



NEW ENGLAND TRANSPORTATION CONSORTIUM

Survey Findings and Highlights: Recognizing Agency Research Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Prepared for

New England Transportation Consortium

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September 2025



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Survey

State transportation agency subject matter experts (SMEs) often play many key roles in the research process. They help define research needs and project statements. They champion efforts and serve on technical review committees during the life of a project. They are also the prime customers of research results and lead efforts to implement findings.

For all their contributions, SMEs are typically volunteers who lend their expertise outside of their regular job duties. Members of the New England Transportation Consortium (NETC) pooled fund study wished to learn about noteworthy practices among state DOTs nationally on recognizing SMEs for their efforts.

To this end, NETC reached out to all state DOTs through the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Research Advisory Committee (RAC) with a 10-question survey in July 2025. This complete list of closed-ended and free-response questions appears below. Complete responses to each question appear in the [Detailed Results](#) section of this report.

1. Please provide your name and agency
2. Are SMEs in your agency involved in any steps of your research process as described in the introduction to this survey?

If no, please describe who helps guide research instead of SMEs at your agency. How are these individuals recognized?
3. Does your agency have a program in place to recognize the efforts of SMEs at scheduled events? (Examples might include dedicated awards ceremonies or annual agency meetings.)

If yes, please provide details.
4. Are certain SMEs singled out for extraordinary or exemplary contributions?

If yes, how?
5. Does your agency have a program in place to recognize the efforts of SMEs on an ongoing basis? (Examples might include issuance of challenge coins or formal letters of recognition from management.)

If yes, please provide details.
6. How meaningful do you believe the following forms of recognition are to SMEs on a scale of (1) not meaningful to (5) extremely meaningful?

Please provide additional comments on your response if you wish.
7. Does your agency maintain an internal list of SMEs to facilitate recognition efforts?

If yes, please provide details.
8. What types of SMEs does your agency recognize? Please select all that apply.
9. What barriers have you faced to adoption of SME recognition efforts? What lessons can you share?
10. What other comments would you like to provide about how SMEs are involved in your research program or how they are recognized?

Highlighted Findings

The survey received responses from 43 individuals representing 32 different state DOTs. Highlighted and noteworthy findings are called out here, along with selected opportunities and barriers identified from the survey results.

SMEs Involvement in Research

All but one responding state DOT affirmed that SMEs are involved in at least some of the steps of the research process. This had been a premise of the survey, and it was borne out in the answer to this question.

What States Are Doing

Responses to questions 3 through 5 indicated that:

- 10 DOTs have programs to recognize SMEs at scheduled events
- 13 DOTs single out SMEs for extraordinary or exemplary contributions
- 9 DOTs have a program in place to recognize the efforts of SMEs on an ongoing basis

Opportunities

- The free-response follow-up comments to these three questions showed considerable overlap. These responses are likely best examined collectively rather than individually, with a wide array of programs, events and award types for state DOTs to consider as possible recognition activities. And unlike trying to carry a technical practice from one DOT to another, many of these SME recognition practices are easily applicable across state lines.
- More guidance is coming. One respondent noted that [NCHRP Project 20-44\(49\), Research Implementation - Strategies for Overcoming Barriers](#) anticipates a final deliverable on how to recognize champions and keep them engaged in research.

Barriers

- Awards and recognition of any kind can be fraught. One respondent wrote: “Not all people like or want recognition.” Another pointed out: “We try to recognize the work being done but it is not always appreciated.”
- Several noted concerns about fairness, or the same people rising to the top every year, or “political” barriers to providing certain types of awards.
- Lack of resources and leadership buy-in was a barrier noted by several respondents.

What SMEs Find Meaningful

Respondents rated forms of recognition they most meaningful to SMEs, on a rating scale of 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = moderately, 4 = very, and 5 = extremely.

- Recognition by management or executives scored the highest at 4.31.
- Next recognition among peers (4.14) and non-monetary awards benefiting the individual (e.g., travel to conferences) (4.05).
- Awarding of certificates scored the lowest at 3.21.

