Expansion Task Force Recommendations to The Access Network

Documented by
Karmela Padavić-Callaghan, Fidel Amezcua, Ben Pollard, and Brianne Gutmann

on behalf of the Expansion Task Force:
Gabby Huckabee
Gloria Lee
Jordyn Mascareñas-Wells
Karmela Padavić-Callaghan
Katherine Rainey
Fidel Amezcua
Noah Charles
Edgar Francisco Ibarra
Donez Horton-Bailey

Table of Contents

Introduction and Process

The Access Network is a network of (currently) nine equity-based STEM mentoring programs at different institutions across the United States. An ongoing goal for the network is to mindfully expand to more institutions, including Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), either through connecting to existing programs or by supporting the creation of new programs.

Task Force Creation

To ensure that the network is being deliberate in our motivations and actions related to its expansion, the Core Organizers decided to draw on the expertise of members of the network itself via a task force. Two Core Organizers, Ben Pollard and Brianne Gutmann, volunteered to take responsibility for logistical and facilitation work related to the Expansion Task Force.

An invitation to participate was sent by email to a subset of past Access Assembly participants. Those contacted had either attended two or three past assemblies (or been an Assembly Fellow two or three times). This threshold was used as a proxy for identifying participants who have seen the network evolve over the years, are likely to understand the ethos of the network, and have shown sustained engagement with the network. To create extra space for those with first-hand experiences with MSIs, or with starting new sites or joining the network, invitations were sent to those from MSIs (Chi Sci Scholars) and from “new” sites (Illinois GPS, Polaris, The North Star Project) who have attended at least two assemblies (or been fellows). For the rest of the sites, the threshold for invitation was three assemblies or fellow terms.

From the respondents to the invitation, Gutmann and Pollard selected nine members to be on the task force using the following criteria: (1) including at least one person from each responding site (though there were no interested members from Rochester Institute of Technology), (2) prioritizing those with more experience participating in Network-level activities, (3) prioritizing people with marginalized identities, and (4) prioritizing unique perspectives, such as international students and non-academic career paths. These selection criteria were expressed to the members of the task force and to those who were not invited to participate. The task force that was assembled by following these criteria included people with perspectives from new sites, and from a site at an MSI. Overall, 8 of 9 of the network's existing sites were represented. The people participating included a variety of racial and ethnic identities, gender identities, sexual identities, and roles within or outside academia, thus reflecting the Network's commitment to making the expansion process inclusive and attentive to many lived experiences. The task force participants were compensated for their time and expertise.

Task Force Meeting and Discussion Practices

The task force met virtually once per week for one hour, over a total of six weeks. Between meetings, members often spent time brainstorming and documenting ideas to prepare for the next meeting. Most formal and informal discussion was documented for purposes of transparency and maintaining an accessible historical record.

Early meetings focused on coming to a consensus understanding of the network's goals and the motivation for the network's expansion, particularly in relation to the expansion to MSIs. These ideas are summarized in the next section.

Later meetings used these agreed upon principles and motivations to guide logistic details in three main areas; these areas were also articulated by members of the task force as being the questions to address. Members of the task force divided into three sub-groups to brainstorm on each of these questions. The questions and makeup of the sub-groups are listed below[1]:

1. How do we advertise to potential new sites equitably? *(Amezcua, Huckabee, Gutmann)*
2. How do we prioritize invitations to the existing potential sites, and what do we expect from them initially? What rate of expansion is sustainable (for example, how many sites/year)? *(Charles, Lee, Pollard)*
3. How should we onboard new sites? *(Horton-Bailey, Rainey)*

Once concrete recommendations were agreed upon in the sub-groups, the ideas were brought back to the full task force for feedback. Following iterative feedback, the recommendations were

[1] Some members of the task force were not able to attend this specific meeting, and are thus not listed in any of the subgroups. Most of these members attended the following meeting when the ideas were discussed as a whole and were still able to give feedback on the ideas.

voted on by consensus. They have been written up in this document in the sections that follow. First, we outline the overall motivation and guiding principles that the task force discussed. Then, we provide more specific recommendations in three sections, each corresponding to a different step in the expansion process. The first section provides recommendations around advertising to potential new site organizers and “getting the word out.” The second section provides recommendations for how to handle the existing connections we already have to potential new site organizers, and how to prioritize those connections. The final section provides recommendations about mentoring nascent sites and on-boarding them into the Network.

