

REDEFINING VISITOR STUDIES

36th Annual
Visitor Studies Association
Conference

2024 CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

Saint Paul, Minnesota • July 16 – 18, 2024

VSA
Visitor Studies Association



Introduction

Welcome to the 2024 Visitor Studies Association Annual Conference Abstracts!

These abstracts serve as a preview of the vibrant conversations that will take place this year as we explore redefining our field of visitor studies. The Abstracts also serve an important role in recording the conversations for the future.

Previous Conference Abstracts are available online at
<https://visitorstudies.org/conference/past-conferences>

The 2024 VSA Conference Abstracts were compiled by Kari Ross Nelson with the help of Garrett Stone and Ashton Allen.

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Tuesday, July 16

11:00 AM-12:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Defining and Redefining Audience Impact on an Organizational Level

Denee Steward Freeman, Creative Discovery Museum

Stephanie Downey, Kera Collective

Jennifer Kovarik, Vesterheim Museum

Panel Discussion

Purpose and Importance: This session will examine how an individual organization can elucidate their desired impact to anchor all programmatic decisions and evaluation- a process called Audience Impact Strategy. By looking at two organizations, one in initial stages of strategy implementation and the other over five years into the process, session attendees will envision how an Audience Impact Strategy can be applied at their institution regardless of capacity level and in-house evaluation expertise.

Vesterheim (Decorah, Iowa) and Kera Collective will detail their collaboration work building an audience impact framework specific to the Norwegian-American Museum & Folk Art School, guiding participants through steps their own organization can implement to undergo such an alignment process either for the first time or as a regular practice. From there, Creative Discovery Museum (Chattanooga, TN) will discuss how, with Kera's support, they have applied that high level audience impact thinking to real-world evaluation questions and needs over time in the setting of a children's museum. Attendees will leave with a greater understanding of how an Audience Impact Strategy can serve as a springboard for making strategic decisions about experiences offered to visitors, as well as a tool to ensure organizations are evaluating what truly matters in their programs.

Abstract: Audience Impact Strategy is a process that requires an organization to articulate its target audience and desired impact to serve as a gauge against which to measure whether something is successful. The strategy goes beyond evaluation and places audiences and impact at the center of an organization's work and decision-making. Through two cases of museums engaging with Kera Collective in different stages of Audience Impact Strategy work, we will discuss experiences and benefits of crafting an impact framework based upon lived experiences of key stakeholders, as well as how organizations can connect these lofty impacts that drive us with the real-world decisions and evaluation needs facing our organizations day-to-day.

Providing a snapshot of early strategy implementation, Vesterheim and Kera Collective will detail the process of key staff and stakeholder interviews, group exercises, and an impact audit, which allowed them to build a unique framework. Attendees will have the opportunity to

experience an abbreviated version of an exercise central to Kera's Audience Impact Strategy called the "Staff Motivation Exercise," which brings staff of an organization together clarify a shared purpose—the thing that motivates, drives, and inspires staff.

Creative Discovery Museum will give complimentary viewpoint, reflecting on the successes and challenges of sustainably embedding an impact driven philosophy in program and experience creation, decision making, and evaluating. With examples from recent summative exhibit evaluations, they will share how success, both in terms of outcomes and specific indicators of those outcomes, was determined directly from their audience impact framework.

All attendees and presenters will end by reflecting on what it takes to create an audience impact framework everyone in an organization feels true ownership of, allow that framework to remain a living and evolving document, and routinely use that desired impact in determining evaluation criteria for visitor experience.

Automating Content Analysis with Excel

Brian Slattery, Lincoln Park Zoo

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Excel is the most popular spreadsheet application, and many evaluators have access to it as part of the Microsoft Office platform. Much of its core functionality is also duplicated in Google Sheets, the largest major competitor software. For many evaluators, these basic spreadsheet applications are a key tool for organizing, analyzing, and visualizing data, due to barriers of cost or knowledge associated with more complex software such as SPSS, Stata, or R. Excel may not be the best tool for many data analysis tasks—but because of those barriers, for many evaluators, it is the only tool. That makes it essential to build on evaluators' existing foundational awareness of Excel's capabilities and introduce new creative approaches for using this ubiquitous tool.

Abstract: In this session, I will walk through the creation of an interactive, reusable template that I created for analyzing free response questions in a post-event survey for Lincoln Park Zoo. This template had two goals: (1) providing a fast overview of attendee feedback that the zoo's events team could promptly share internally, and (2) filtering and highlighting categories of attendee feedback, so that evaluators could perform a more detailed analysis of commonalities and variation in responses later. I will explain the Excel formulas and capabilities used in this template's creation and provide additional examples of how these formulas can be used and combined, as summarized in a cheat-sheet handout.

Advancing DEAI through Process Evaluation & New Approaches for Evaluating Professional Impact
Sarah Lukowski, Museum of Science Boston

Stormi Allen-Knight, Science Museum of Minnesota
Evelyn Christian Ronning, Science Museum of Minnesota
Liz Kollmann, Museum of Science Boston

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Textbook “process evaluation” does not meet the complexities of the culturally responsive, community-informed processes increasingly used in our work. This session uses the experience of three projects to start a robust discussion around innovating on process evaluations to increase accountability to DEAI commitments, center lived experience in evaluation, and understand professional impacts. This session sits somewhere between the panel presentation and facilitated discussion categories. After hearing from three projects grappling with process evaluations, session attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions and share about their own work. We plan to facilitate discussion around: How have you used evaluation to increase accountability to DEAI goals/frameworks on projects? and What are methods you have found helpful in embedding evaluation into ‘in-process’ projects?

Abstract: Three projects will seed our discussion on process evaluation: Engaging Hispanic Communities is a multi-year, multi-site effort across the Southwestern United States being led by the National Informal STEM Education Network (NISE Net) to develop Earth and space science activities in co-creation with regional Hispanic/Latine communities. Evaluation considers the development of projects, and reflections from museum and community-based professionals on the impact of working together on such an endeavor. Sarah Lukowski will discuss these methods and how evaluation can support the team in being accountable to the DEAI values embedded in the project. GP-IN: Connecting Opportunities for Research Experiences in the Geosciences (GP-IN: CORE) is a two-year regional collaboration from the Science Museum of Minnesota to develop strategies to inclusively introduce youth whose identities are underrepresented to the geosciences. In order to develop these strategies, the project also focuses on geoscience professionals that serve as mentors during the project. Evelyn Christian Ronning and Stormi Allen-Knight will share about how iterative development of the program coincides with iterative development of evaluative activities as they focus on the story to tell about their collaboration and its impact. Boston Science Common is a new effort at the Museum of Science, Boston (MOS) to bring cutting edge science to the public at the pace of change. The hope is that by focusing content on a single content area over the course of a year presented through a number of different formats that MOS will be able to reach larger and more diverse audiences. Liz Kollmann will share how an evaluation has been implemented for MOS staff to reflect on the process and provide feedback about how the departments are working together to reach their audience goals, what is working, and what needs to change.

Examining and Elevating Our Community Norms and Best Practices
Kari Ross Nelson, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance: In the call for 2024 conference proposals, the Visitor Studies Association was described as a community of evaluation practitioners who draw on norms and best practices cultivated over decades. But are our norms really best practices? Recent studies have highlighted challenges of museum evaluations centered around technical evaluation capacity. As we, the Visitors Studies community, consider redefining visitor studies and updating the Evaluator's Competencies Framework (<https://visitorstudies.org/about/imls-redefine-visitor-studies>), a critical look at our existing practices can inform new approaches that accommodate the new and changing realities of our work. The goal of this discussion-based session is to take an appreciative approach to a critical examination of our practice and generate direction for redefining best practices that strengthen our work.

Abstract: Recent studies have highlighted challenges of evaluations in museums centered around technical evaluation capacity. Fu et al. (2016) examined the methodological characteristics of informal science education (ISE) evaluations and confirmed “the common impression of reliance on a few evaluation designs and methods” (p. 32). In a landscape review, Grack Nelson and Tranby (2015) coded over 500 evaluation reports published on informalscience.org and found frequent gaps in reporting. They argue that adding key technical details to evaluation reports can increase their utility. Teasdale (2022) reviewed 33 summative evaluation reports from the same source to analyze the criteria that underpin their conclusions. Similar work by the current author found only loose alignment of museum evaluations to the fundamental Logic of Evaluation (Scriven, 1991), of which criteria is a part. Each of these studies emphasized a need for increased technical evaluation capacity to better contribute to the evidence base for the value of informal learning.

In this facilitated discussion we will review and respond to findings of the research cited above. We anticipate discussing questions such as:

- What aspects of our practice can we improve upon?
- What are the realities of informal learning contexts that require adaptation to methods tried and true in other contexts?
- What tools can help us make improvements, and how can we develop those tools?

Discussion will be guided by an appreciative inquiry approach, emphasizing dialog that results in positive idea generation rather than negative problem identification. Based on time and audience size, we will facilitate dialog by engaging participatory methods such as pair & share or break-out groups; brainstorming following IDEO-inspired rules such as deferring judgment, encouraging wild ideas and building on the ideas of others; graffiti sheets, or other interactive methods.

References

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1:15-2:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Rethinking “Authenticity,” Learning, and the Visitor Experience

James Kisiel, California State University Long Beach

Martin Storksdieck, Oregon State University

Kimberley Preston, Oregon State University

Kathleen Westervelt, California State University Long Beach

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance: While it seems that authenticity (a quality of objects, settings, or activities) is often viewed by educators, exhibit designers and program developers as a driver for public engagement in informal settings, there remain questions as to how this long-standing perspective relates to learning. Understanding the role of authenticity in visitor learning experiences was the primary aim of an NSF-funded project that involved a systematic review of research findings and other perspectives from across the literature related to this topic.