Opportunities

- The top two forms of recognition are potentially low-cost activities. A DOT looking to start up or bolster a program might consider instituting leadership or peer recognition. One respondent wrote: “Sending a note regarding the work the SME is doing on the project goes a long way.”
- At the same time, those looking to cut costs or better direct spending should give careful consideration to physical tokens. Paying for attendance at a career-relevant activity may be more appreciated than a plaque or trophy.

Barriers

- “Low-cost” does not mean free. A congratulatory lunch with a leader takes staff time to plan and conduct, and it pulls resources away from other tasks. More broadly, simply running a recognition program—determining criteria, making selections, and bestowing recognition in whatever form—can be a time-intensive undertaking.

Which States Maintain Lists

11 agencies maintain an internal list of SMEs to facilitate recognition efforts.

- Free response answers revealed that such lists sometimes come out of the research process, where SMEs are research advisory panel members or implementation plan signers.
- Other states noted that they do maintain these types of lists, but not for recognition purposes.

Who States Recognize

Responding DOTs noted the types of SMEs they recognize.

- Most common were research project champions (21) and other research project advisory committee members (15).
- Next were research program staff (9) and other innovators (9).

Opportunities

- Questions 3 through 5 show how recognition programs cut across research, innovation and implementation. There is room for any state to do more, or to try recognition in a new area.
- A common theme in the responses to question 10 (“What other comments would you like to provide...?”) was the overall value of SMEs to DOTs’ research programs and individual projects. “Driving force” and “great impact” and “their success is our success” are phrases put forward. As one respondent writes in terms of opportunity: “Anything we can do in this space is better than nothing at all.”

Detailed Results

1. Please provide your name and agency

The following 32 DOTs responded to this survey:

Arkansas	Maine	Pennsylvania
Colorado	Maryland	Rhode Island
Connecticut	Michigan	South Carolina
Delaware	Minnesota	South Dakota
District of Columbia	Mississippi	Tennessee
Georgia	Montana	Texas
Idaho	Nevada	Utah
Illinois	New Hampshire	Vermont
Indiana	New Jersey	Virginia
Iowa	North Carolina	Wyoming
Kansas	Ohio	

Notes on respondents:

- Twelve different individuals responded from Georgia DOT. On all of the questions framed as “Does your agency...”, these respondents provided a mix of “yes” and “no” answers. For the purpose of analysis, whenever at least one Georgia respondent provided a “yes” response, Georgia DOT as an agency was counted as a single “yes.”
- To provide a degree of anonymity for respondents, names of agencies have been removed from free response questions. Each respondent was assigned a number from 1 to 43 for the purposes of correlating free response answers between questions, as noted by the numerals in parentheses after answer.
- Quotes have been lightly edited for grammar.

2. Are SMEs in your agency involved in any steps of your research process as described in the introduction to this survey?

Among 32 responding agencies, 31 (97 percent) indicated that SMEs are involved in at least some of the steps of the research process described in this survey.

3. Does your agency have a program in place to recognize the efforts of SMEs at scheduled events? (Examples might include dedicated awards ceremonies or annual agency meetings.)

Among 32 responding agencies, 10 (31 percent) indicated that they do have such recognition events, and 22 (69 percent) indicated that they do not.

Respondents provided these details:

