

NERRS Science Collaborative 2018 Catalyst RFP Feedback Report

The NERRS Science Collaborative is an adaptive program. We work to refine and adjust our approach continually to meet our goal of delivering highly relevant, usable science that addresses coastal management problems important to the reserves. Our adaptive approach is driven by feedback from program participants and the NERRS, and direction provided by NOAA.

This document summarizes the 2018 Science Collaborative Catalyst RFP feedback process and the feedback we received.

2018 Catalyst RFP Feedback Process

We invited feedback on the 2018 Catalyst RFP through two mechanisms:

1. Written responses via an anonymous, web-based feedback form; and
2. Comments and questions via a feedback, discussion-based webinar.

Web-based feedback form

Reserve staff and all 2018 Catalyst RFP applicants were invited by email to provide feedback using an anonymous, web-based form. The invitation to reserve staff encouraged them to provide feedback, even if they did not ultimately submit an application. We received 42 responses, the slight majority of which (60%) were from non-reserve staff representing universities/colleges or non-profit organizations. In all, 90% of respondents were part of a team that submitted a proposal in response to the 2018 Catalyst RFP.

Feedback webinar

The same group that received the feedback form was also invited to participate in a discussion webinar, held June 26, 2018. On the webinar, attendees shared their perspectives about the application experience, what worked well and what could have been improved, and compare it to prior program RFPs.

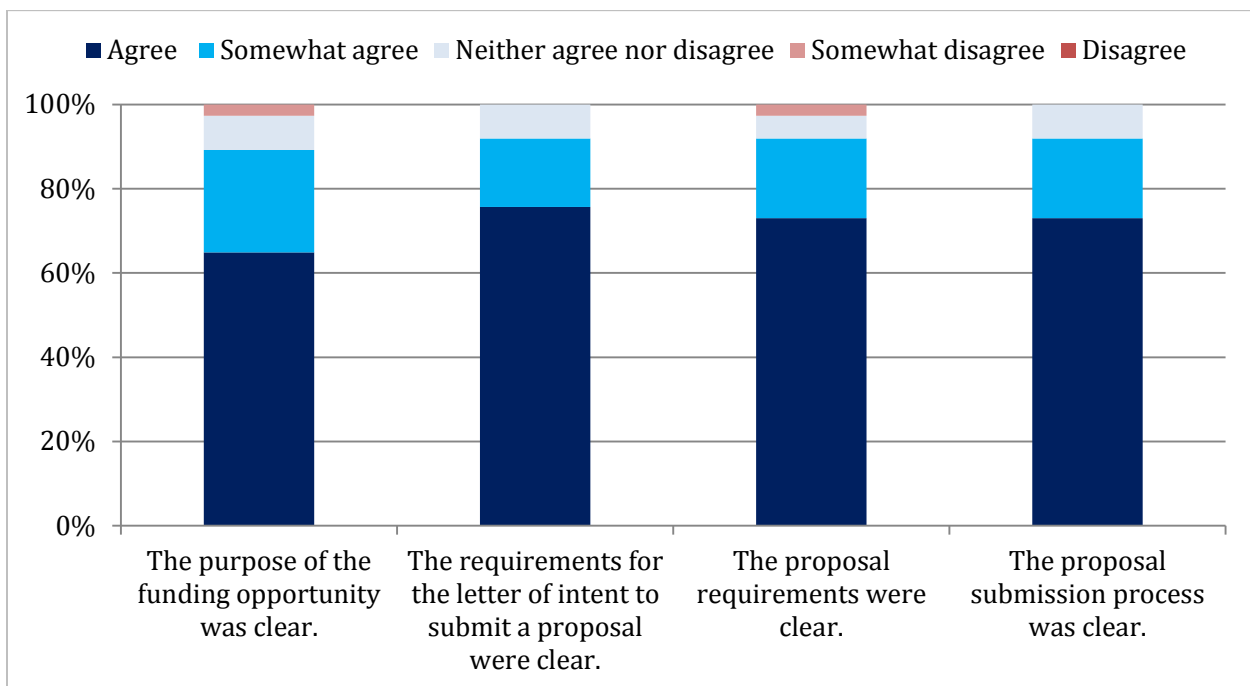
2018 Feedback

Over the past three years, the Science Collaborative has run Research/Integrated Assessment and Science Transfer RFPs and modified them annually based on feedback from participants and the NERR System. However, due to the structure of the five-year cooperative agreement between the University of Michigan and NOAA which only allows for one-year projects at this stage, the Science Collaborative was unable to offer multi-year grants in 2018. Instead, the Science Collaborative offered the new, one-year Catalyst RFP, which offers targeted funding to advance collaborative science.