This process quickly revealed a complexity within the conceptualization of ‘authentic,’ as well as a scarcity of empirical research that attempted to connect the idea to learning outcomes. Our findings, based on perspectives from fields such as museum studies, tourism, marketing, psychology, anthropology and education, led to the development of an initial model that provides a view of learning using an ‘authenticity’ lens—demonstrating how the authenticity of an object, setting, or activity might be assigned, and subsequently mediate learning experiences.

This session seeks to share key ideas from our synthesis and engage participants in a discussion of the relevance of these findings to the practices of visitor studies and the development of learning experiences in informal settings.

Abstract:

Background

A systematic review of the literature, across multiple disciplines, was initiated to better understand ‘what we know’ about the role of authenticity in informal science learning. (Although this NSF-funded project focused on ‘science learning’, our findings relate to a broader range of informal learning outcomes.) Phase 1 involved synthesis of existing literature reviews, books and other publications that might provide a clearer sense of underlying theory and agreed-upon assumptions. Key ideas from this initial investigation informed Phase 2 of our project and involved examination of nearly 200 peer-reviewed publications that featured empirical research related to the impacts of authenticity.

A Possible Model

Several important findings emerged from our efforts. Probably the most important of these is the unsettled characterization of authenticity itself. While some might see authenticity as a dichotomous concept (it is, or it isn't), others see authenticity as more subjective, best described as a continuum. Still others point to authenticity as an individual construct, suggesting the idea that 'perceived authenticity', influenced by both internal and external factors, may be more influential than the 'true' authenticity designation assigned by an authority (scientist, historian, etc.) The model incorporates the role of individual context (e.g., prior experience, expectations) as well as other contextual factors (intrinsic features, physical space, institutional norms and cultural perspectives.) These combine to influence the visitor's perceived authenticity, which may or may not support further engagement. Such engagement then has the potential to support learning. (Key themes from the synthesis will help to validate the model)

Discussion

The later part of the session will be used as a forum for discussion using several questions:

- What about this model (if anything) is surprising to you, based on your experiences.
- How are these findings relevant to the practices of visitor studies or the development of informal learning experiences?

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Additional Links

<https://www.csulb.edu/science-education/the-authenticity-project>

Building a Better Field Trip: Evaluation in Practice

Claire Steffen, Minnesota Historical Society

Ida Streeto, Minnesota Historical Society

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: The goal of the Building a Better Field Trip project was to improve how we were serving students and teachers by considering the following questions, “What makes an effective field trip?”, “What do teachers want from a field trip experience post-pandemic?”, and “What shared criteria for success can we apply to all Minnesota Historical Society field trips?” It was important that any evaluation would take into account the varying needs of diverse Minnesota teachers and students and the unique experiences that each of MNHS’s historic sites and museums offers. The shared criteria for success needed to be specific enough to be measurable and flexible enough to be adapted to different contexts. The resulting mixed methods collaborative evaluation updated our understanding of teachers needs and preferences and informed ongoing structural and programmatic changes at the Minnesota Historical Society. It also built relationships among staff, as well as, shared language, understanding and expectations. The study has the opportunity to form a model for museums to analyze their program offerings.

Abstract: This presentation aims to illustrate how Minnesota Historical Society staff utilized informal learning and evaluation best practices in a real-world context in collaboration with our community of practice. The Building a Better Field Trip project focused on current field trip practices across MNHS’s network of historic sites and museums to identify ways to improve programming to meet current teacher and staff needs. During the session, the presenters will introduce the Tenets of an Effective Field Trip (our collaboratively designed evaluative criteria) and share both the development process of the criteria, and their impact on which evaluation methods were ultimately used by the presenters. We will discuss the program observations, focus groups, and staff consensus building done as part of the project. We will review the evaluation findings and their implications for staff training, as well as program development and implementation. The presenters will reflect on how our positionalities shaped the way we approached the evaluation methodologies and impacted colleagues’ reactions to the project. Participants will also consider the impact of their own positionality and identity on potential evaluation methodologies and their corresponding results. They will have the opportunity to participate in a modeled consensus workshop to further explore these questions.

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Additional Links

www.mnhs.org
https://bit.ly/MNHS_VSA24

Perspectives from the 2024 Book *The Art of Accessible Evaluation*

Karen Breece, Conner Prairie

Alyssa Carr, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Maia Werner-Avidon, MWA Insights

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This session shares lessons learned and best practices for conducting evaluation with people with disabilities. We detail how to share authority with people in disability communities and explore alternative evaluation practices (such as using literature reviews as evaluative tools) that minimize the potential harm that data collection can have on marginalized populations. Session content will be relevant to museums seeking to expand their

accessibility programming and offerings, measure their social impact, and perform evaluation without furthering harms that have happened when people with disabilities are the subject of social science research. Our goal is to inspire attendees to reconsider evaluation as a tool for advocacy and community building while emphasizing the importance of ethical data collection practices like participatory evaluation.

Abstract:

Session Background and Positionality

All presenters are contributors to an upcoming 2024 book that focuses on evaluating museum accessibility programming. We also are all evaluators, two internal to our organizations, and one an external contractor. While all the contributors are passionate about using museums to meet the needs of people with a wide range of disabilities, none of us represent these target communities ourselves. During our session, we invite alternate perspectives to not only inform our future work, but also to reflect on our past work, as described in the forthcoming book.

Session Overview

This session will include case studies about evaluating accessibility programming at three different museums: Conner Prairie, a history and children's museum in Indiana; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri; and The Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo in California. Each case study will emphasize ways to share authority or employ alternative evaluation practices to minimize harm.

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: This presentation will focus on evaluation of The d/Deaf Culture Project, with particular emphasis on partner-driven analysis activities (including participatory data analysis and feedback sessions with community partners).

Connor Prairie: This presentation will examine evaluation of Connor Prairie's Memory Cafes, focusing on research considerations when evaluating programs targeting people with dementia.

Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo: This presentation looks at evaluation of a new facility designed with accessibility in mind and highlights best practices for developing an Accessibility Advisory Committee with members of disability communities.

We invite participant discussion throughout our session on barriers and challenges for people with disabilities who visit museums, accommodations that museums have tried (both those that have worked and those that have not), and how to further the conversation into action at all of our respective institutions.

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1:15-1:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

Signaling Inclusion: The Role of Latinx Cultural Signifiers at Exhibitions

Sylvia de la Piedra, Exploratorium

Julia Nee, Exploratorium

Individual Paper Presentation

Proposal Narrative: Many organizations are seeking ways to increase their relevance for historically underserved cultural groups, with calls to move beyond increasing participation and instead integrate substantial cultural, linguistic, and other changes that decenter dominant narratives (Dawson, 2019; Kasper & Handsman, 2015; Martinez, 2020; Simon, 2010). One design strategy that can contribute to these efforts is the inclusion of cultural signifiers - bi/multilingual labels, objects, or other signals conveying a cultural connection with a specific group. But what impact does this strategy really have on visitors?

We present the results of a focus group study (n = 25 groups) investigating the impact of integrating Latinx cultural signifiers at ¡Plantásticas!, a science exhibition focused on people's relationships with plants. Results generally support the use of Latinx cultural signifiers (including multilingual labels) as a way to foster a sense of inclusion for Latinx and non-Latinx audiences alike. However, we also learned that some visitors did experience feelings of exclusion at the exhibition related to two main themes: (1) visitors did not feel their (sub)culture (e.g., Colombian, Argentinian) was adequately represented at the exhibition or (2) visitors did not understand why Latinx culture was highlighted over others (e.g., Chinese, Filipino).

We build on prior work related to belonging (Ronning et al., 2023) and multilingual inclusion (Yalowitz et al., 2013), providing detailed evidence on the benefits and pitfalls of including cultural signifiers at ¡Plantásticas! and sharing recommendations for design teams to consider when using bi/multilingual labels and/or culturally-specific objects in exhibitions. We highlight

the importance of effectively communicating to visitors the reasoning behind highlighting particular (sub)cultural groups to help mitigate visitors feeling excluded or overlooked.

We end the session with a facilitated discussion of why attendees might highlight a particular (sub)cultural group, how they can incorporate (sub)cultural signifiers into their future exhibitions, and how they might communicate these choices to their visitors.

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Additional Links

<https://www.informalscience.org/bilingual-exhibit-research-initiative-report-institutional-and-intergenerational-experiences>

1:45-2:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory to Understand Families' Museum Experiences
Suzy Letourneau, New York Hall of Science

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Researchers in science education argue that agency in the learning process includes not only the actions that learners take to pursue their goals and ideas, but also their perceptions of the choices that are available and of their own roles within shared learning experiences (Miller et al., 2018). Within science centers, families' perceptions may depend on

their interests and prior experiences with STEM, the goals they have in mind for their visits, the roles that caregivers play in supporting their children's learning, and many other factors. Yet, recent studies suggest that museums are often designed with a narrow segment of their audiences in mind — those who are already regular museum-goers or who are familiar with informal approaches to STEM learning — leaving many other visitors feeling excluded or discouraged (Dawson, 2019; Tran & Gupta, 2021). With this in mind, this study examined families' perspectives about their learning experiences at a variety of STEM exhibits in order to critically examine current practices and identify opportunities to make exhibits more inclusive for a wider range of identities and ways of learning.