- We have challenge coin program to recognize efforts of all staff. SMEs are often rewarded with AASHTO appointments and travel to meetings as well as TRB and other conferences. (5)
- We have an annual department wide awards ceremony. Anyone can nominate, and there are different levels/types of awards. The ceremony is broadcast via Teams as a live event to the department. (8)
- We have annual awards that recognize individual and team efforts for distinguished work. (10)
- Agency annual awards. (11)
- Transportation summit. (14)
- Employee awards. (15)
- Our agency annually conducts a State Employee Recognition Week (SERW) by the Commissioner and Governor. This week cultivates in an annual award ceremony for issuing Safety Awards, the Commissioner Achievement Award, the Commissioner Merit Award, District All-Star Award, and Statewide Awards (James F. Condrion Award, Wayne Shackelford Leadership Award, Heroism Award, Innovator Award, Community Service Award, Team Award, and Sean Kornacki Award). Details on our awards can be obtained from our Office of Human Resources. Our agency also has 3 levels of Management Development Program (MDP) training that target developing leaders or SMEs. Our agency also conducts annual surveys to gauge how employees feel about the organization, their supervisors, leadership, and executives. This survey is used to guide agency workforce development. (17)
- In reality the answer here is “Kind of”. SME recognition at events is not specifically for their involvement in research projects, but for our Innovation program and annual “Best of the Best” innovation competition. There is some overlap where research project outcomes become award-winning or at least nominated Innovations. (19)
- Innovative ideas contest annually; STIC (State Transportation Innovation Council) members. (20)
- We award them a certificate at Research Needs Day and send a letter of thanks signed by the State Transportation Engineer to them, cc their supervisor. (22)
- No, but we are planning to implement something for this at our new annual Research & Innovation Showcase in 2026. (24)
- Every even year we have the RAD (Research Administration) Awards. HVR nominated projects are illustrated in a weekly agency newsletter. Every odd numbered year, all 80/20 projects have an opportunity to present to the director an elevator speech level presentation. (25)
- We give them appreciation certificates and sponsor their travels for presentations of their HVR projects at the annual TRB meeting. (26)
- We recognize them as part of the annual work program presentation, but that’s not a lot or enough. (27)
- We typically give two awards each year recognizing SME that have made significant contributions to our research program. Normally these contributions include participation in one or more of our Research Advisory Committees, serve on project-specific Technical Review

Panels, and/or serve as Project Champions thereby taking on the responsibilities associated with the implementation of research recommendations. (42)

- Like the idea of Michigan's red carpet. (42)

4. Are certain SMEs singled out for extraordinary or exemplary contributions?

Among 32 responding agencies, 13 (41 percent) indicated that they do single out SME for such contributions, and 19 (59 percent) indicated that they do not.

Respondents provided these details:

- There are certain SMEs in different divisions in the department who particularly made tremendous contributions for our research projects in the process. (1)
- On occasion leadership recognizes staff that go above and beyond or make a remarkable/selfless contribution to our mission. (5)
- There are several different categories:
 - Employee Appreciation Awards
 - Commissioners Merit Award – Nomination must be made by a Division Director or Office Head
 - Commissioner's Achievement Award
 - District All-Star Statewide Awards
 - Wayne Shackleford Leadership Award - Nomination must be made by a Division Director or Office Head
 - James F. Condron Award - Nomination must be made by a Division Director or Office Head
 - Heroism Award
 - Community Service Award
 - Innovator Award
 - Team Award
 - Sean Kornacki Award(8)
- Award recognition. (11)
- Not specifically related to research involvement, but as part of combined overall achievement, usually in the form of an award or acknowledgement. (12)
- Awards are given to multiple disciplines. (14)
- How their work contributes to the overall improvement of Department operations. (15)
- Employees can be nominated for the awards by any employee within the agency. Employees can also be nominated for Management Development Program training. (17)

- Engineer of the Year Award. (20)
- High value Research projects when it was done, the SME is invited to the Executive Research Board meeting to present the results and the executive staff will give recognition of his/her efforts. (21)
- We recognize the good or unique things they contributed and share that with the group. (22)
- There are individual awards given out that are voted on by others around our agency, and awards given by RAd staff. (25)
- Sometimes, based on the workload of their involvement in research and significant contributions as TAP members. (26)
- They might collaborate with the PI on presenting the Research at Conferences, Meetings or other venues. Typically this is based on exemplary research and not necessarily the SME. (29)
- Occasionally SMEs are discussed in publications, reports, or other communications that may include rewards or other acknowledgments from our agency or other agencies (e.g. gov award). These are not specific to research but may be loosely related. (30)
- We administer an Outstanding Project Lead award to one SME during the annual CTR Symposium. (39)
- We have had an annual research award (Trailblazer award) to recognize an internal or external SME for their contributions to transportation research. This is transitioning to an annual implementation award (TBD). We also recognize certain SMEs through sharing of innovation stories within our agency that contain aspects of successful implementation of research results by the research champion or TAC members. (40)
- The research center Director or one of the Associate Directors will present the awards to the two winners at one of the six spring Research Advisory Committee meetings. The winners are also recognized in research center's weekly update to the Executive Team. (41)

5. Does your agency have a program in place to recognize the efforts of SMEs on an ongoing basis? (Examples might include issuance of challenge coins or formal letters of recognition from management.)