Overall Motivation and Guiding Principles

Before tackling specific logistics, the task force felt it was important to articulate the network's motivation for expansion, particularly expansion to MSIs. These discussions were intended to allow the members to think critically about the network's goals and the framing of its expansion, as well as define principles which could guide decisions about logistical details.

On a fundamental level, connecting students and faculty organizers at different institutions has been an integral part of the Access Network since its creation and the network's mode of operation has always included intentional community building. Since the overall goal of the network is to empower historically underrepresented and marginalized students to succeed in the sciences on a national level, its expansion is a natural part of the current model. In addition to offering a unique space where practices such as consensus decision making or use of content warnings are consistently and productively used to encourage the betterment of everyone involved, the network can also offer tangible resources and materials when it comes to logistics and day-to-day details of starting or maintaining an equity-oriented program in STEM at any university. Historically, site leaders have benefitted from interactions within the network and the experiences they shared with each other have inspired new site-specific developments; these interactions would likely have the same outcome in the case of adding more sites to the network. It is therefore the view of the task force that, especially given how many programs currently in the network are hosted by resource-rich institutions, in order for the network to continue acting in line with its values and maximizing its impact through sharing of experiences and materials, it should expand.

In our expansion to Minority Serving Institutions specifically, it is most important to understand that our goal to expand to MSIs is genuinely being pursued from a mutual partnership lens. The Access Network will gain an understanding of academia from minority perspectives and the underlying issues that pertain to their experiences in academia as well as their successful models of community that are more typically supportive of students of color than in a predominantly white institution (PWI). The Access Network will likewise support students at MSIs by providing resources and mutual mentorship/partnerships that will allow students' science networks to expand.

We understand that communities of people of color (POC) have historically experienced marginalization, so no assumptions should be made about shared experiences. We hope that although we don't share identical experiences, we deal with similar emotions when encountering academic social pressures and we strive for genuine collaborations to be created. We are explicitly not seeking to increase the volume of POC members as a means to boost up our network's portfolio, but instead give way to a genuine space where we can speak freely, if desired, about our concerns in academia. We hope that this space will enable us to support one another in learning, in action, and in empathy amongst all people in their current and past experiences.

While the network has the potential to learn from communities and students at MSIs, there was additionally consensus within the task force that we should not do so at the exclusion of students at PWIs. Although PWIs may historically have more access to resources, their culture may feel particularly toxic or isolating for students of color, and the network should not overlook these students as receiving benefit or contributing their experiences to the network. Additionally, including institutions with more access to financial and social resources provides the network with more resources which can be shared among institutions that have historically not been prioritized. Because the network currently has higher representation of PWIs than MSIs, there should be some effort to prioritize the inclusion of groups from MSIs initially, but we believe that we should be mindful of the value of both types of institutions as members of the network as we continue to expand.

We have documented the motivations and goals of expansion in this section for two reasons: to serve as a foundation for the more specific recommendations below, and to inform future discussions in the Network in the longer term. We see one of the main outcomes of this task force's work as the exploration, synthesis, and documentation of how Access's guiding principles translate into more specific motivations and goals for expanding the Network. Furthermore, in the spirit of unfinished business, we expect that the Network will continually strive to refine these goals to further align with its principles, finding balances as we all work in the realities of the systems in which we operate. As the Network expands, we hope that we will create supportive relationships between individuals at different sites, new and old, as well as sustaining and strengthening existing connections. This task force envisions a future Network that continually learns from different perspectives and ideas of new sites as it shares resources and support to a growing number of people and institutions in STEM.