Abstract: This presentation will summarize methods and findings from an interview-based study (NSF grant no. 2146141) about families' experiences at STEM exhibits, and the exhibit features that either aligned with or were in tension with families' learning goals. The project used two theoretical lenses to make sense of interviews with 120 family groups across eight STEM exhibits with a range of affordances (from open-ended to structured). First, intersectionality guided sampling methods and analytical approaches; family groups were categorized based on their relationships to systems of power and privilege (experiences with STEM and with museums), rather than grouping participants by predetermined demographic variables. Second, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) was used to parse and code interview data to identify interconnected elements of families' museum experiences. CHAT involves analyzing activities as systems that include multiple elements: the objectives for a given activity (from participants' own perspectives); the "tools" (physical or conceptual resources) that participants use; the "rules" (including norms, constraints, or beliefs) that shape how they approach the activity; the communities involved; and the division of labor or responsibilities that different individuals take on (Engeström, 1987). Analyses revealed that many caregivers visited museums for their children rather than themselves, and this shaped their expectations about how STEM exhibits should be designed and how the museum should support children's learning. In addition, families' past experiences with STEM influenced their expectations about what kinds of experiences they might encounter at the museum, and what their own roles might be in the learning process. In both cases, tensions arose when progressive pedagogies at the museum appeared to prevent families from learning together in the ways that they wanted. This study provides an example of how studies can consider multifaceted and nuanced aspects of families' learning experiences in order to critically question and improve museum practices.

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Additional Links

Project website: <https://tinyurl.com/NYSCIchangelab>

2:45-3:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

Hello From the Other Side: Reflections From a Post Museum Career

Alice Anderson, Forum for Youth Investment

Renaee Youngs, Management Analysis and Development, Minnesota Management and Budget

Maria Robinson, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance: While we all are passionate about museums and other informal learning environments, it's not always easy or possible to stay employed by a museum. This session aims to explore the facets of post-museum career life. In this facilitated discussion, participants will have the opportunity to hear from three former museum employees about their career journeys following their departure from the museum field, including how their skills have translated into new roles and what aspects of the museum environment they miss. Additionally, attendees will engage in discussions, sharing their perspectives on transferable skills, envisioning potential future roles in the museum sector, and exploring avenues for continued support and advocacy, even beyond their museum careers. By recognizing the versatility of museum skills and the factors influencing career transitions, stakeholders both inside and outside the museum field can better support professionals in navigating diverse career paths and foster a more dynamic and resilient workforce.

Abstract: As a place of employment, museums have undergone change, challenge and criticism in recent years. Many staff were laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kranz & Downey, 2021; Charr, 2020), others have left (or are thinking of leaving) the field due to many factors (Benoit-

Bryan, Jean-Mary, & Locks, 2023), and those that remain are seeking additional workplace protection through unionization (Oladipo, 2021). For those who entered the profession for their love of museums and their place in society, this has been a hard period. While there is much to be done to improve the workplace conditions of museums, colleagues who have left the field offer insight into how our skills, passions, and connections may translate well into other fields. Furthermore, they offer new perspectives on how the field of museum research can be supported via formal and informal partnerships from adjacent fields. What can we learn from colleagues who are on the other side? How might we continue to support one another in our broader local learning ecosystems or civic institutions? What does it look like to continue learning from and with former colleagues?

Join us in this facilitated discussion to hear more about career journeys outside of a museum and have the opportunity to share your own reflections and perspectives.

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Acting on Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Shared Responsibility

Sarah Lee, Sarah Lee Consulting

Hannah Ridenour LaFrance, Cleveland Museum of Art

Rachel Arzuaga, Cleveland Museum of Art

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: In 2020, the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), with generous support from an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Museums Empowered grant, launched “Expanding Data Literacy at the CMA.” The project was conceived as an initial investment in long-term culture change: to empower and equip staff across the museum — from educators to

curators, guest services to executive leadership — to become active stakeholders in the design, practice, and meaning-making of audience research and evaluation at CMA. In this hosted presentation, we'll use this project as a lens through which to explore the definition and redefinition of visitor studies — examining CMA's intended culture shift from the perspectives of both visitor studies practitioners and those making audience-informed and visitor-facing museum decisions. We'll share the history of audience research and evaluation at CMA; how we approached this particular IMLS-funded project; and how we're continuing to develop a culture of shared responsibility for audience research and evaluation across the museum. And we'll touch on questions about the role of non-evaluators in research and evaluation projects and the emerging competencies (collaboration, facilitation, offering counsel and advice) that evaluators need to support the entire museum in putting audience research and evaluation to effective use.

Abstract: This session will begin by establishing the history of internal evaluation at CMA, ongoing efforts to create studies that offer actionable insights about visitors and the broader community, and the challenges of translating audience insights into action. Supported by an IMLS-funded project that began with a convening of audience research practitioners from the museum field, we confirmed this is a common challenge: conducting rigorous and well-designed studies is seldom enough to ensure that findings are adopted. We believed a necessary first step toward building a culture of shared responsibility for acting on audience research and evaluation was to invest in the staff's audience data literacy so that they could become better consumers of the work executed by their evaluation colleagues. After a rigorous planning process that engaged staff at multiple levels, we designed and offered a workshop series. Post-workshop surveys showed both meaningful impact and additional opportunities for ongoing organizational growth, including an evolving role for the evaluation team, which will be shared with session attendees. The session will feature both an evaluator and an interpretive planner from CMA, who will discuss key questions raised by this project regarding the definition of the visitor studies field, such as:

- How should research and evaluation projects engage non-evaluation staff to maximize their ability to put research and evaluation to use?
- What knowledge, skills, and competencies do non-evaluation staff need to be equipped and empowered to become active stakeholders in the design, practice, and meaning-making of audience insights?
- What knowledge, skills, and competencies do evaluators need to effectively engage their colleagues in the design, practice, and meaning-making of audience insights?

Attendees will also be invited to share experiences with cultivating a shared responsibility for audience research and evaluation in their institutions — including their own perspectives on the session's key discussion topics.

When UX Design Met Evaluation: Towards a Shared Lexicon

Victoria Eudy, Missouri Historical Society

Kara Glenn, Western Kentucky University

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: When we think about visitor studies, chances are we're thinking about a field rooted in better understanding visitor behavior and enhancing experiences in physical informal learning environments – such as museums. In parallel, the User Experience (UX) field emphasizes a user-centered approach to problem-solving in digital spaces. This presentation aims to demonstrate how UX design principles, while traditionally digital, can inspire innovative methods in visitor studies in digital and physical environments. We will tell the story of what happens when a UX professor, an emerging UX designer, and a manager of evaluation from a historical society converge. Through this blending of ideas, we demonstrate how a combination of the two disciplines has the power to enrich our practice as evaluators and enhance the visitor experience in informal learning settings.

Abstract: The discussion highlights the collaborative efforts between Kara Glenn, Design professor at Western Kentucky University and Victoria Eudy, Manager of Institutional Evaluation at the Missouri Historical Society. The two met when one of Glenn's design students used her knowledge of indoor GPS technology to create a mobile application (Muser) utilizing precise-location technology to generate heat and path maps for investigating user engagement in museum settings – and a larger conversation about the convergence of visitor studies and UX emerged. The presentation underscores the potential of UX principles in addressing common challenges faced by museums. The conversation delves into the evolving role of evaluation in the museum setting and the field's relationship to UX, as demonstrated by Victoria and Kara's experiences, and the implications for visitor studies. Audience members will be encouraged to consider how their own experiences might benefit from UX principles shared during the presentation.

Additional Links

<https://lawsofux.com/>

2:45-3:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Building Responsive Practice: Live Assessment During Informal Science Learning

Kim Clarke, Gulf of Maine Research Institute

Drew Perlmutter, Gulf of Maine Research Institute

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Informal science learning environments offer learners a fast-paced, engaging, and dynamic context for learning, but one that also presents challenges to the collection, analysis, and application of data to inform both teaching practice and illuminate student outcomes. Researchers and practitioners at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, Northwestern University, and Loyola University Chicago iteratively designed and tested a live assessment tool that allows educators to quickly and easily collect data to quantify and analyze the efficacy of various approaches and aspects of their program. In this session we will explore the assessment tool, the ways we have used this tool, and some preliminary findings. Finally, we will share best practices for implementing live assessments in informal science learning contexts.

Abstract: Although informal learning spaces have long existed, they have only recently been recognized as crucial sites for lifelong learning and development (Falk & Dierking, 2016). Acknowledging the important role informal educators play, the field has stressed the importance of capacity building and training for informal educators (e.g., Tran et al, 2013), among them the development of strategies, routines, and tools for supporting an understanding of the conceptual and praxeological dimensions of assessment. This session explores the development of a live assessment tool designed to illuminate elements of peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult interactions, hypothesized to support greater individual student learning and engagement.

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3:15-3:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

Visitor Behavior and Exhibition Content: When Are They Really Reading?

Tom Beatman, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: For many cultural institutions signage remains a key component of their educational offerings. The goal of this content is to align with the institution's mission and

support the exhibition's defined outcomes. The hope is that by reading the text, visitors will engage with new ideas, shift perspectives, and even act or change their behaviors. This session examines visitors' reading behavior in zoo settings to quantify whether the interpretive goals of exhibition content are reaching visitors' eyes. Looking at exhibitions with differing interpretive plans and characteristics, the work described will highlight trends in when and where visitors choose to read signs and how this behavior interfaces with desired information, content preference, and sign content.

Abstract: In informal settings, the most frequently encountered source of information or interpretation comes in the form of labels, signs, infographics, video, and interactive elements. It can be simple to examine what we are saying in our exhibitions, but how does this relate to how visitors use the space? This session presents the integration of a series of traditional timing and tracking studies with content-domain distributions to better understand the visitor experience in a zoo setting. In wildlife conservation-focused institutions there can frequently be a disconnect between the visitor's experiences of seeing the animals and absorbing crucial conservation messaging, and calls to action. Previously, we developed a method for producing statistics and visualization of the contents of exhibition signage, but a robust question remained: how visitor reading behavior and content preferences confound our attempts at messaging. To this end, timing and tracking studies were implemented throughout Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium to better understand how visitors engage with interpretive materials. This study examines multiple exhibitions of different designs, including both indoor and outdoor, those with descriptive, interpretive, or immersive labeling, and a newly refurbished exhibit which replaces traditional signage with touchscreen interfaces. The behavioral observations focused heavily on time stopped, moving through the exhibit, and reading, combined with tracking occurrences and locations of attentive behavior including gesturing to exhibit animals, affinity indicators, intragroup communication, and specific signs read. This data is then taken and used to show how exhibition content distributions become diluted through the visitor experience lens. The result aims to provide evaluators as well as exhibit planners food for thought on interpretive design from a UX perspective.