Among 32 responding agencies, 9 (28 percent) indicated that they do have such recognition programs, and 23 (72 percent) indicated that they do not.

Respondents provided these details:

- For all staff. (5)
- Annual awards and years of service certificates. (13)
- Usually in the form of service awards are certain milestone intervals (5 year, 10 year, etc.) (12)
- Merit awards, commissioner awards and Transportation summit awards. (14)
- See responses to 3 and 4. (15)
- Awards are provided on an annual basis. Employee may be eligible for performance pay

increases as part of annual performance review processes (albeit dependent on agency annual budgets). Management Development Program training is typically conducted annually (albeit dependent on agency annual budgets). (17)

- We have an employee recognition program recognizing our agency’s super employees. I typically issue a certificate to our project managers (SMEs) at the end of the project if they led the project successfully. I will also issue a certificate to tech advisory committee members on research projects, but only if they are particularly well-engaged throughout the entire process. Anyone who receives a certificate is automatically entered into a quarterly drawing for a “Choose your experience” prize - examples are a pizza lunch party for their team or unit, lunch with an executive, trip to a backcountry airstrip, tour of the State Capital, field visit to a drone project, or various swag like mugs, T-shirts, etc. (19)
- It can be a monetary reward (spot bonus), awards for publications, etc. (21)
- As described above. (22)
- Awards are given to the Best Research Projects (vote), People’s Choice Award (vote), and RAD Champion. The awards are made by RAD staff. (25)
- We provide awards to SMEs during our annual research showcase event. (31)
- Yes, the award described above (Mal Kerley Award) is given out each year and named after a former Chief Engineer who was a staunch supporter of research and our research center. (41)
- As of 2024, we feature Champions in our annual Symposium booklet. (42)

6. How meaningful do you believe the following forms of recognition are to SMEs on a scale of (1) not meaningful to (5) extremely meaningful? (1 = Not at all meaningful; 2 = Slightly meaningful; 3 = Moderately meaningful; 4 = Very meaningful; 5 = extremely meaningful.)

Form of Recognition	Importance
Recognition by management or executives	4.31
Recognition among peers	4.14
Non-monetary awards benefiting the individual (e.g., travel to conferences)	4.05
Monetary awards	3.92
Recognition in print or digital publications, such as newsletters or emails	3.74
Non-monetary awards benefiting the individual’s business unit (e.g., capital purchases)	3.24
Awarding of certificates	3.21

7. Does your agency maintain an internal list of SMEs to facilitate recognition efforts?

Among 32 responding agencies, 11 (34 percent) indicated that they do maintain such lists, and 21 (66 percent) indicated that they do not.

Respondents provided these details:

- The division heads of SME division in the department are initial contacts who facilitate recognition efforts and process. (1)
- Recognizing efforts should not be limited to dedicated SMEs, particularly with staff retention issues. (5)
- I'm not aware of one. (8)
- Not that I am aware of. (13)
- Only as it pertains to award recipients, completions of Management Development Program training, and Office designated SMEs (for ExperienceU questions). (17)
- The SME is always the business owner of the research project that is responsible for implementation. The Business owner will sign an implementation plan and be responsible to the executive staff to implement the results of the research. (21)
- Plan to do this but have not implemented. (24)
- We have a database that tracks projects and their completion. Otherwise, a list of focus areas around MDOT is maintained and is on our website www.michigan.gov/mdotresearch. (25)
- They are part of technical advisory panels. (26)
- They are listed in our Research Management System. (27)
- We gather periodically SME list across the NJDOT units. (31)
- Yes, we maintain a list, however it is not currently used for recognition purposes. (34)
- We maintain a list of SME project advisors identifying the Lead/champion for the project and annually identify one to provide recognition to with an award. (39)
- Our research center's Leadership Team votes on this award based on RAC membership and TRP participation, but no formal list specifically for SMEs is kept. (41)

8. What types of SMEs does your agency recognize? Please select all that apply.

Type of SME	Agencies
Research project champions	21
Other research project advisory committee members	15
Research program staff	9
Other innovators	9
National cooperative research program participants	4
Project evaluators	3
STIC (State Transportation Innovation Council) members	2

Some individuals provided further details in an "Other" free response box:

