

Rapid network evolution prompts changes to LTER governance

Governance is not a topic that most people think about often. For more than a year, however, it was the subject of the Governance Working Group (GWG), a diverse team of LTER and non-LTER researchers brought together to study this critical issue as part of LTER Planning Grant activities. The goal of the planning effort is to create a framework to increase the scale and scope of activity needed to address the ecological “Grand Challenges” identified by LTER (Collins, 2004).

The GWG was asked to consider modifications to the LTER Network’s organizational structure to promote synthetic inter-site research, to foster interaction with other research networks, and to accommodate the growth of the Network. Ultimately, the GWG proposed that the LTER Network bylaws be significantly revised. After some lively discussion at the LTER Coordinating Committee (CC) meeting in May 2006, a new version of the bylaws was voted on and approved by the Committee. The changes went into effect soon afterward. This article describes the factors that led to the revision in the LTER Network governance structure, the considerations behind these changes, and the relevance of the new bylaws to members of the LTER Network.

Governance is a process through which a group makes decisions that direct their collective activity (www.ioq.ca). The formal elements of this system, such as constitutions and bylaws, define how the process is supposed to function. In reality, the informal practices or unwritten codes of conduct are equally important in determining how governance works. The LTER Network has had a governance structure since it was formed in 1980. At the first meeting of the six initial LTER sites, the members established a Steering Committee, elected officers, and formed committees that preceded several standing committees that are still in existence today (Magnuson et al., 2006).

Throughout its history, the governance of the LTER Network has been marked by democracy rather than hierarchy and by informality rather than formality. The democratic structure is evident in the fact that during most of its existence the Network’s major decision-making body has been a committee comprised of the Principal Investigator from each LTER site.



Photo: Karen Baker

Members of the Governance Working Group (GWG)—**Back row, l to r:** Robert B. Waide (LNO), Lawrence Weider (University of Oklahoma/OBFS), Peter Groffman (BES/HBR), Karen Baker (CCE/PAL), Dan Childers (FCE). **Front row, l to r:** Chelsea Crenshaw (SEV), Ann Zimmerman (University of Michigan), Katherine Lawrence (University of Michigan), John Magnuson (NTL).

The Network’s decision-making process was not codified into a set of written bylaws until 23 years after the Network was formed. In its democracy and informality, the LTER very much fits the definition of a network, which the organizational literature defines as a relationship between independent entities that coordinate their work through informal social systems rather than bureaucratic processes (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Jones et al., 1997). This history was a major consideration as the GWG pondered changes to the Network’s organizational structure.

By October 2004, when the LTER Planning Grant officially started, the LTER had grown to 26 sites, more than 1,800 scientists and students, and a Network Office. In light of this growth and of the goals of the planning effort, the leaders of the Planning Grant asked the GWG to consider two questions:

- ◆ Is the LTER Network as it is presently constituted well-governed given the scope of present and known future activities?
- ◆ Will the present governance structure of the LTER Network accommodate new sites, collaborations with non-LTER sites, and resources that might result from the planning grant?

After much discussion and research, the GWG concluded that the answer to both questions was “no” for two key reasons. First, the increase in the size and complexity of the LTER Network, though a sign of its success, affected the Network’s ability to function efficiently and effectively. The organizational literature shows that this phenomenon is common as the number of sites in a network grow.

See “Bylaws,” p. 5

Bylaws (continued from p. 4)

In particular, it was difficult for the CC, a group of 26 individuals, to meet frequently and to make decisions quickly. The Network structure included an Executive Committee (EC), a group of six individuals elected from among the sites, but their decision-making power was limited. The EC primarily prepared action items and issues for discussion and made recommendations to the CC, which made the decisions. Second, the strength of the Network lies in its science. Under the previous structure, the CC's time to engage in discussion about research direction, to set future courses of action, and to implement a higher level of research collaboration, synthesis, and integration was limited. The GWG felt that the intellectual capital of the Network leadership was being spent on management activities that could be handled by a smaller group.