4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Reimagining a People's Palace: Transforming Historic Spaces into Vibrant Cultural Hubs

Jacob Watson, The Practice

Chinyere Achebe, The Practice

Zhenesse Heinemann, Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events

Hosted Presentation

Proposal Narrative: Our session will provide an overview of the CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER (CCC) Audience & Engagement Project, a 9-month research process designed by The Practice, in collaboration with the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events to reimagine the role of the Center within the city's cultural landscape. Once dubbed The People's Palace, the CCC has served a number of different audiences and purposes in its many decades of existence.

Our approach to this process was a radical departure from past visitor engagement studies, asking not how to attract more visitors to the Center, but focusing instead on what the concept of a People's Palace might mean to Chicagoans today, and what they might find uniquely valuable within the city's already robust cultural landscape. We asked, How might we reimagine the Chicago Cultural Center as a vibrant hub of cultural activity?

Utilizing a design thinking process, we spoke with more than 500 stakeholders across multiple underrepresented interest groups, including youth, educators, families, BIPOC artists, and artists with disabilities. In addition to more traditional focus groups and interviews, we also leveraged arts-based imaginative practices including an onsite interactive wall installation and a series of theatre-based workshops that engaged creative visioning activities to re-imagine the future of the CCC.

[Building a Data-Driven Culture Through a Cross-departmental Metrics Team](#)

Roslyn Esperon, Walters Art Museum

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This interactive session will provide a case study on institutional metrics capacity building and engage attendees in a thought exercise on how these tactics can be applied within their own organizations. We will share learnings from how the Metrics Team at the Walters Art Museum breaks down data silos, making research a part of institutional conversations, and helping to center data in decision making. By sharing our journey from origin story through current work and future visioning, we hope to empower colleagues with learnings from the barriers we've navigated and the successful strategies we've implemented for cultivating a metrics-minded organizational culture. We will model ways we've bridged data across our institution and created opportunities for internal partnerships for data use and sensemaking. This session will prompt attendees to consider how they might build their own team of data champions and provide example resources and tools for shaping a data-driven institutional culture.

Abstract: In this interactive session audience members will follow the journey of the Walters Art Museum's Metrics Team, a cross-departmental team dedicated to shaping a data-driven institutional culture. This session is structured into three key parts, each with a reflective

prompt that audiences will use to start drafting a game plan for their own institutional metrics team.

Building a Metrics Team

This part of the session will address our beginnings as a team: how team members were appointed, how metrics were selected and defined, and an orientation to the spreadsheet where we collected and recorded data. Audience reflection: Where does data in your institution live? Who manages the data? Which metrics tell our stories? How would you record that data?

Scaling our Work

We will reflect upon building cross-department representation, reporting quarterly and exhibition-based metrics, and elevating our view of impact from attendance to include new metrics while building our sphere of influence. Audience reflection: What data stories could you tell? What are the natural platforms for reporting? How might you build buy-in with staff and leadership?

Shaping the Future

We will share our vision for professional development and capacity building and our steps towards institutional goal-based metrics. Audience reflection: What gaps might you have in your data? What metrics align with your institutional goals? How do you streamline and build excitement around metrics? We will close the session by sharing the collective ideas that have come out of the workshop activities so that attendees can learn from each other and have a shared tool set to use at their own institutions. We will also reserve time for Q&A.

What Could an Anti-Racist, Justice-Focused Visitor Studies Look Like?

Pei P Koay, Our Shared Future: Reckoning with Our Racial Past - Smithsonian Institution

Emmett Fung, Museum of Science, Boston

Jeremy Foutz, STEAM Workgroup

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance: The museum and informal learning fields continue to grapple with critical issues around dismantling systemic racism and creating spaces that support equity, justice, and belonging. As advocates for visitor and community voices, visitor studies practitioners and researchers have the potential to play a key role in advancing these efforts. In order to push the field forward, the JARFIG proposes to facilitate a dialogue to explore what an anti-racist, justice-focused visitor studies looks like in practice.

We hope to create the space for participants to experience the following, in addition to many other possibilities that might emerge from the conversation:

- Increase awareness and understanding of how justice and anti-racism lenses could inform the visitor studies and museum evaluation fields.

- Gain insights around how to strengthen their own anti-racist, justice-focused practices in designing, implementing, and/or utilizing visitor studies.
- Increase awareness of practices, methods, and approaches that reflect an anti-racist, equity-focused lens in visitor studies, research, and evaluation.
- Discuss strategies of professionals navigating within their own institutions.

By attending to our own practices and contexts, we intend to encourage others to honor past efforts and join ongoing work to grow our fields into tangible anti-racist, justice-focused reflections of our ideals.

Abstract: To frame the conversation and provide some context, we'll present a summary of key themes that emerged out of the 2022 Omaha Closing session in which conference attendees discussed and shared their responses to the question of what an anti-racist visitor studies (and/or VSA) would look like, as well as offering some examples, frameworks, or potential definitions of anti-racism that we could build from in the dialogue. These examples and frameworks will be drawn from several resources, including the Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity guides and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative.

In consideration of past data alongside the resources and frameworks provided, we'll open up the space as an opportunity for session participants to be able to discuss their own ideas, perspectives, and lived experiences. We ask that participants practice our community agreements during this session to help make the session time as welcoming and inclusive as possible (available in the Additional links section). JARFIG members will facilitate small group discussion to reflect more deeply on how visitor studies can engage an anti-racist, justice-focused lens. Online, anonymous options will also be available for participants. We suggest using these two groups of questions to give some focus to this complex topic:

- What types of practices and mindsets are needed to support an anti-racist visitor studies? How do you or could you bring these lenses to your own practice?
- How can you use your position, privilege, and/or power to support anti-racism and justice efforts within your institution[s]? What are we willing or able to risk in putting these values and ideas into practice?

In order to be action-oriented, we'll also collectively identify what potential tangible outcomes or "products" could emerge from the dialogue (e.g., position paper, concept map, blog, etc.).

Additional Resources

VSA JARFIG Resource List

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1HJ7QvHiOUYiE-qEoBsOjrgwRWlir-Oc--YxeESM0h04>

VSA JARFIG Community Agreements

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U-ZT9mwslyuA1UQ_seF19NbqD3cyU5r3QceZXfxU6uk/edit?usp=sharing

Questioning the Status Quo of Learning Goals and their Evaluation

Claire Pillsbury, California Academy of Sciences

Amanda Krantz, Kera Collective

Matt Matcuk, Field Museum

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Summative evaluation is a well-established tool to assess an exhibition's success by measuring whether visitors can show that they grasped and understood the learning goals. Critiquing summative evaluation methods can involve questioning the valorization of exhibition learning goals and the ability for visitors to verbalize that content. If exhibitions and visitor experiences are framed as primarily about education and measured by verbal responses, are we neglecting the value of affective experiences for both learning and a sense of satisfaction, wonder, and identity for visitors? What if we redefined evaluation methods and exhibition goals by integrating a more empathic understanding of the visitor experience? Attendees will be encouraged to reexamine traditional exhibition development and evaluation processes, including how these methods might unintentionally contribute to less inclusive practices. Panelists will share their own experiences with creating exhibition goals and corresponding evaluation instruments to assess whether visitors can 'demonstrate' that they achieved those learning goals. Panelists will also highlight potential new methods to assess visitor impacts and how we could use existing methodologies in different ways.

Abstract: Many museums conduct summative evaluations to assess whether visitors learned and understood the main messages of an exhibition and if educational outcomes were achieved. A belief in the potential of exhibitions to convey a wide range of learning goals may hinder our understanding of the actual accessibility of different kinds of content as well as other important qualities of the visitor experience. What visitors can verbalize in an interview context may only be a fraction of what they remember and take away. And even their use of key terms in verbalization may not reflect conceptual understanding. In short, summative evaluations may not produce accurate measures of visitor understanding and learning or reflect the totality of the visitor experience. We could be overlooking those visitors who are not as verbally fluent or able to promptly synthesize concepts when asked. And could we be missing other takeaways that are as valid and important to visitors as our learning goals are to us? In this session our aim is to prompt consideration of whether some of the typical practices of exhibition development

and evaluation may unintentionally impair our ability to engage visitors, confound our measures of what visitor takeaways are, and detract from our efforts to be inclusive learning spaces. Alternatives to summative visitor interviews could include investing in formative evaluation to develop more salient content, recording and coding visitor conversations, querying visitors in their social groups rather than interviewing individual visitors, critical appraisals from professional evaluators, and using process evaluation to examine how exhibition development is carried out. Panelists will share their reflections on the questions that arise with examples from their own exhibition and evaluation experiences.

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Wednesday, July 17

9:45-10:45 AM Concurrent Sessions

Making Meaning of Interview Data Through Collaboration with Community Members
Suzy Letourneau, New York Hall of Science
Franklin Aucapina, New York Hall of Science
Diana Ballesteros, New York Hall of Science

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Developing more inclusive and equitable museum practices requires that institutions work closely with the communities they serve to define topics of interest and criteria for success. Collaborative and participatory methods can allow museums to design more culturally responsive learning experiences that are grounded in community members' knowledge and lived experiences. Nevertheless, few guidelines exist for involving community stakeholders in interpreting front-end evaluations or exploratory research data during the initial stages of a design and development process. In this session, researchers from the New York Hall of Science will provide an overview of collaborative research methods developed in a two-year NSF-funded project (award no. 2215353) that defined family engagement in early STEAM

learning in partnership with caregivers and pre-K educators. The project developed novel strategies for integrating member checking into narrative interview protocols, and engaging caregivers and educators in collaboratively analyzing interview data and generating personas to synthesize the findings. Although engaging non-researchers in analytical processes can be challenging, these collaborative approaches can ground data analysis and experience design in the intersectional knowledge and lived experiences of community stakeholders, decentering dominant narratives, and creating space for new perspectives and ways of knowing.