- Mostly for successful innovations. Though, covid and staff turnover has created a setback in our innovation program. (5)
- Heroism Award; Community Service Award; Innovator Award; Team Award. (8)
- Each SME in their respective office is recognized as being a contributor to projects being developed. (13)
- Our agency has an annual research forum to recognize and illustrate ongoing research programs/projects. (19)
- All the above only in newsletter/project write ups meant for broad communication. Individual projects would have champions and TAC members. Program/initiative FYIs might pull from those on TSP, CRP, AASHTO, TRB panels to highlight how those programs exist, what they do and who pays for them via quotes or listing involvement, which isn't directly recognition awards but does allow them to see their name in print, especially for those not heavily involved or serving as the face of a bureau/initiative. (20)
- People that accomplish significant things, typically having nothing to do with research, however, these SMEs tend to be the productive types of staff that volunteer or are otherwise obligated to be involved in other things like research. E.g.. an administrator that executes projects on time and under budget may be involved in research but recognized for project execution. (30)
- We have no formal recognition other than our personal thank you to them. (35)
- We like the *idea* of broadening our recognition. (42)

9. What barriers have you faced to adoption of SME recognition efforts? What lessons can you share?

- We have not tried, but are considering a program that parallels the Environmental Awards at our agency. A barrier is that we have many fewer people/projects to select from each year, so we would either have fewer categories, or have awards every 2 years (initial thinking). Awardees are recognized in several high-level and popular presentations, as well as in newsletters. Some care and some don't. (2)
- To be honest, I had not thought about it very well. I feel like there may not be many barriers to do this. I think it would be worthy to try something so that they feel their work is appreciated. Not sure if Management would think too high about these recognitions but I do not think they would oppose either. At the end of the day, the great SMEs I have interacted with lately, they do it because they actually have a need for their project in their respective units or they really liked it. I do not think they expect a recognition, but it would feel good though to do something for them. (3)
- Leadership rightfully being preoccupied with the surge in infrastructure funds and associated project inflation issues and now dwindling funds and staff turnover. (5)
- Although it's an easy process to nominate individuals, it's sometimes still hard to find time to do a nomination or think of deserving SMEs at the time nominations are requested. I recommend keeping a file of people and accomplishments year-round so that when asked, you can be ready to make a nomination when requested. (8)

- Resource availability to recognize. (11)
- We don't have a specific program recognizing individual SMEs that I am aware of. Each office is recognized for their contribution to our projects. (13)
- We have a hard time getting to take the time to submit the individual or team for recognition for their work. (14)
- Large volume of work and buy in from leadership.
- More informal methods (e.g. supervisors sending praise on an employee accomplishment) need to be created, encouraged, and promoted to be more culturally allowed/acceptable outside of formal recognition. There is no formal ongoing budget or method to provide GDOT branded items as recognition. (15)
- See text response to #6. (18)
- One-size-fits-all approach is the easiest, but not all people like or want recognition. Our leadership is also super wary of anything that could create feelings of unfairness among staff, and they are also very concerned about following our state laws regarding money spent on "gifts". I think this is why the RISE awards I mentioned above are branded as "experiences". (19)
- There is no barrier at all. All participants in the research projects either as a business owner or part of the Study Advisory Committee will get any form of recognition. (21)
- For Innovation recognition, there has been a lot of "political" barriers to providing monetary items or awards to individuals or groups. Additionally, make sure any branding or award naming is coordinate with appropriate front office personnel. We had a previous Innovation Coordinator who had trouble with these things. A logo they created had to be redone, some low-cost hats they promised for innovators were not allowed to be paid for or given. (24)
- With the volume of projects, ensuring that all completed projects are included and when voting each is given a fair opportunity. How and what we communicate matters. It matters to RAd, the project, project managers, the SME's and our agency. (25)
- None. (26)
- Hard to find a proper venue or outlet for it. (27)
- No barriers because we haven't done it...yet. With this survey and the results, however, I'm going to start recognizing our hard-working SME. (28)
- We have none in place. (32)
- We would love to recognize our SME, however, the resources to do so are not available. If we were to recognize SMEs it would have to be out of pocket. (34)
- None at this time. (36)
- We never really had a plan in place. We have not put much thought into this and really have overlooked the value of this. SMEs play a huge role in the research process and I appreciate this survey since it gave me something to think about applying to our DOT. (37)
- Lack of continuity has provided challenges for a stable recognition program. (38)
- No barriers. Being able to select one is a challenge. (39)

- For our research program, this type of regular SME recognition is not currently in our process, so it would take additional time and other resources to do regularly. Our Innovation Program does have a robust recognition program for UDOT innovators. (40)
- The only issue we have found is that the same small subset of individuals float to the top of the voting each year. (41)
- More interest in non-monetary forms of recognition. (42)

10. What other comments would you like to provide about how SMEs are involved in your research program or how they are recognized?