Recommendations

Advertising to New Sites Equitably

As the Access Network continues to expand and evolve, questions regarding equitable advertising to new sites, as well as to the general public, had to be openly discussed and answered amongst members of the expansion task force. The challenging task of generating innovative and equitable avenues for advertising were assigned to two members of the Network Expansion Team. Huckabee and Amezcua, with the guidance and mentorship of Gutmann, collaborated in formulating ideas that would provide the opportunity for people from all backgrounds and having a wide range of lived experiences to have access to information regarding the Access Network's core values and related opportunities the network can provide. Ultimately, the members agreed that in advertising the expansion, the network as a whole has to make sure everyone has equal access to this information. With this in mind, the team proposed three recommendations:

1. Increase our social media presence via a paid fellowship role
2. Attend more conferences, and of different types, with a focus on advertising our Network
3. Take deliberate advantage of already established connections at various institutions, and extend invitations to new institutions by actively connecting with people via phone calls and emails, with attention to different types of institutions.

These broad categories were then discussed with the aim of selecting actionable methods financially feasible to the Network.

Given the reach and importance of social media today, the team decided that it was a great idea to use this avenue to advertise. Social media campaigns could have a large impact when it comes to the distribution of information to a wide audience. However, members also recognized that such a feat would require a significant amount of work and consequently suggested creating a paid role for this specific duty. The focus of this new paid role would be on actively using a variety of social media platforms, i.e. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc., to engage and interact with other organizations and societies that share values and ideas similar to the Access Network. An increase in our social media presence, with the intent of creating a more prominent public profile would also allow for the general public to interact with the Access Network on a semi-personal level. For instance, some social media efforts could feature network member testimonials thus putting a more relatable, human face to the work of the network.

The second item discussed was increasing the number of conferences we attend with the intent to engage with the wider STEM community. The Access Network's core values and social justice standpoint extend beyond the physics education community. Presently, it is known that STEM education does not favor supportive learning environments to marginalized groups for a variety of reasons, causing many undergraduate students to leave STEM degrees before completion. Because of these ongoing challenges, the members of this task force decided that equitable advertising should be inclusive of all STEM fields. They also recognized that this activity could be challenging in the future if the Network encounters financial limitations. However, it is above all else important that the Access Network, even if limited in resources, offers the opportunity for students in higher education to explore what a supportive space, such as the one created by the Network, looks like.

Beyond expanding to new fields, the task force members recognize that attending large conferences only is not equitable, as not all students have the resources to attend them. Attending smaller, more local, STEM conferences will cater to STEM students who may lack resources, as well as create a more affordable venue for Access representatives to attend. In this way, extending our presence would acknowledge a financial void that could limit some marginalized students from acquiring information about the Access Network or similar organizing and advocacy efforts.

At these conferences, modes of advertisement could include both tabling and presentations. Undergraduate students routinely engage with organizations and universities in undergraduate expos, so having a presence in these spaces would allow the Access Network to advertise to more students. Here, representatives of the Access Network could engage with undergraduate students, graduate students, and other institutions with the intent to provide pamphlets, fliers, and other “swag” that would showcase the Access Network’s core values and social justice standpoint. These interactions could be as formal or as casual as the situation calls for, aiding in forging personal connections between network members and students who may benefit from the work of the network or who may want to add to it. The representative team should include undergraduate students, and the work of the network should be presented and showcased in poster sessions and similar more formal conference venues. This will allow undergraduate students representing the network to gain professional development skills while also advertising the network to an undergraduate audience. Because conference travel can be expensive, the task force suggested a trial run of the suggestions here. Following this trial period, these methods would be reflected upon and revised for subsequent years.