Abstract: Research on culturally responsive practices has argued that it is essential for institutions to partner with their audiences to address socially relevant issues and elevate voices that historically have been silenced or marginalized (Garibay & Teasdale, 2019; Jackson, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In recent years, museums have begun working toward this goal by using co-design methods to engage community stakeholders in developing new learning experiences in partnership with museum staff (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). However, community members may not be directly involved in the earliest parts of the design and development process, when museums define learning goals and priorities for museum experiences, often based on front-end evaluations or exploratory research data. This neglects important opportunities for researchers and experience developers to check their assumptions, interpretations, and values against the perspectives of the audiences they aim to serve (Gutierrez & Jurow, 2016).

This workshop-style session will involve participants in learning about and practicing methods used in a two-year project that brought together caregivers, pre-K teachers, museum researchers and educators. The group collaboratively interpreted data from an exploratory research study with families from NYSCI's local community, and this process informed subsequent co-design efforts, in which the group defined qualities of family engagement based on interview themes, and brainstormed new ideas for family programming that would meet our shared goals. Session presenters will share tools and templates for narrative interview methods that allowed for live member checking, and session participants will work together to collaboratively identify interview themes from interview excerpts and co-create sets of personas that synthesize themes and integrate community-level data. Discussions will examine the challenges and opportunities involved in sharing authority with community members during the data analysis process, including ways that this approach could be adapted to other settings and audiences, supporting participants in integrating this approach into their own work.

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Additional Resources

Project website: <https://tinyurl.com/NYSCIsteamteam>

COVES+ Mosaic: Revealing Patterns in Twin City Museums' Visitor Demographics

Gretchen Haupt, Science Museum of Minnesota

Tom Reed, Walker Art Center

Anika Taylor, The Bakken Museum

Adrienne Wiseman, The Bell Museum

Michael Folliard-Olson, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Twin Cities COVES+ is a cross institutional effort exploring visitor demographics collected across five Minneapolis and St. Paul museums. Key demographic indicators, including geographic origin, group composition, race/ethnicity, gender, age, income, and education, are gathered at all sites using COVES and analyzed to identify commonalities and variations among museum visitors.

Sharing this work exemplifies how our community of practice can contribute to advancing equity within our work. Through collaboration and shared data, the project seeks to expand on how museums use visitor data to better serve their communities. The inclusion of diverse perspectives from art and science institutions underscores our commitment to acknowledging and embracing the intersectionality of experiences within our institutions and communities, and also reflects that we are all working to reach residents of the same metro area.

This session hopes to encourage attendees to pursue similar partnerships by showcasing how collaborative projects contribute to the advancement of visitor studies, as well as inspire actionable insights by empowering attendees to apply lessons learned from the COVES+ project

to enhance their museums' visitor engagement strategies, exhibit designs, and educational programming based on a broader understanding of audience demographics.

Abstract:

Content Overview

This session offers a peek into the Twin Cities COVES+ project, a collaborative endeavor involving five prominent museums in Minneapolis and St. Paul. This initiative aims to uncover patterns and trends across diverse cultural and scientific institutions through collecting and sharing visitor demographics in rigorous and consistent ways.

After a brief overview of the COVES exit survey methodology used to gather most of the visitor data, the session will focus on the process of data collection, cleaning, analysis, and reporting, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in cross-institutional collaborations. The demographic information aggregated in this project includes data about visitors' geographic origin; group composition on the day of their visit; Race or ethnicity; gender; age, household income, and education level. Reporting has so far focused on identifying similarities and differences in demographic patterns between the five organizations and generating working hypotheses about what factors may be contributing to observable differences; but a goal of this collaboration is to consider additional moves we can make, later on, as a result of this shared data.

Panel Discussion

Representatives from participating institutions will share their motivations, goals, and experiences within the COVES+ project, highlighting the practical applications of demographic insights in shaping visitor engagement strategies and exhibit designs. The discussion will also explore potential avenues for future research and collaboration, inviting attendees to actively engage in dialogue and knowledge exchange such as:

Presenting the process of gathering and analyzing cross institutional demographic data and the ongoing conversations on adapting practices in the face of evolving institutional environments. How our community of practice can contribute to generating and sharing resources, expertise, and new approaches in visitor studies.

How a regional collaboration can support organizations to better serve their current visitors and, by better defining the gaps in their non-visitor audiences, guide initiatives that foster inclusivity and increased relevance.

Exhibit Summatives: Going Beyond the Obvious with Walk-Alongs

Karen Breece, Conner Prairie

Jacob Higgins, Conner Prairie

Susan Foutz, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis
Abby Chamberlin, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This session connects to the theme of “Redefining Visitor Studies” by first showcasing a method that calls upon a researcher’s lived experience and positionality, and second, reintroducing a newer data collection method to the visitor studies community by featuring case studies that add to Skov et. al’s work from 2018 on walk-along studies. Doing walk-alongs explicitly calls the researcher to bring in their lived experiences and challenges the traditional “objective” stance of the researcher within a project. The approach calls on the researcher to build rapport and interact with the study participants in a more participatory stance than is typically used with timing and tracking. While this may challenge some researcher’s views of “best practices”, walk-alongs acknowledge the rich social context and informal learning environment of museums. This session also hopes to re-introduce an emergent practice to visitor studies practitioners, as the outcomes-based and accessibility-based data collected through walk-alongs can go beyond what timing and tracking can capture.

Abstract: Session Background: Two teams of internal evaluators, one from Conner Prairie and the other from The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, explain how we incorporated walk-alongs into recent summative exhibit evaluations. Walk-alongs are a data collection method with deep researcher-participant interaction that was first discussed in Visitor Studies in Skov et al. (2018). We present two studies approaching the method from different ends of the qualitative and quantitative spectrum, with one documenting outcomes in a makerspace and the other on understanding the experiences of families with accessibility needs in a dinosaur exhibition.

Session Overview: We discuss our experiences with this methodology and implications for future use, as well as the results of each of our studies. We aim to have session participants think deeply about the stance of a researcher in an evaluation study (as an objective observer, participant observer, or facilitator) and how this impacts the data we gather from target audiences. Are there times where embedded research may yield richer data than research from a distance? How does doing research involving families with young children, especially young children with disabilities, impact the stance we may take as researchers? And what are the benefits (and drawbacks) of trying to collect more impactful data (such as outcomes fulfillment) than timing and tracking can capture? These are all questions our session poses to the field.

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[Communities of Practice: A Strategy for Research in Museums](#)

Nicole R. Rivera, North Central College

Claire Thoma Emmons, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Kari Ross Nelson, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Children's museums serve an important role in the ecosystem of education and care for young children. They provide high quality, developmentally appropriate opportunities for children and their adult caregivers. Central to the work of children's museums is the belief that "Play is learning, and it is critical to the healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development of children" (ACM). Through play, children have the opportunity to develop and practice skills that will help them engage in social spaces. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social emotional learning (SEL) is, "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions". While there is a wealth of literature about the benefits of SEL, most focus on formal learning environments. Children's museums professionals observe SEL, but face the challenge of building systematic approaches to examine SEL because of limitations of resources and time. The goal of this panel discussion is to explore the ways a community of practice can bridge that gap.

Abstract: This panel discussion will highlight an evolving community of practice (CoP) that is focused on gaining more insights about SEL in children's museums through a series of nation-wide studies. A community of practice is a collaborative group with a shared domain of interest, whose members actively engage to share resources and build practices. The composition of this CoP has evolved over time, always including both university researchers and internal evaluators, and at times including museum practitioners as well. Presenters will provide an overview of three multi-site studies that explored preschooler's social emotional learning at children's museums. The first study compared the frequency and nature of observable SEL behaviors displayed by young children in children's museum exhibits with those displayed by children at

non-museum sites. Study two compared the frequency and nature of children's observed SEL behaviors across three different exhibition styles. The final study examined the perspectives of parents and caregivers on their children's social emotional learning during children's museum visits through post-visit surveys. Interwoven with the summary of each study will be reflection on the ways in which aspects of the study (for example, scale or methods) were enhanced through the CoP compared to what they likely would have been if undertaken by a single institution or researcher. After providing an overview of this CoP's evolution and the studies described above, panelists will engage participants in a discussion of the role CoPs can play in enhancing the capacity for visitor studies and generating new knowledge for the field. Attendees will be invited to share their own personal experience with other CoPs and/or multi-institution research projects.

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2:15-3:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Grappling with Nuance: Examining Semantic Typology in Visitor Studies Vocabulary
Tom Beatman PhD, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium
Fran Mast, Morton Arboretum
Rebecca Nall, Saint Louis Science Center
Lindsay Maldonado PhD, Northeastern Illinois University

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: VSA is at a critical point of self-reflection, examining and revising its practices, ways of knowing, community, and purpose. This session aims to highlight how variable mental models, training, and backgrounds can create barriers to communication and understanding within our field when left unexamined. This session aims to quantitatively and qualitatively explore the nuanced differences in semantic models surrounding terms used by the Visitor Studies professional community and encourage discourse to recognize and appreciate how the “fuzziness” (ambiguity) in language needs to be acknowledged and overcome to support best practices. While this session hopes to point to the need to clarify language across our field, a major point of focus is on the identity of Visitor Studies as a field, the nature of institutions it examines, and the Who of our focus of research and evaluation.

