

AN ASSESSMENT OF VIRTUAL EVENTS ORGANIZED AND SUPPORTED BY THE NASA ASTROBIOLOGY INSTITUTE. A. U. Aydinoglu¹ and Estelle Dodson², ¹Research Center for Science and Technology Policies, Middle East Technical University, arsevu@gmail.com and ²NASA Astrobiology Institute, estelle.dodson@nasa.gov .

Introduction: Astrobiology is a grand challenge that requires significant levels of collaboration and interdisciplinary cooperation [1], [2], [3]. There is a great need to utilize data, theories, models, and samples from many different fields in order to address this grand challenge [4]. In order to address this challenge and keep the greater astrobiology community updated about the latest developments the NASA Astrobiology Institute (NAI) organizes virtual seminars and also introduced a virtual workshop series entitled Workshop Without Walls [5], [6]. This study is an assessment of the seminars and workshops conducted in 2014 in regards to remote communication and facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration.

Methods: An online survey was applied after six NASA Postdoctoral Program Alumni Seminars, four Director's Seminars, and two Workshop Without Walls that were conducted in 2014. Ninety-nine responses were collected after the events. The survey is a combination of both open-ended and multiple choice questions –24 questions in total. It starts with asking about demographic information, followed by questions on the technology & software used for the event, content of the presentation(s), and potential impact of the event.

Results: The events were quite beneficial for researchers in regards to interdisciplinary collaborative research. Fifty-one respondents expressed that they “*learned new concepts in another field*”, 48 said that the event “*helped them to understand the big picture*”, 32 of them were “*able to make connections to their primary field from another field*” (n=99). As for technological issues at the events, 70 participants found the software “*easy to use*” and also liked “*being able to tune in from anywhere*”. Sixty of them mentioned that “*no need to travel*” to attend the was great. Approximately two thirds of the participants enjoyed the “*interaction opportunity in the chat feature*” which led them to have parallel discussions simultaneously during the presentations. Less than 10% of the participants reported a technical failure for these events but praised the support from IT staff at NAI Central for troubleshooting.

Discussion: As a virtual institute NAI has been quite successful in organizing and supporting these events. The participants overall were content with the virtual events and expressed their gratitude in the survey to NAI for organizing these events. They found that these events were great to increase their knowledge

and network. Being low cost and less demanding on their time were also useful. A future study is being planned to track the outcome of these virtual interactions among participants.

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