- The main challenge in fact is that SMEs in the department are pretty busy with their regular job duties and their involvements in the research process are additional and voluntary tasks for them. This sometimes makes SMEs difficult to keep their continuous/enhanced/timely involvements during the research process. - It might be a challenge to develop the quantifiable tool/method for evaluating SMEs involvements/contributions for recognition. (1)
- 1. Many of our SMEs are dedicated and looking for opportunities to solve a problem with research - that is their main motivation/reward, although recognition is likely welcome.
2. We are also interested in ideas to recognize our best researchers (generally university or contractor researchers) (2)
- One small way strong SMEs can be rewarded is that we run a research intern program and those that are strong intern managers with good research projects are more consistently given interns each summer (we have limited slots so do have to pick projects often). (4)
- I might not be reading this correctly, but I am unaware of any specific agency recognition. We - at least I - feel it is part of our duty to share our knowledge and experience in an effort to guide the department as it strives for excellence. We have standing research focus area groups - where the SME's participate in the development of RNS, reviewing and suggesting changes to existing RNS, assessing the feasibility/implement ability/use of submitted RNS, and then the appropriate SME follows through the entire life cycle of the research. (7)
- We also submit our research projects for rewards outside of the Department (such as to the state archives awards program). Those awards when received are recognized in our agency publications and highlighted at agency Board meetings. It's another way to recognize innovation and research. (8)
- We try to recognize the work being done but it is not always appreciated. (14)
- Our agency is implementing new technology (e.g. Workday, etc.) which should open up opportunities to define and track employee skills, relate skills needed in job positions, relate training to skill development, and create learning programs for more skill development. This could help identify potential SME's or highlight employees with specific skills that could be leveraged. (17)
- Anything we can do in this space is better than nothing at all. It really is important to growing and retaining good SMEs. (22)
- We solicit research ideas from our SMEs but there is no internal recognition program. We do

participate in partner-focused recognition programs (MDQI, AASHTO Awards) for large scale construction projects. (23)

- We began providing priority to attend the TRB Annual Meeting to those who are active in our Research and Innovation activities. This was very well received on two cases. (24)
- Having a regularly defined structure of business areas is critical to communicate information. Also having a defined project development process is critical to know when to engage with SME's in your organization. (25)
- SMEs are the driving force for any research program. Acknowledging their efforts benefits tremendously and encourage other SMEs to participation more in research projects. (31)
- We are very interested in seeing the results of this survey. We would like to do more to recognize our SMEs because of their great impact for our program. Currently we list them on the final reports and summaries of the projects they assisted with. Some are also mentioned in Department publications and/or videos for certain projects. (36)
- SMEs help with recognizing who should be panel members for the research project they champion. SMEs also play a significant role in the implementation process. If it is a successful project, members of the tech panel that were very involved will be recognized by the research review board which includes our executive team. (37)
- A recognition program is of great value, and we plan to stand one up in the near future. (38)
- Participation in the research program is not on any of the SME performance goals however sending a note regarding the work the SME is doing on the project goes a long way. (39)
- Our research program is built on the research needs of our SMEs, so their success is our success when the research and implementation go well. We could improve in our recognition efforts of SMEs. (40)
- Though very small, we try to acknowledge the importance of our RAC and TRP members every time we meet with them. We go out of our way to thank them for their help. Their contribution is critically important and we remind them of that every chance we get. (41)
- The 20-44(49) project anticipates an Appendix of how to recognize Champions/keep them engaged in Research in the final deliverable. Definitely interesting that SME/Champion recognition is a big topic these days (Colorado 2023) and 20-44(49) and elsewhere. (42)