Abstract: As Visitor Studies evolves, its vocabulary and core content can undergo shifts in definitions, and that of associative or secondary meanings. With the contributions of session participants, we will grapple with and map the difficulty in making meaning when we communicate with seemingly simple ideas such as community and engagement. A common observation within and outside the Visitor Studies field is miscommunication originating from different understandings of shared language and terminology. While we can often readily recognize that words can have multiple flexible meanings across and within contexts, articulating these differences or disparate meanings and resolving them is often more challenging than it at first may seem. While these issues may at first seem obtuse or overly exacting, they can often reflect intrinsic biases, with terms such as community or even visitor studies, carrying undesirable, coded meanings that function less as a definition and more as a means of exclusion. In this session, we, in collaboration with session participants and the VSA community at large, examine meaning-making and item definitions through a combination of open discussion, community-sourced definitions, and an item definition semantic sort exercise that will enable us to quantify and visualize the variation in meaning for individual concepts and terms. Through this exercise we can highlight common sources of miscommunication and enable practitioners to mitigate the confusion that can emerge from the use of common language found both within visitor studies and in communication with our institutions and stakeholders. Likewise, this session provides us and session participants the opportunity to reflect on biases, coded language, and potentially problematic definitions that demand reconceptualization.

[Redefining Credibility and Utility: Exploring Culturally Responsive Evaluation Practices](#)

Allison Anderson, Museum of Science Boston

Ann Atwood, Museum of Science Boston

KT Todd, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh

Hosted Presentation

Proposal Narrative: This session offers multiple examples of applying culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) practices in our work. This session primarily aligns with the conference theme to “Examine what happens when best practices meet the realities of real-world evaluation contexts.” We have worked on a variety of projects that incorporate these practices to different degrees and have learned a lot in the process. We have selected a few examples to illustrate how they tackled integrating CRE practices, and intend for participants to learn from and with each other. The real-world examples shared will be drawn from multiple projects, key examples are detailed below.

Located at a children’s museum, Presenter A will share how our team has incorporated CRE across multiple projects, highlighting an ongoing collaboration between their museum and an urban middle school. We found that our initial approaches with traditional data collection led to poor quality data, which seemed to stem from distrust between a predominantly white organization and predominantly Black student body. Over time we built trust with the students through active listening, co-creating data collection methods, and embracing flexibility, which led to dramatic changes in what we learned with and from students.

Presenter B will share examples from a project that incorporated culturally responsive research practices in our front-end research study investigating alignment between literature and practice around strategies and principles for building and maintaining STEM learning ecosystems. At the end of the study we encountered new challenges around how the findings were shared, including navigating ownership, authorship, and methods for sharing. In this session, we will share some of the challenges and decisions that were made as the project worked towards sharing findings with the field.

Presenter C will share examples from a project that brings together six museums and community partner teams to engage their local audience with relevant Earth or space science topics. Broadly, the development of these engagement strategies are led by community-defined interests and needs, however in practice how this is executed varies widely. As project evaluators, we are working to help support the museum/community organization teams in collecting, analyzing, and sharing data, while also helping document learnings to share with the funder. In this session, we will share some of the different strategies the teams have used and reflect on balancing flexibility with providing teams with the information they need.

Presenter A will lead an interactive multi-modal art-based activity that they have used for data collection, to explore incorporating non-traditional data collection methods. This activity will be a starting point for discussions around incorporating CRE practices in the participants’ own work. Discussion prompts will revolve around including what counts as credible evidence, translating knowledge between different groups, and navigating internal organizational culture and expectations.

Data Sharing Systems: What's Working & Where We Go Next

Elena Tsakakis, Science Museum of Minnesota

Gretchen Haupt, Science Museum of Minnesota

Ronda Maurer, Science Museum of Minnesota

Andy Chambers, Science Museum of Minnesota

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This session will explore how staff at the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) utilize data to drive decision-making processes and foster a culture of data literacy and enthusiasm within the institution. By delving into SMM's data sharing systems and strategies for internal data use, attendees will gain valuable insights into the practical applications of audience data across multiple museum departments. The session's focus on collaboration between evaluation, visitor experience, and STEM education staff underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in leveraging data to inform organizational goals and enhance visitor experiences. The session's emphasis on accommodating changing realities and serving diverse visitor populations aligns with broader discussions within the field of visitor studies, highlighting the relevance and applicability of the presented content to museum professionals seeking to redefine their approaches to data utilization and audience engagement.

Abstract: In this session, attendees will learn about the data practices employed by the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) to inform organizational decision-making and enhance visitor experiences. Drawing upon the expertise of evaluation, visitor experience, and STEM education staff, the session will provide a comprehensive overview of how SMM has developed data sharing systems for internal data use, and how they work to cultivate excitement around data within the institution. As the discussion unfolds, attendees can expect to hear firsthand accounts of data use and sharing from panelists representing different museum departments who interact with museum audiences in different ways. Panelists will share their experiences in utilizing audience data to inform their respective areas of work and will discuss strategies for maintaining momentum and excitement around data-driven decision-making. Key discussion points will include the diverse ways in which audience data can be incorporated into broader organizational goals, the role of collaboration between departments in maximizing the utility of shared datasets, and the importance of fostering a culture of data literacy and agency among museum staff. Additionally, panelists will reflect on the future direction of SMM's data sharing strategies and offer insights into emerging trends and opportunities in museum data management. By showcasing the experiences and practices of the Science Museum of Minnesota, this session aims to inspire attendees to rethink their approach to data utilization and explore new avenues for leveraging data to enhance museum operations and visitor experiences. Whether seeking practical guidance on establishing data sharing systems or strategies for promoting data literacy within their organizations, participants will leave equipped

with actionable insights and a renewed enthusiasm for harnessing the power of data across the organizations where they do their work.

2:15-2:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

Together for Impact: Working with Community Organizations to Measure Shared Goals
Michelle Mileham, Oregon Zoo

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: In 2024, the Zoo Apprenticeship Program (ZAP) at Oregon Zoo is celebrating its 25th anniversary. ZAP employs low-income youth and youth of color, who learn about and participate in conservation and gain leadership skills through various program opportunities. While the program has undergone small changes in the course of its history, it shifted significantly as the zoo emerged from COVID-19 closures, moving from a model of ZAP going out to communities to a model of bringing community groups to the zoo. The pivot to on-grounds guided tours, which was community-inspired, was quick; the ZAP team was “building the plane while flying it” and still operating at 25% pre-pandemic capacity. Now with a full education staff, a new ZAP cohort, and a program impact focus, we are building ZAP-led tours with intentionality and community input. In particular, we are bringing community voices into both program decision-making and evaluation. This session will address how we approached community conversations, general findings, and how ZAP is incorporating findings into the program.

Abstract: The Zoo Apprenticeship Program (ZAP) at Oregon Zoo not only employs low-income youth and youth of color but also engages diverse community groups in educational programming. Historically, ZAP youth went into the community to present educational programs; now, community organizations visit Oregon Zoo for an all-inclusive, ZAP-led guided program at no charge to participating organizations. Though this shift was more out of necessity from an internal perspective, the idea of offering guided tours originated from a community organization pre-pandemic and felt like a logical direction to lean into given that a new direction was required. Over the last two years, a guided program was developed and implemented with limited staff capacity and few defined goals or outcomes. We are now taking a step back to design a ZAP-led tour with intentionality and community input. This session will highlight how the ZAP coordinator and program impact manager collaborated to answer: What does our community want from a guided, all-inclusive, experience? How does the education team, and ZAP in particular, meet those needs with the resources we have available? To answer these questions, we invited community organizations into conversation. We will present (1) the methods and results from the meetings with community organizations and (2) how findings were used to inform program design, a logic model, and embedded assessments. Participating community organizations serve diverse populations of the Portland metro area, including youth

experiencing low-income and houselessness, refugees, native youth, and people of color. Recognizing that community organizations, and therefore the people they serve, are not a monolith, attendees will hear how we grappled with aggregating data while acknowledging the individuality (n=1) of community organization goals and desired outcomes.

2:45-3:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Awe Inspiring Eclipses: Measuring emotions and science interest during the 2023 and 2024 Eclipses

Heather Fischer, Oregon State University

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: The STEM Research Center at Oregon State University was working collaboratively with NASA's Heliophysics Education Activation Team (NASA HEAT) to study audience engagement and outcomes at two events organized by NASA to interpret the October 2023 Annular Eclipse (at the Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, NM) and the April 2024 Total Solar Eclipse (at the Dallas Arboretum (TX), both major celestial events that garnered public excitement and received enormous media attention. We used structured observations, short onsite intercept "spot" interviews, and online surveys to (1) understand the value NASA's presence provided for visitors and (2) record the impact of the eclipses on audiences, including the degree to which these events elicited strong emotions of awe and triggered a desire for follow up. We modified existing instruments to measure the emotional response and used a range of "embedded" assessments to record motivation, cognitive engagement, emotion, and desire and plans for follow-up. We were also able to assess the value that NASA's interpretation and support provided to visitors at both events. In this session, we will present findings from our work as well as hold a discussion with attendees about measuring awe and science interest at events like these.

Abstract: The STEM Research Center at Oregon State University was working collaboratively with NASA's Heliophysics Education Activation Team (NASA HEAT) to study audience engagement and outcomes at two events organized by NASA to interpret the October 2023 Annular Eclipse (at the Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, NM) and the April 2024 Total Solar Eclipse (at the Dallas Arboretum (TX), both major celestial events that garnered public excitement and received enormous media attention. The Balloon Fiesta was visited by more than 100,000 people whose primary motivation was to see dozens of hot air balloons inflate and rise before the eclipse started, while most of the thousands of visitors to the Arboretum specifically attended to experience the Total Solar Eclipse. We used structured observations, short onsite intercept "spot" interviews and online surveys to (1) understand the value NASA presence provided for visitors, and (2) record the impact of the eclipses on audiences, including the degree to which these events elicited strong emotions of awe and triggered desire for follow up.

