Executive Committee Review of the Network Office
26 February 2004

The LTER Executive Committee (EC) met in Washington, D.C., and prepared this review on the basis of materials received from the LTER Network Office (LNO), including: 1) its annual report to the NSF; 2) a draft of the LNO Strategic Plan, and; 3) discussions with Executive Director Bob Waide. The EC appreciates the obvious effort the LNO has put into the strategic planning process, and believes that continued attention to this activity should improve the effectiveness of the LNO. Furthermore, we are impressed with the degree to which the LNO has become involved in, and contributed to, cutting-edge efforts to develop information technology through research grants awarded to LNO personnel and participation in network-of-networks activities (e.g., KNB, SEEK, and other such projects).

The EC has concerns about the mechanisms by which the LNO is fulfilling its responsibility to facilitate science in the LTER network. Although it is possible that these concerns are a result of lack of information, some of them appear to be long-standing issues. In any case, the LTER Network has not been adequately involved in the development of responsibilities and priorities for the LNO. To improve the flow of information, the following deficiencies in the current review process need to be remedied:

- The structure of the NSF annual report does not allow assessment of the amount of effort expended by LNO personnel on specific tasks that are priorities for the LNO.
- Previous breakdowns of time allocation have not been useful, again because they are not keyed to priorities.
- Actual LNO priorities are not explicitly presented or discussed relative to activities.
- Contact of the EC with LNO personnel is mostly limited to the Executive Director.

To this end, the EC recommends the following changes to future reviews:

1. The LNO should develop its priorities in consultation with the EC and CC before proposals are submitted to NSF for the Cooperative Agreement
2. The LNO should develop an explicit list of its priorities, and clearly indicate how the work of its personnel has addressed them, whether in its annual report to the NSF or separately in preparation for this annual review by the EC.
3. The LNO should work to improve its communication of accomplishments and activities to the sites and the Coordinating Committee (CC).
4. The Information Manager member of the EC should conduct a "site visit" of the LNO prior to the annual review by the EC, in order to gather information from the LNO on its activities.

The LTER network is moving into a new era, with the objective of using the network to its maximum potential—taking the science to a new, higher level. The problems and concerns with the operation and effectiveness of the LNO, whether real or merely perceived, need to be solved if the LNO is to play a significant role in this new era of network-level science. The EC has identified certain minimum expectations that should be met by the LNO, and plans to revise and revisit this roster of expectations on a regular basis.

1. Demonstrate the applicability of informatics and technology products being developed and tested at LNO for the LTER network.
2. Communicate about, train for, and deploy new products and tools as they are developed, rather than after all development is complete.
3. Target those tools for development and testing that enable scientific synthesis.
4. Provide a "helpdesk" to the sites for network informatics and technology products.
5. Provide support for new sites where needed or requested.
6. Be responsive to database needs that arise from the LTER science community, especially in relation to network data products (as per #4 and 5 above).