

Regional Medical Library-sponsored e-Science activities: A qualitative survey and lessons learned

Raquel Abad, MLIS, Health Sciences Librarian

Blaisdell Medical Library; University of California, Davis; Sacramento, CA; 95819

OBJECTIVE

To determine, by National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) region:

- the extent of participation in Regional Medical Library (RML)-sponsored activities addressing e-science;
- the structure of these activities, and;
- the effect, if any, they have had within their region.

The project was limited to activities occurring during the current 2011-2016 NN/LM contract period.

BACKGROUND

What piqued my interest?

- I have been the Project Coordinator for the University of Massachusetts and New England Area Librarian E-Science Symposium since 2009, co-sponsored by the New England Region;
- I was the Project Chair for E-Science Day (December 2011), sponsored by the Pacific Southwest Region;
- I am the Managing Editor for the *Journal of eScience Librarianship*;
- I participated in an e-science planning group that involved the Southeastern/Atlantic Region in April 2011.

METHODS

- The same introductory letter and qualitative survey was emailed to each RML Associate Director.

- The survey began with a definition of ‘e-science’[1] in an attempt to establish a framework of what was meant by the term ‘e-science’.

The Survey:

7 multiple choice and fill in the blank questions addressing:

- Which region is being represented;
- What kind of e-science related activities the RML had sponsored;
- Which, if any, of the activities included Continuing Education credits from the Medical Library Association;
- If the RML intended to sponsor e-science related activities during the remainder of the current NN/LM contract;
- If the Associate Director was aware of the activities impacting the regional members;
- If the RML deemed the activities to be successful;
- And if the author had permission from the Associate Director to contact them with follow-up questions if further clarification was needed.

Post-Survey:

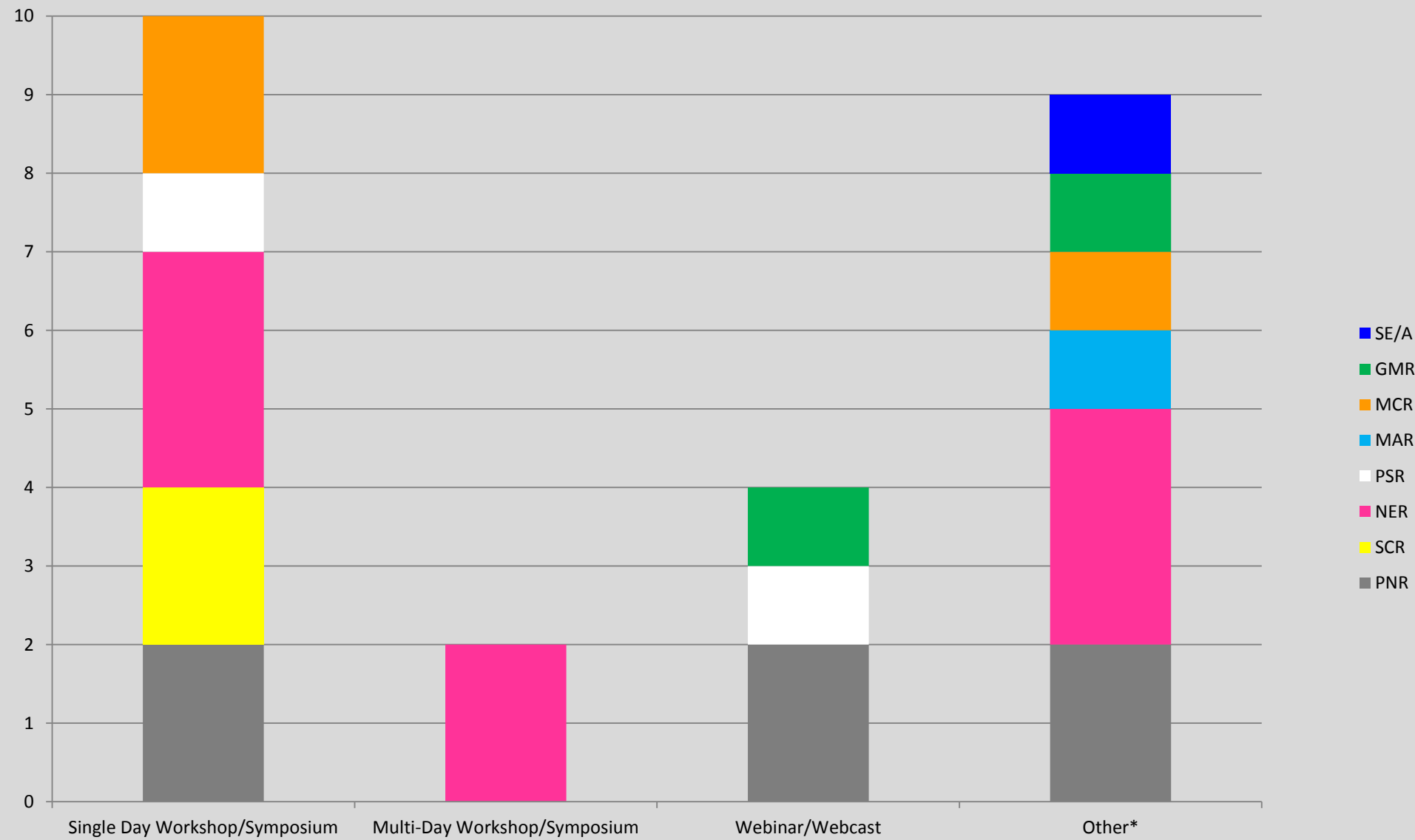
Follow-up conversations were held with 5 of the Associate Directors via telephone, email, and in-person conversation. These Associate Directors were selected for follow-up because they included contextual information in the surveys that was critical to understanding their survey responses and regional activity (see “Lessons Learned”).



