant programs.



**Summary of Directors Response Letters**

Table 6 is a summary of feedback pulled from the program director response letters. Nine programs complimented some part of the evaluation process. Six programs provided feedback that either contested their Standards of Excellence or national focus area results, provided suggestions for process improvement, or expressed concerns with the process.

Table 6: Assessment of Program Feedback

| Number of Programs who Complimented Process | Number of Programs who Suggested Improvements to Process | Number of Programs who were Concerned with Process | Number of Programs who Contested Standard of Excellence or Focus Area Rating Results |
|---|--|--|--|
| 9   | 2  | 5  | 4  |

## **Findings**

The Evaluation Committee (EC) has reviewed all 34 site review reports, Director's letters responding to program reviews, SRT member's comments, Director's comments on the site review process, and scoring data.

Our overall observation is that the site review process is working quite well and has matured to a level that is accepted by most of the Sea Grant community members. There were surprisingly few negative comments, indicating that the site review process does not need a major overhaul. In general, the SRT reports were very consistent, numerical scores were generally well defended, and only four programs expressed concerns about their scores. Scoring data in the four focus areas (Healthy Coastal Ecosystems (HCE), Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture (SFA), Resilient Communities and Economics (RCE), and Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development (ELDW), show a distribution that approaches a bell curve, indicating a robust grading process with few deviations. It also indicates that a majority of the programs are performing at a high level.

The general consensus of the EC is that the entire review process is useful for the Sea Grant programs, for the National Sea Grant Office (NSGO), and for NOAA. The evaluation gives the individual programs an opportunity to take a critical look at their *modus operandi* and to synthesize their accomplishments in a coherent and meaningful way. It also provides programs and the NSGO an opportunity to display their accomplishments to a number of different audiences including stakeholders, university officials, the general public, and legislators. It is thus more than a merit exercise. For the smaller programs the process is particularly valuable to help them learn, grow, and become more productive.

## **EC Recommendations**

Scores were found to be fair and equitable with the exception of one report. For this program, the EC recommends that the performance rating for the Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development focus area be raised from a score of three to a score of two. The rationale for this recommendation was that the EC believed there was a perception of potential bias in the review which affected the rating in this focus area. The bias was likely related to insufficient training of SRT members by the NSGO, and a recommendation to mitigate this issue is discussed in our report on the site review process.

During the site reviews, two programs were found to not have met the Standards of Excellence criteria. Based on the Director's response and implementation steps taken by one of these programs since the site review visit, the EC recommends that this program now meets the



standards of excellence and is eligible for future merit increases. Another program did not meet the standards of excellence and is struggling to respond. Positive steps have been made and another report is due later this spring, after which time we recommend a final determination be made by the Director provided the recommendations have been satisfactorily addressed.

Once the above recommendations are addressed, the EC recommends to the Director of the National Sea Grant College Program that all SRT reports be finalized.

From our review and results from the survey we have several recommendations for process improvement (training, language to support ratings, ensuring that the written and oral reports match, SRT membership selection, research funding policy, target metrics, and Director's participation on site review visits) that are described in a second report titled, *NSGAB Evaluation Committee Site Review Visit Process Report*.

## Appendix 1: Charge to the Board



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
National Sea Grant College Program  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3282

April 27, 2018

Dr. Amber Mace  
Chair, National Sea Grant Advisory Board  
via email

Dear Amber,

As you know, every four years, each of our Sea Grant programs undergo a site review to determine if the program meets the requirements of our legislation 33 USCS § 1121, and the Standards of Excellence per [Sea Grant Federal Regulations](#) (15 CRF 918). In order to comply with the Federal Advisory Committee Act (Pub. L. 92-463) and the suggested changes to our Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (PIE) process, I would ask that you create an Evaluation Committee of the Board to oversee these evaluative activities.

The charge for the Evaluation Committee is to help coordinate the quadrennial evaluation of the programs and the National Sea Grant College Program. To achieve this, the Evaluation Committee will 1) assign a Board member for each of the 34 site reviews; 2) review the site review reports and associated materials to verify that each program is held to the same standards; and 3) identify individuals to serve on the Independent Review Panel. This panel will provide an external evaluation of the effectiveness of the NSGO and the National Sea Grant College Program overall.