Feedback about the 2018 Catalyst RFP revealed that participants appreciated the opportunity to design a focused project that allowed researchers and end users to expand ongoing or recently completed research. Participants commented on the value of having a funding opportunity dedicated to enabling work on a new or emerging idea that might not have competed as well in a different RFP.

Figures 1-3 summarize responses to three key performance questions from the web-based feedback form. The responses indicate that proposal application requirements were clear and that the process was simpler and less time consuming than other RFPs (Fig. 1), although a more streamlined process would be better. Responses also indicate a clearly described review process and review criteria (Fig. 2), although open-ended comments revealed a few potential areas for improvement, regard to the summary documents returned to applicants with the funding decision.

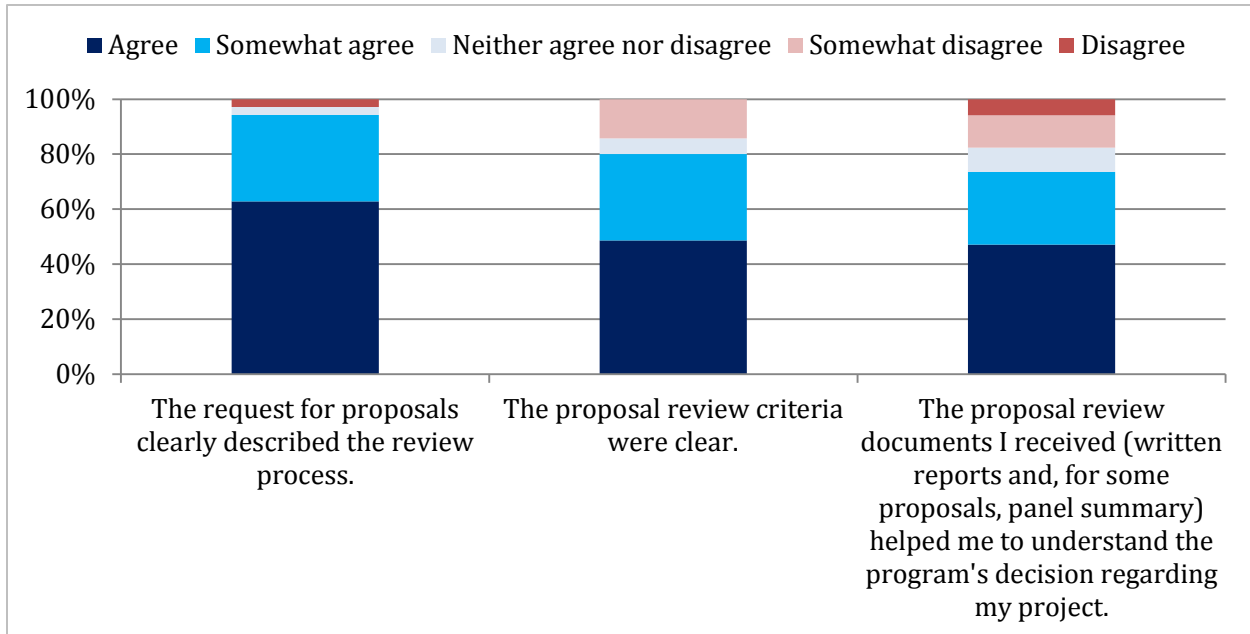
Figure 1. Survey respondents' perceptions of the 2018 Catalyst RFP application process.



Providing applicants with feedback materials that clearly convey the rationale behind a funding decision is one of the most difficult aspects of any formal review process. It requires both intentional selection and preparation of reviewers, as well as thoughtful programmatic oversight in the development of these materials. We know that these documents are the most important piece of feedback applicants receive after undertaking the intensive process of developing an application. We strive to prepare and guide reviewers to make their comments and summaries as clear and constructive to applicants

as possible. Each year, we learn something new and work to adjust and sharpen our guidance to reviewers to ensure the best feedback products possible.