We modified existing psychographic instruments to measure the emotional response, and used a range of “embedded” assessments to record motivation, cognitive engagement, emotion, and desire and plans for follow-up. Since annular and total solar eclipses differ dramatically during totality (but not during the roughly 90 min leading towards it or moving out of it, we were able to run a series of comparisons of visitor responses. Furthermore, we were able to contrast responses by prior interest in science, and by motivation to attend the events. We were also able to assess the value that NASA interpretation and support provided to visitors at both events. In this session, we will present findings from our work as well as hold a discussion with attendees about measuring awe and science interest at event like these.



4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

(Re)Envisioning Our Backyard: A Peek into Ongoing Community-Informed Design

Megan Goeke, Science Museum of Minnesota

Sara Ilse, Science Museum of Minnesota

Caillean Magee, Science Museum of Minnesota

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: The museum field is continually increasing calls for, and integration of, community member voice in design processes. While methods of eliciting community voice range from consultation on content (e.g. McMullen, 2008) to full co-creation of exhibitions (e.g. Barnes & McPherson, 2019), our field is still developing new and innovative approaches (Bevan & Ramos, 2022). At the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), we collaborate with community members via a process we term Community-Informed Design (CID; Callahan Schreiber et al., 2023), which involves naming values and priority, emergent planning, flexible and distributed staff, organization-to-organization relationships, and layered data. This year, taking advantage of Saint Paul as VSA's host city, we look to CID as an ongoing process—specifically sharing a project that is currently in process and told through the voices of community members involved with its design.

Community Design Partners and museum staff will host a guided tour of Our Backyard, a current community-informed design project. Grounding conversation in the actual built current version of the exhibition and prioritizing community collaborator voice, we highlight where and how community members are shaping the design of this ongoing project and the lived experience of community-driven work.

Abstract: The museum field needs many visions for how to integrate community voice into design work. While we cannot claim that our approach is a universal “best practice”, we aim to open our doors and invite VSA members into a conversation about the lived experience of CID, embracing the unique opportunity to ground this conversation in the literal exhibition space being discussed. In this session, conference participants will be invited into conversation about iterative CID in context. Our Backyard is approximately 10,000 square feet of programmable space and now hosts nature-focused maker experiences involving water, wood, rocks, and fiber-like plant materials. By hosting this session in Our Backyard, commentary on iterative design and documentation of processes can be shared alongside the actual built experience, opening possible observations and questions not available when imagining a space from pictures alone.

EXPANSE (NSF #2215592) brings BIPOC families (referred to as Design Partners) together with museum staff as collaborators in the development and iteration of an outdoor makerspace and research partners in developing design principles for making outdoors with natural materials. Aiming to build an outdoor makerspace that reflects the needs and priorities of BIPOC families (a group underserved by science museums overall), the exhibition is currently in year two of an iterative development process, structured around 3 annual cycles with 4 collaborative phases: joint sensemaking around data in the fall, feedback on design plans in the winter, planning celebration events in the spring, and experiencing the makerspace iteration in the summer. In this session, we will highlight two critical but under-shared aspects of this work: 1) how engagement in CID feels in the words of community Design Partners themselves, and 2) how the messy work of ongoing iteration and responsiveness to Design Partner voice is documented for later reflection and accountability.

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Additional Links

<https://www.informalscience.org/expanding-activities-outdoor-nature-situated-making>

Design Challenge- Evaluating Learning Outcomes from STEAM Kits

Elizabeth Marchio, Center of Science and Industry (COSI)

Gary Timko, Center of Science and Industry (COSI)

Facilitated Discussion

Proposal Narrative: A design challenge is a practical, real world activity aimed to facilitate learning and discussion. Design challenges for evaluators are a hands-on, immersive ways to facilitate discussions about evaluative challenges and work together toward solutions. The most salient aspect of a design challenge is the provision of space for diverse, unique perspectives and, by design, offers participants a sense of inclusivity in solving real-world issues. The design challenge for this session is to create an evaluation strategy to successfully solicit survey responses from STEAM kit users. These kits are given out at food banks, non-profit organizations, libraries, and schools.

This presentation will encompass a short lecture focused on providing background information on the current situation and to outline constraints for solving the issue. Then, session participants will be split into small working groups, given a STEAM kit to embed them into the situation as a STEAM kit user, and asked to complete the evaluative design challenge. Each group will present their solution to the group and discussion will follow, as time allows.

The Challenge: A science museum has created STEAM learning kits which are grant funded through various partnerships and distributed in various ways to families with children in K-8th grades. To solicit feedback on the kits, specifically STEAM learning outcomes, a QR code linked to an online questionnaire is provided in each kit. Compensation for survey completion is via a

raffle for a high value gift card. The current response rate for the online questionnaire is very low, which is problematic; thus, increasing the response rate is the focus of the design challenge.

Outcomes of this session include the opportunity to explore solutions with peers, to flex and hone skills, to increase soft skills, and to work with major constraints in a short time period.

National Museum Survey: NMS Pilot and the Path Ahead

Helen Wechsler, Institute of Museum and Library Services

Jake Soffronoff, Institute of Museum and Library Services

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: There has never been a nationally representative survey of the United States' museums. The museum sector is particularly challenging to study due to its great variety: what does a small historical society museum have in common with a huge aquarium, and how can each be reliably contacted? After groundwork research with hundreds of museum administrators to develop an answerable, relevant and useful survey, IMLS conducted a pilot National Museum Survey (NMS) in 2023 to determine the ease or difficulty of responding and the most effective way to contact survey recipients to foster high response rates. This session will describe input gathered during the pilot process, including respondent research, SME engagement, cognitive interviewing, fielding the survey with seven experiments designed to learn how to best administer the survey, and conducting a non-response study. Attendees will hear what IMLS learned from this study, how this work is informing the development of the NMS' first annual collection scheduled for early 2025, how the process could inform other museum field surveys. They will also learn about a novel approach used to developing the population frame of museums through using information from commercial vendors that was then cleaned using traditional cleaning methods, crowdsourcing, and AI.

Abstract: IMLS is working to establish a reliable, valid annual national collection of data about museums. Following more than a decade of investigation, we began planning a National Museum Survey (NMS) Pilot in 2020 to develop and test a questionnaire, identify drivers and barriers to response among eligible museums, and build enthusiasm for this effort among museums by determining and delivering a manageable survey that delivers useful data for its participants. Field input has been prioritized from the project's initiation. Groundwork included a comprehensive review of museum sector literature and research; ongoing input from a panel of Subject Matter Experts; focus groups and a survey that collected feedback about survey burden, survey content preferences, how to best reach museum practitioners, and other key aspects of survey design; and cognitive interviews testing the NMS Pilot questionnaire. The resulting NMS Pilot questionnaire covered the following topics: institutional background information; institutional characteristics; facilities; finances; human resources; admissions,

visitors, and outreach; digital presence; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and a pilot-only section on the survey-taking experience. IMLS developed the survey's population frame of approximately 20,000 museums by combining, triangulating and cleaning public and private sector lists through implementing traditional data transformation methods blended with crowdsourcing and AI approaches, then invited 7,050 to take part in the pilot. Most respondents found that the survey was easy to complete, with response generally taking less than one hour including the time spent collecting the requested information. Respondents found the financial and admissions sections to be the most challenging. The pilot's non-response survey illuminated the importance of using contact information targeted to a specific person within each museum and reaching out to museums with a preliminary phone call. These findings are being used to inform the agency's development of an annual NMS whose first collection is scheduled for early 2025.

Additional Links

<https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/national-museum-survey>

<https://www.imls.gov/webinars/imls-national-museum-survey-pilot-summary-findings-webinar>

Cultivating Equity: Unpacking Assumptions in Evaluation Practices

Cecilia Garibay, Garibay Group

Smirla Ramoz-Montañez, TERC

Veronica Garcia-Luis, Exploratorium

Panel Discussion

Proposal Narrative: Since 2020, calls towards the imperative of attending to equity, inclusion, and social justice have continued to grow in the informal learning field. Within Visitor studies, specifically, discussions about researchers' and evaluators' roles in moving the field toward more equitable practices have primarily (though not exclusively) tended to focus on methods and "how to" tips and lessons. What is largely absent from these conversations is a deep examination of the paradigms that inform our research and evaluation choices, methods, and practices which ultimately impact our work (Garibay, 2022). Is our work truly supporting shifts toward greater equitable systems or are we actually reifying and perpetuating inequities?

Despite the often-portrayed value-neutrality of research and evaluation practices, these endeavors are shaped by our values, experiences, and world views which have been historically grounded in norms and assumptions privileging dominant perspectives (Hood, Hopson, & Kirkhart, 2015; Smith, 2012; Hopson 2009; Arzubaga et al., 2008) which, of course, also includes the informal learning field (Garibay 2022; Garibay and Teasdale, 2019). Thus, we argue

that addressing equity and inclusion requires us to look critically at our stances, values, and assumptions and engage in epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992)

In this session, three research and evaluation professionals will introduce varying paradigms as frameworks that drive their respective equity work, surfacing nuances related to different dimensions of equity.

One panelist will share her experience utilizing Huerta Migus' Equality to Equity Continuum (Huerta Migus, 2020; Ramos Montañez, 2023) to explore approaches to address issues of equity in STEM education research and evaluation. This framework represents a spectrum illustrating different approaches to addressing inequality, from initial approaches that focus particularly on representation and access, to deeper-level approaches involving empowering individuals and disrupting unjust systems that have created and perpetuated inequalities.

A second panelist will discuss ways her work has been informed by approaches rooted in critical and social advocacy theories (Hopson 2009; Hood et al., 2015). She will share the transformative paradigm as a framework for researchers and evaluators to address inequities and support furthering social justice (Mertens and Wilson, 2012, Mertens 2007). This paradigm is grounded in four philosophical assumptions that guide the researcher to consider values (axiological), the nature of reality (ontological), the nature of knowledge (epistemological); and methods choices and processes (methodological). It begins with taking an ethical stance and commitment to social justice and challenging structures that sustain inequities. It requires bringing a critical lens to whose reality is being voiced and privileged, understanding the consequences of those decisions, and amplifying the voices and experiences of those most marginalized. To do so, researchers and evaluators must use methods and approaches that are responsive, attentive to context, power and privilege, that capture the complexity of the issues under consideration and that contribute to social transformation.