In several face-to-face and teleconference meetings, the GWG drafted a new set of

bylaws. These changes were guided by principles of good governance (Graham et al., 2003) and by the need for:

- ◆ greater inclusiveness of sites in Network governance
- ◆ adequate time for envisioning the future of LTER science
- ◆ smaller decision-making group
- ◆ clear expectation of participants in the governance process
- ◆ continuous supply of Network leaders and new ideas

In March 2006, a draft was presented to members of the EC for comment. On May 18, 2006 the CC approved most of the proposed changes and unanimously voted to accept a new version of the LTER Network bylaws. To read the full text of the new bylaws and a table summarizing the major changes between the previous and new version of the bylaws, please read the online edition of this newsletter (www.lternet.edu/news).

What do the new bylaws mean for members of the LTER Network? First, they offer more opportunities than ever for individuals to participate in governance. Second, they make clear the responsibilities of those charged with the governance of the Network. These obligations include responding to input from Network members and ensuring good flow of information and effective communication of ideas within the Network. It is up to each person in LTER to participate in the governance process, whether it is to provide information, to hold Network representatives accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities, or to serve on the Science Council, Executive Board, or a committee.

Organizations, like species, continually evolve. The LTER Network's new organizational structure reflects significant changes in governance that were necessary for the big steps the Network has embarked on as part of the planning process. They will certainly not be the last changes to Network governance. The newly formed Science Council and Executive Board have been operating under the revised bylaws since May 2006. They are learning what is working and what may need to be refined or changed. Further, the outcome of the planning process may lead the Network to evaluate its governance structure once again in the not too distant future.

References

Barringer, B.R and J.S. Harrison. 2000. Walking a tightrope: Creating value through interorganizational relationships. *Journal of Management* 26:367-403.

Collins, S. (2004). LTER Network plans for the future. *LTER Network News* 17(2):1-3

Graham, J., B. Amos, and T. Plumptre. 2003. Principle for good governance in the 21st century. Policy Brief No. 15, Institute on Good Governance. Available: <http://www.ig.az/publications/policybrief15.pdf>

Jones, C., W.S. Hesterly, and S.P. Borgatti. 1997. A general theory of network governance: Exchange conditions and social mechanisms. *Academy of Management Review* 22:911-945.

Magnuson, J. J., Kratz, T. K., and Benson, B. J. (eds) 2006. Long-term dynamics of lakes in the landscape. New York: Oxford University Press.

By Ann Zimmerman, University of Michigan

Main components of the LTER Network governance structure

Science Council

Role and authority: The scientific direction and vision of the LTER Network is established by the Science Council. The Science Council reserves ultimate authority for decisions affecting the Network and may address issues that arise from the Executive Board, the Network Office, or the participating LTER sites.

Composition: The Science Council is composed of a Chairperson, a Chair-Elect (as needed), the Chair of each Network-wide and Targeted Standing Committee, the Executive Director of the Network Office, and the Principal Investigator and an additional participant from each LTER site.

Executive Board

Role and authority: The Science Council grants the Executive Board the power to make rules or regulations for the Network's management; to create, evaluate, and dissolve committees; and to fill vacancies in and change membership of committees. All members of the Executive Board are charged to act on behalf of and are accountable to the membership of the LTER Network.

Composition: The Executive Board is composed of the elected Chair of the Science Council, 9 members selected by individual sites on a rotating basis; an Information Manager; the Executive Director of the Network Office; and, as needed, a Chair-Elect.

Officers and Duties

The *Chair* is elected by the voting members of the Science Council. The Chair presides at all meetings of the Science Council and Executive Board. Along with the Executive Board, the Chair generally oversees and supervises the governance of the LTER Network. The Chair facilitates communication to the Network sites regarding decisions of the Executive Board; provides a receptive ear for any Network member who wishes to raise an issue of concern; and serves as or appoints liaisons to NSF, other agencies, etc. The term of office for the Chair is 2 years. The Chair may stand for re-election for one consecutive 2-year term.

In the absence of the Chair, the Chair-Elect exercises all powers and duties of the Chair. The Chair-Elect serves for 1-year prior to assuming office as Chair.