

ERC PD Experience

By Cheryl Cathey

I greatly enjoyed my time as an ERC Program Director. I enjoyed working with my NSF colleagues, who were helpful, knowledgeable, and interesting. There were many other aspects of the experience that I found rewarding, but I think I liked the site visits the most. I enjoyed hearing about all of the amazing science and engineering going on at the participating universities and how it aligned with the interests of, and challenges faced by, their industry partners. The fact that the work was required to be interdisciplinary and visionary made it particularly interesting to me, as I was fascinated by the scale of the challenges and how the centers integrated science with engineering and research with technology innovation. There were many impressive centers, but I particularly remember the Engineered Biomaterials ERC at the University of Washington (UWEB), where the teams did amazing work combining nanomaterials with biological ones while striving to make them biocompatible.

Another aspect of the site visits that held great interest for me was seeing the many different institutional cultures and, even in less well-known institutions, areas of excellence. Almost all of the centers were good at what they did, but I was struck by the diversity in ways of thinking about problems and approaches taken. Each institution had its own personality, which was interesting to learn about. For example, once we were talking about the challenges of center leadership with the Provost of MIT. He told us that the problem they have at MIT is that it's a very data-driven institution and the faculty were not viewed in a favorable light if they did not support their assertions with clear, carefully collected data. Standing up in front of a group of faculty and sketching a vision, which is pretty much the opposite of a data-driven exercise, was something they were not at all comfortable doing. Nor, in general, were they very good at it. So unless the individual had high standing in the faculty and felt free to speak his or her mind, being an effective center leader could be difficult.

I think the things that stuck with me the most from my experience as an ERC PD were the management techniques and tools I learned either first-hand or through watching others. For example, after a day and a half of site visit meetings, the reviewers were asked to put together a report of their findings and opinions of the center's work. Typically at this point they were thinking of all of the work they had waiting for them at home and when they had to leave for the airport. However, the report was the critical outcome of the site visit and needed to be a well-thought-out, clear document that would give useful feedback to the center and be the basis for the NSF funding decision. I gained valuable skills in bringing a team of independent, opinionated people to consensus on the strengths and weaknesses of the center and motivating them to create a good report under time pressure (and for free!).

I will forever be thankful for the opportunity Lynn gave me to work with the ERC Program.