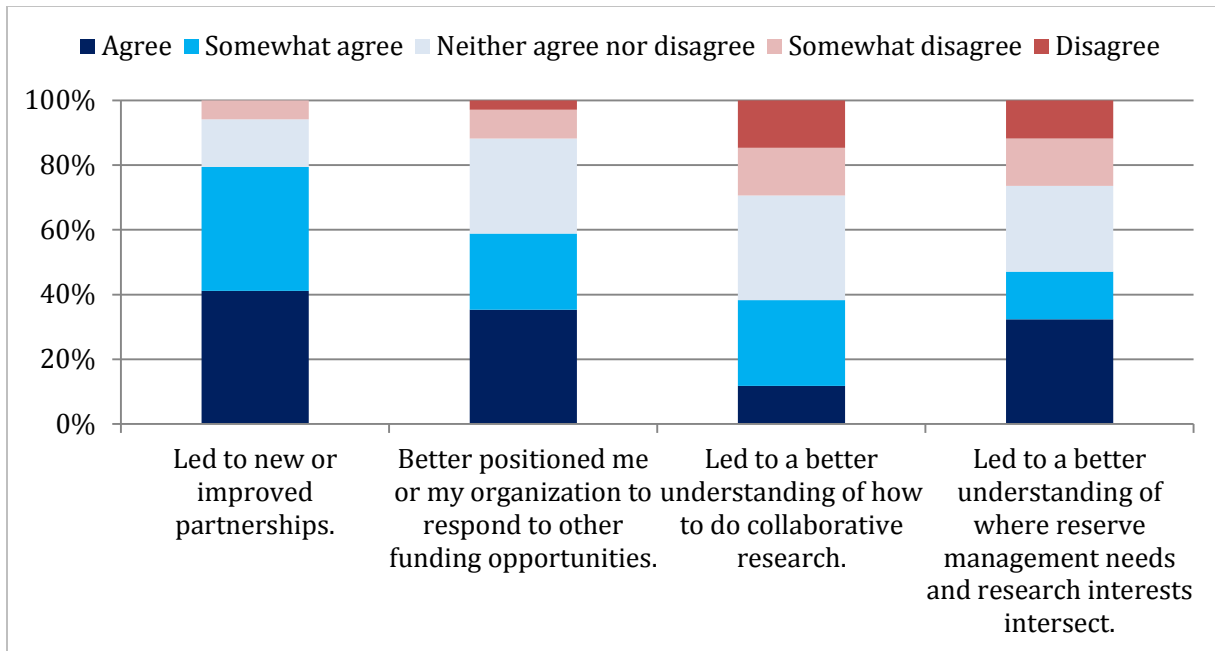
Figure 2. Survey respondents' perceptions of the 2018 Catalyst RFP review process.



While slightly over 75% of the survey respondents found the proposal review documents helpful in understanding the program's funding decision (Fig. 2), some survey respondents noted that the technical reviews of their proposals varied, potentially indicating that reviewers did not possess a common understanding of the review criteria and purpose of the RFP. Some respondents disagreed with review comments, leading a few to suggest including a rebuttal step in future RFP review processes. Other respondents indicated some concern about the role of reviewers in assessing project feasibility (an important emphasis of this RFP).

Eighty percent of respondents indicated that developing Catalyst proposals led to improved partnerships while 59% of respondents felt their reserves were better positioned to respond to other funding opportunities (Fig. 3). Slightly more respondents found the Catalyst competition led to a better understanding of how to do collaborative research than did not. A similar pattern was seen for better understanding where reserve management needs and research interests intersect.

Figure 3. Survey respondents' perceptions of the impact and value of participating in the 2018 Catalyst competition.



This year's feedback also raised larger, programmatic questions about funding equity and priorities. The Catalyst RFP required participants to identify a lead reserve, which allowed NOAA and the Science Collaborative to ensure that a single reserve did not lead more than one award for this funding opportunity. This allowed consideration of regional representation as a selection criterion in the review process. Some participants commented that this was confusing and had the potential to disincentivize collaboration, as some reserves felt that they needed to prioritize their participation in one or a few proposals, rather than agree to engage with all partners approaching them with a project idea relevant to their reserve. Some participants also felt that it was unclear as to what the Science Collaborative was interested in funding, both in terms of project scope (proof of concept vs. larger research projects) and topical interest area.

We thank everyone who participated in the Catalyst RFP and provided feedback on the process. Although the current Science Collaborative program is not able to issue an RFP in the fall of 2018, all feedback will inform future program planning and funding opportunities. Understanding what works well and where to make improvements is critical to ensuring the best program is delivered to the NERR System. We take your feedback seriously and look forward to continuing to evolve and improve the program.

Please do not hesitate to provide additional input by email (nerrs-info@umich.edu) or phone (Lynn Vaccaro: 734-763-0056).