In previous years the Access Network’s expansion to new sites has occurred by way of personal interactions with people at physics conferences and the personal and professional acquaintances of core organizers and other active Network organizers. The Network values its current connections as a genuine way to initiate the Network’s expansion goals, but aims to explore more equitable ways of expansion that do not require prior connection through professional spaces. The expansion task force decided that the Network should continue to focus on established connections, while also deliberately extending an open invitation to new institutions across the nation. In doing so, we are providing an equitable opportunity to known and potential connections to actively engage with the Access Network.

Extended invitations to join our network will take the form of phone calls and emails from active Core Organizers and members of the Network. To lay the groundwork for a more complete expansion strategy, representatives of the Access Network should also reach out to already existing diversity groups at both MSIs and PWIs with the intent to provide information that would not have otherwise occurred through solely focusing on our current established connections. The focus for this outreach is not to target specific groups of people, but to advertise and provide our information in the most equitable way possible. Ultimately, the team recognized that these actions would require an immense amount of work and dedication, so creating another paid position to fulfill this specific role would be ideal due to the level of time commitment required.

These actionable items for equitable advertising were presented to the network expansion task force during our final virtual meeting, and it was unaminaslousy decided by the group that these avenues were feasible to explore, manage, and execute. Ultimately, these are the ideas put forth by the network expansion task force in hopes of expanding our network equitably to other institutions, undergraduate and graduate students, industry, and the wider public as well.

Handling existing connections, application process

A sub-group consisting of Charles, Lee, and Pollard focused on questions around how to handle existing connections to potential new site organizers, and how to prioritize those connections. Their discussions were presented to the task force as a whole and further discussed. This section documents those discussions and recommendations by providing answers to the following questions:

1. How do we prioritize invitations to the existing potential sites?
2. What do we expect from them initially?
3. What rate of expansion is sustainable?

Regarding the final question, we recommend **2-4 sites per year**. Our discussions concerned our perceived limits on the ability of the Network to support new sites, while simultaneously forming and cultivating meaningful relationships with existing sites. In particular, much of our discussion was informed by a concern that if Assemblies got too big, it would be difficult for returning attendees to maintain connections with other network members. We recommend that new sites do not on-board individually, but instead have the opportunity to form a cohort with at least one other new site on-boarding at the same time so that such connections could be established. We started to consider, but ultimately did not take into account, funding constraints in this recommendation as those constraints are too unknown and fluid at this time.

In terms of identifying and prioritizing new sites, we recommend an application form that would allow us to collect information from potential new site organizers. We have drafted a set of questions to illustrate what such an application could look like. This draft is based on information we think should enter into decisions around prioritizing potential new sites. However, the task force is wary of creating an additional barrier to entry, especially an inequitable one, by requiring this application. It is important to be clear that there are no particular answers that are expected, especially for sites that are just starting out. For this approach to expansion to be effective and aligned with the network's values, sites organizers should not feel discouraged by the need to fill out an application, and they should feel comfortable answering the questions in that application honestly.

To that end, we recommend creating two versions of the application, one for programs that already exist, and one for organizers looking to create a new program at their home institution. To further alleviate the potential barriers we identified, we recommend that an experienced member of the network offer 3-5 hours of help and mentorship to assist applicants in answering the questions on the form. Resulting discussions would offer further opportunities for supporting and mentoring leaders of future sites. They could also act as brief, informational interviews giving potential new site leaders a taste of what Access is all about. We aimed to design an application that could be completed in no more than 2 hours.

