

Practices for facilitating interdisciplinary synthetic research: the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC)

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Abstract

This paper describes the programs and processes of a new center designed to enhance interdisciplinary team effectiveness and the building of new communities of social and natural scientists undertaking socio-environmental synthesis research. The theory and organizational structure of the center is motivated by research on interdisciplinary team science from diverse social science fields. A set of core practices was developed to catalyze the formation of new teams, facilitate team development of shared conceptual frameworks and provide customized support for teams that have challenging methodological, computational, or group dynamic issues. The vast majority of the 58 teams thus far have self-reported good progress and positive team experiences and have published extensively. Most teams took advantage of one or more forms of customized support: 21% of the teams used facilitation services, 38% support for meeting design or for resolving problems that hindered team progress, and 46% of teams used advanced computational support. Throughout, we describe the most common problems teams encountered and provide perspectives on factors and practices that may best promote positive interdisciplinary outcomes on synthesis research by teams of social and natural scientists.

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