RESULTS

- 100% of surveys were completed;
- All regions indicated activity pertaining to e-science, the form that this took, however, varied greatly [Table 1];
- Each region indicated that they intend to sponsor e-science related activities in the future [Table 2]. Again, the form of this varied greatly. Additionally, these results reflect that the survey was administered only 18 months into the current NN/LM contract period (see “Lessons Learned”).

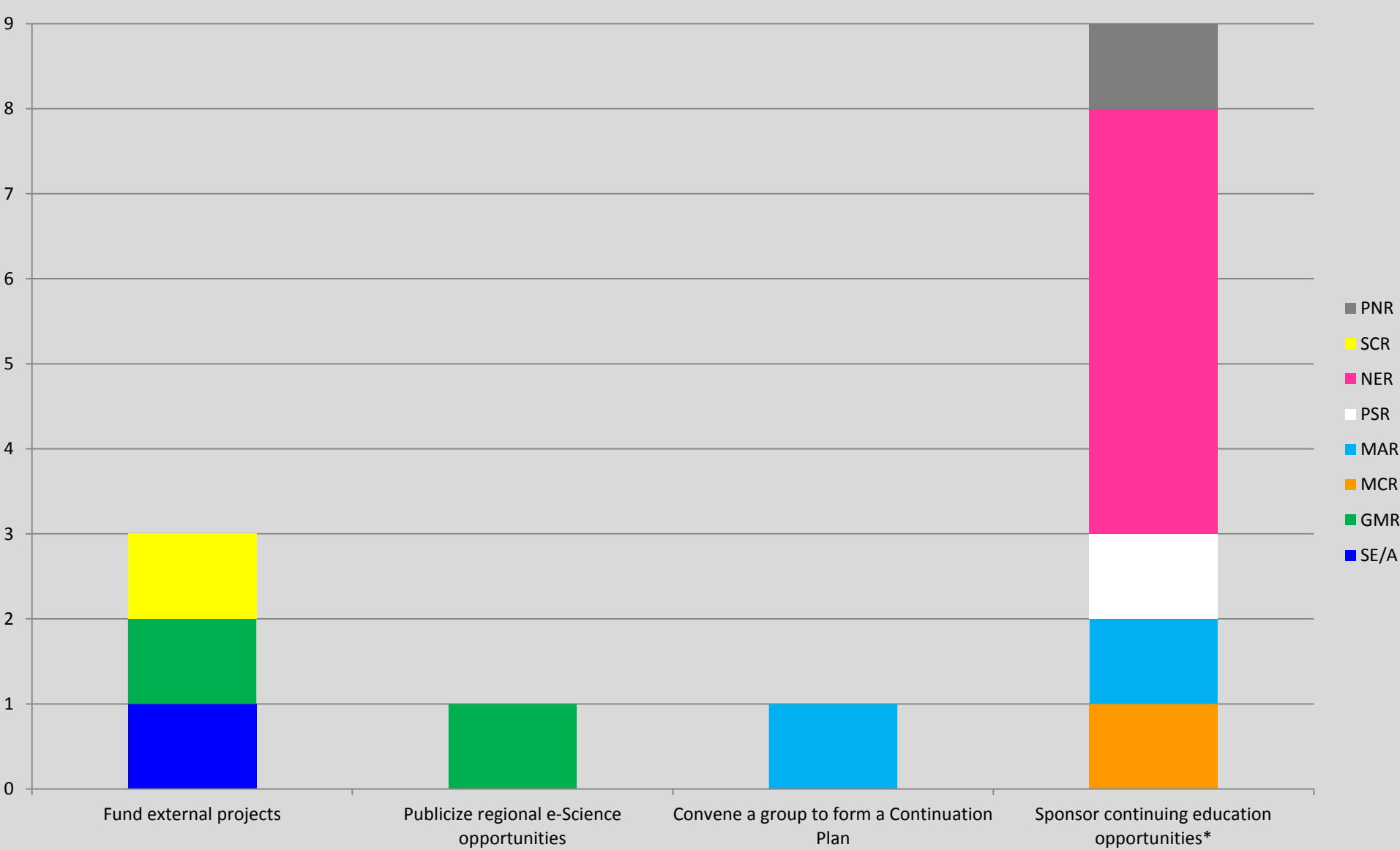
Table 1: e-Science related activity, broken down by form of activity.