Below, we present questions and writing prompts representative of the proposed application:

- Why do you want to join Access? (Essay question)
- Here are our principles: how much does your program align with them?
- What types of programs do you want to run/are you already running?
    - How many people does each serve?
    - What are the characteristics of the population each serves?
    - How long has each been running?
    - How is each funded/institutionally supported?
- How much support do you already have and what type of support are you looking for?
    - (financial support, departmental support, administrative support)
- What are your institutional characteristics? Does your program have an aim to serve a specific population?
    - Public/private?
    - MSI/PWI?
    - R1/R2/etc. (Carnegie classification)?
    - Specific problems/particulars of the departments you serve?
- How could we benefit you/how could you benefit us?
- What is your plan for sustainability? (include sample plans as resources)

Once the information from these applications has been collected, some process will need to occur to decide on how to prioritise potential new sites. Given the target rate of expansion discussed earlier in this section, we foresee a need to decide which potential new sites Access should pursue. Such decisions will not be easy, and will ultimately require discussions on a case-by-case basis. However, we recommend that these discussions start with a set of criteria and a procedure for considering them, with the goal of treating potential new sites equitably. We envision the formation of an "onboarding working group" within the Access Network that would discuss received applications in depth and make these decisions. We suggest that some members of this working group would also be the ones liaising and mentoring the applications prior to the group's application review taking place.

The task force has identified some criteria to consider when making the prioritising decisions. In particular, we recommend that the discussions start with a ranking system, for the sake of transparency and to make sure each application is considered equitably along dimensions aligned with Access's values. We recommend each decider rank each application, say on a 1-5 scale, for each of the following criteria:

- Institutional characteristics
- Who they serve
- Alignment with Network's values
- Level of experience/how established they are
- What can they bring to the Network (evaluate that in the context of what other sites can bring)

These rankings would form the starting point of discussions around prioritization.

On-boarding of new sites

The onboarding process proposed in this section is designed with the explicit purpose of easing the incorporation of new sites into the Access Network. It was developed through discussions of expansion task force members Horton-Bailey and Rainey and approved by a consensus vote by the full expansion task force. As the Network offers support to different sites in different ways and each site contributes to shaping the culture of the Network in a unique way, we see a need for there to be a space intentionally focused on these exchanges. Further, as the Network expands, the onboarding process will serve to maintain ties between newer and older sites and fully introduce the former to the resources and practices already developed and adapted by the latter.

We propose a two-part on-boarding process. One part of the process would involve a single new site at a time and consist of providing that site with materials and mentorship. The other part of the process would take place at the Access Assembly and serve as an in-person orientation and welcome for a potential cohort of new sites. Below, we outline both parts of the process:

Part 1: At each site, pre-Assembly

a. Provide the new site with the Access Starter Kit - provide the new site with the comprehensive document developed by G. Huckabee providing exhaustive instructions on operating an Access site; a How-To document
b. Provide the site with Access FAQs - provide the site with an expanded version of the FAQs currently available on the Access Network website, stating the goals, purpose and values of the Network; a document clarifying the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of Access
c. Assignment of Site Mentor - provide the site with personal assistance and guidance of an experienced Access organizer from an existing site, make the mentor available for open-ended conversations and Q&A sessions in the months leading up to the Access Assembly

Part 2: At the Assembly, collaborative

d. Day 0 for new sites - a half-day of introductory activities and conversations prior to the official start of the Access Assembly aimed to ease the new attendees into the Access community and empower them to fully participate in discussions concerning the future and goals of Access in later days of the Assembly

As we consider Part 2 to be especially important due to previous feedback from first-time Assembly attendees in favor of more introductory information, we also propose a detailed Day 0 agenda here:

Access Assembly Day 0:

- Icebreaker
- Brief introduction to the Access Network intro
    - Who is Access?
    - What is the mission of Access?
    - brief history and outline of past accomplishments and activities
    - preview of current status of Access (in preparation for discussions of the Network's future on Day 3 of the Assembly)
- Site Introductions
    - what do new sites hope to get out of the Assembly and overall participation in the Access Network?
    - Current status of each new site?
    - Future goals of each new site and on-going self-improvement or growth efforts?
- Brainstorming session for new sites and their mentors - developing a strategy for the Assembly and the following academic year as informed by previous discussions
- Transition into social activities, dinner and games with attendees from previously admitted sites as they arrive to the Assembly

We suggest that 2 leaders (including at least 1 student) from each site participate in Day 0.