Elizabeth Rohring, the Designated Federal Officer for the Board and Susan Holmes, the NSGO PIE Coordinator will oversee the process and work with you and the other Board members to provide support and answer questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan R. Pennock".

Jonathan R. Pennock  
Director, National Sea Grant College Program

cc: Susan Holmes  
Elizabeth Rohring



**Memorandum to:** Amber Mace, National Sea Grant Advisory Board Chair

**From:** Jonathan Pennock, National Sea Grant College Program Director

**Date:** April 27, 2018

**Subject:** Charge to the National Sea Grant Advisory Board (Board) to create an Evaluation Committee

**Purpose:** The charge for the Evaluation Committee is to help coordinate the quadrennial evaluation of the state Sea Grant programs and the National Sea Grant College Program.

**Background:** As part of the Sea Grant Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation program (PIE) every four years a Site Review is conducted to assess if the Sea Grant state programs meets the Standards of Excellence per Sea Grants Federal Regulations (15 CRF 918.3). Due to recommendations from the PIE II Committee and an evaluation of our current process, quadrennial evaluation of the National Sea Grant College Program and state Sea Grant Programs will take place in three parts.

- 1) The site reviews will serve as a retrospective evaluation of a program's overall impact on society as guided by their state program strategic plan, and as well as their achievement meeting the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence. Each Site Review Team (SRT) will be Chaired by a Federal Program Officer and Co-Chaired by an Advisory Board member.
- 2) The Evaluation Committee will review consistency and equity of the SRT process through a review once all site visits are completed and all directors have had the opportunity to comment on their report. The Evaluation Committee will make recommendations to the National Sea Grant College Program Director for revisions should they deem any necessary.
- 3) An Independent Review Panel will be created by the Evaluation Committee to review the NSGO and the National Sea Grant College Program as a whole. The Evaluation Committee will identify Board members and external experts to serve on the Independent Review Panel.

**Charge to the National Sea Grant Advisory Board:**

Create an Evaluation Committee that is charged with:

- 1) Identifying one Board member for each of Sea Grant program SRTs. Should a sitting Board member not be available, former Board members will be asked to serve in an *emeritus* Board member capacity as SRT Co-chair.
- 2) Reviewing the SRT reports for consistency and equity and reporting those findings to the Advisory Board.

- 3) Creating an Independent Review Panel (IRP) for the National Sea Grant College Program to provide an external evaluation of the effectiveness of the NSGO and the National Sea Grant College Program overall.

The Evaluation Committee will provide all findings of the SRTs and the IRP to the National Sea Grant Advisory Board at the Fall 2019 Advisory Board meeting. The Board will send their reviews and any recommendations for changes to the Director of the National Sea Grant College Program.

**Participants:** Due to the number of site visits required, it is expected that all members of the Advisory Board will participate. No Advisory Board member who serves on a state Sea Grant program advisory board or steering committee may be involved in that state’s SRT or portions of the IRP that involve that state. The SRT members will serve as individual subcommittees for the Evaluation Committee and report their draft findings to the Evaluation Committee, who will report to the full Board. The National Sea Grant Advisory Board is the only group who can provide recommendations to NOAA and the SRT reports shall not be considered final until they have been reviewed and voted on by the Board. The SRTs should include a Board member, a Sea Grant Director, a Federal Program Officer, and other external experts. The NSGO is prepared to provide staff support and travel funds as necessary to facilitate the Evaluation Committee and SRT work.

**Tentative Schedule:**

| Activity  | Timing                  |
|---|-------------------------|
| Site Visits Begin                               | October 2018            |
| Site Visits End                                 | May 30, 2019            |
| SRT Reports to Evaluation Committee             | July 30, 2019           |
| Evaluation Committee Convenes                   | August 2019             |
| IRP Convenes                                    | August, 2019            |
| IRP Findings due to Evaluation Committee        | September 30, 2019      |
| Evaluation Committee presents to Advisory Board | Fall Board Meeting 2019 |