*Other:

- Awarding funds supporting network members embarking upon e-science-related projects;
- facilitation of an online discussion;
- creation of an e-Science Portal;
- designation of an e-science and data management subcommittee for the region.

Table 2: Breakdown of future-planned e-Science related activity.



*Continuing education opportunities include: an e-Science forum, a 2-day data management course, webinars, annual e-Science symposia, annual science bootcamps, annual professional development days, publishing the *Journal of eScience Librarianship*, and continuing the e-Science Portal.

LESSONS LEARNED

Very valuable lessons were learned during the course of this project, which ultimately broke down into two categories:

ABOUT THE RMLs

- The RMLs are not necessarily “top-down” organizations, the direction of each is led strongly by the interests and needs of the network members;
- Each RML has its own culture and because of this, it is difficult to fairly compare them;
- Some RMLs have been in place for multiple contract periods, others are either new or relatively new and are still working out their regional plans;
- The regions do not “exist in a vacuum,” i.e. they don’t necessarily operate independently of one another.
 - E.g., a few regions acknowledged the work done by the New England Region on the e-Science Portal and decided that since it satisfied the educational needs of other regions, they would not need to create a similar resource.

ABOUT DOING RESEARCH

- Defining ‘e-science’ is difficult. Although I provided a frequently cited definition, there does not seem to be a standard definition of e-science, thus the survey questions may be interpreted differently among Associate Directors;
 - E.g., one RML included CTSA activities, while another did not.
- It would have been a good idea to contact each Associate Director before doing this project, to receive feedback on it/to gauge and assess the interest in participation;
- Since the survey was administered only 18 months into the current NN/LM contract period, it could be considered premature as there are 48 months left in the contract. The question regarding whether the RMLs plan to sponsor activities in the future was critical in that it highlighted that RML planning and activities are still in development;
- Be very cognizant of bias! It can unintentionally show up in your project.
 - E.g., I did not read over the NN/LM RFP Statement of Work before designing the survey. Given my lack of knowledge of the e-science outreach objective in the RFP and my own experience with the RMLs and e-science, I assumed “e-science support” would take the form of educational events. This bias was reflected in my survey questions. The RFP states that the RML shall “develop pilot projects, which may include professional schools and organizations, to identify and promote the roles of libraries in institutions that have e-science initiatives”[2]. This is a broad enough directive that the results from this project illustrate that each RML has so far participated in e-science support activities, regardless of whether or not this takes the form as an educational event.

CONCLUSIONS

As this project has illustrated, e-science, while a nebulous concept and rather difficult to identify with one definition, is being discussed and supported for medical librarians & their libraries due in part to the national reach of the RMLs. In retrospect, the author has come to understand that the more interesting question is not, “what is each RML doing to address e-science,” but rather, “what form are the RML e-science outreach activities taking?” Every RML is participating in e-science support activities; the most important take-away for this author is that the form and structure of these activities may vary greatly from one RML to the next. Ultimately, the bottom line is, *what kind of activity best serves the region and its network members?* As the author has learned, the RMLs are not strictly top-down organizations, and as such, their activities will strongly reflect the interests of their regional membership.

REFERENCES

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- National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services. Request for Proposal Statement of Work 2011-2016. Bethesda, MD, 2010. https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=46b8705da5a6ca048c7384f1b4883ba2&tab=core&_cview=1.

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