The third panelist will share her use of the continuum on becoming an anti-racist organization (Jackson and Hardiman, 2006) to inform her work and interrogate practices. This framework explores six stages of anti-racism phases from exclusion, to stages that move toward structural change, to a fully inclusive anti-racism phase. The framework describes behavioral and action oriented indicators.

Panelists will also offer reflections about their own development and journey toward equity work, including moments of self-questioning and self-realization in the process. We share reflections for a variety of reasons, including to create a space to validate and share a variety of experiences, find companionship, seed vulnerability, recognize that mistakes will be made in pursuit of equity, that even when well-intentioned we can perpetuate injustices, and to showcase how we can learn from those mistakes. These reflections are intended to serve as a bridge between theory and practice and to demonstrate that the pursuit of equity is not a linear process but a dynamic, iterative journey. Along with these paradigms, panelists offer these

stories as a starting point for small group discussion and critical reflection on individuals' own practices and in current efforts in visitor studies related to issues of DEAIJ.

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Thursday, July 18

10:45-11:45 AM Concurrent Sessions

Understanding the Impact of Justice-focused Programming on Change in Museums

Evelyn Christian Ronning, Science Museum of Minnesota

Pei Koay, Smithsonian Institution

David Valentine, Science Museum of Minnesota

Robby Callahan Schreiber, , Science Museum of Minnesota

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: The museum field's ongoing work to embed racial equity into their structure and function is well known (e.g. Ash, 2022; Garibay & Olson, 2020; Mayas et al., 2019; MASS Action, 2017; AAM, 2016), with initiatives that have pushed important changes in the field. Evaluators play a critical role in collecting data, documenting impact, and providing recommendations for this work, often without the necessary capacity or tools. Program evaluation often focuses on individual impact; for DEAI professional development programming to support work that leads to meaningful change, evaluations need to be designed accordingly: focused not only on individual impacts, but the relational aspects of museums achieving collective impact in community. This panel focuses on the key role the evaluation of a professional development program will help to show its impact on the pursuit of racial justice in cultural organizations. By uncovering and sharing examples of museums working towards change, evaluators can prompt larger circles of change in museums. The panel will raise questions such as: How do we focus on indicators of success in terms of racial justice at the level of collective impact? How do we report out to leaders, funders, and others who are often fixated on quantitative metrics?

Abstract: This presentation describes a collaborative effort to develop programming for museum professionals around racial justice work, detailing the interplay between the critical aspects of designing, implementing and evaluating the program and its impact on institutional change. It will include robust discussions among participants about various approaches to evaluating DEAI-focused professional programs. The panel will begin by describing the Smithsonian Institution's 'Our Shared Future: Reckoning With Our Racial Past' initiative, and its partnership with the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) to host and facilitate the Museums

Advancing Racial Justice convening: a convening for museum professionals aiming to create a network of cultural institutions focused on changes to their policies, practices, and offerings to counter racist and systemic oppression. The panel presentation will discuss the effort to understand the impact of programming for museum professionals around racial justice work in their museums. The panel will share tools used in the formative evaluation work, yielding data that influenced the content, structure, and experience of the convening and revealed potential institutional characteristics that are most likely to support transformative change, as well as providing the metrics against which convening participants will evaluate and share out about their own successes and challenges. Lastly, evaluators will share the emergent findings from in-process evaluative efforts conducted during and immediately following the convening. The sharing of data should provide a snapshot of the state of the museum field around racial justice work. There will be ample time for questions and periodic share outs from session participants as we surface key issues and priorities for evaluators working to understand institutional change.

Additional Links

<https://new.smm.org/marj>

<https://oursharedfuture.si.edu/>

Using ZooMonitor for Visitor Observations

Theo Bamberger, Woodland Park Zoo

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Observations of visitors and staff can provide valuable insights for informal learning centers, but few accessible tools exist to gather this type of data digitally. The goal of this session is to demonstrate how ZooMonitor, an animal ethogram tool freely available to all AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, can be modified to conduct observations of human behavior.

Abstract: Observations of visitor behavior have been utilized in informal learning environments as far back as the early 20th century and provide invaluable insights into how people interact with and respond to exhibits and programs. Despite this fact, technologies to support observational data collection are often prohibitively expensive for many institutions and limited in functionality. As a result, many evaluators and researchers rely on ethnographic notes, other pen and paper data collection tools, and video or audio recording to capture information about what visitors say and do. These methods often require time consuming data entry and qualitative coding processes that can restrict our ability to analyze data and report findings in a timely manner. As the field of visitor research and evaluation progresses, new, more sophisticated tools are needed to support the collection and analysis of observational data, but

few are available. One promising option is ZooMonitor, a software developed by Lincoln Park Zoo and intended for recording animal behavioral data. With simple modifications, this tool can be utilized to develop robust observation instruments that allow observers to record even complex information on visitor behavior in real time, eliminating the need for manual data entry or coding video or audio recordings. Unlike other platforms, ZooMonitor is also freely available to all organizations accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. For evaluators and researchers working in these institutions, ZooMonitor has tremendous untapped potential as a data collection tool. In this presentation, Theo Bamberger (Woodland Park Zoo) will speak about how they have utilized ZooMonitor to conduct observations of visitor behavior in zoo exhibits, including a demonstration of how to create and use observation instruments for human behavior in the software.

Additional Links

<https://www.zoomonitor.org>

Redefine Visitor Studies Using Community Storytelling: A Creative Evaluation Story

Molly C. O'Connor, Coco Canary Consulting

Sully Moreno, Culture Shift Consulting

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: In this session, you will learn about a new approach called Creative Evaluation & Engagement (CE&E). Sully and Molly will demonstrate how they used this approach for an equitable contracting evaluation and community engagement project with Public Heath Seattle & King County. They will also share how they utilized arts-based methods (storytelling & poetry), a community advisory committee, and local artists to collect data and create art that became tangible recommendations.

Outcomes include: (1) Participants will learn a new and innovative evaluation approach called Creative Evaluation & Engagement. (2) Participants will learn how to integrate at least one art-based method into their own practice (3) Participants will learn the importance of bringing in a community engagement specialist for community-based evaluation projects.

This project builds upon the body of evaluation practice, specifically adding much-needed tangible ways to incorporate arts-based methods (storytelling & poetry) into practice. As well as how to effortlessly combine evaluation and community engagement, in which community organizing and community voice takes the lead.

Abstract: We believe in the power and wisdom of community voice. This means inviting community members to share their input and be at the table to shape services, programs, and

policies. Sometimes, topics are technical in nature, and community members can be unfamiliar with the relevant concepts and terminology.

That is why we use Creative Evaluation & Engagement (CE&E), a qualitative, arts-based, and community-centered approach to gathering community input. Developed by Nora Murphy Johnson and A. Rafael Johnson, authors of “Creative Evaluation and Engagement: Volume 1: Essentials,” CE&E consists of four fluid phases: trust and relationship building (align), data collection (learn), data synthesis (adapt), and communicating results through shared experiences and art (embody). And through these phases we can translate complicated concepts into engaging evaluation activities and outputs.

During this presentation, Molly O'Connor and Sully Moreno will give a short lecture about CE&E's history, theory, and practice, and then will demonstrate how they used this approach in an equitable contracting community engagement project funded by Public Health - Seattle & King County (PHSKC). Specifically how they used guiding principles, arts-based methods (storytelling & poetry), a community advisory committee, community feedback sessions, and a team of local artists to write two fictional stories—which became over 80 tangible recommendations—and create four pieces of visual art—which became PHSKC's contracting equity vision.

Our overarching evaluation question was: “What would a good contracting process look and feel like?” The data collection methods used were 5 Senses, Found Poetry, and Narrative Analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted by the evaluators and artists. Subsequent thematic and visual analysis was conducted during a second set of feedback sessions by and with community members.

The executive summary and full evaluation report will be available for review after the presentation.

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Additional Links

Coco Canary Website: <https://cococanary.com/>

Culture Shift Consulting Website: <https://cultureshiftconsult.com/>

PHSKC Project Case Study:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAFp2LY4xQ8/RyKuJ20OYZoDXSqDF5nrNQ/view?utm_content=DAFp2LY4xQ8&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=viewer

10:45-11:15 AM Concurrent Sessions

Methodological Bricolage: Innovative Methods in Environmental Behavior Change Research

Jill Bueddefeld, Research Consultant

Individual Paper Presentation

Proposal Narrative: In this presentation, we explore a case study that exemplifies the theme of "Redefining Visitor Studies" by showcasing how methodological bricolage can be a powerful tool for adaptation and resilience in the face of unexpected challenges, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our case study revolves around a mixed methods research project on visitor learning and pro-environmental behavior. Initially designed for field-based data collection, the study faced limitations due to pandemic-related disruptions. Undeterred, we swiftly pivoted, adopting a methodological bricolage approach that integrated a variety of research methods, including a survey, interpretive video, naturalistic observations, personal meaning maps, interviews, and a novel method—comprehension assessments.

The presentation will demonstrate how this adaptability not only maintained the trustworthiness and rigor of the research but also allowed for flexibility in response to changing protocols. We will share specific findings and conclusions from our study, illustrating how the chosen methodologies effectively contributed to our understanding of visitor behaviors and learning experiences in a real-world, dynamic setting.

Relating to this year's theme, our presentation engages with the questions posed by the Visitor Studies Association about redefining practices in the evaluation field. We address the theme's call to examine existing practices and create new ones that accommodate the changing realities of institutional environments. Through our case study, we contribute to the exploration of how evaluative practices can better serve both visitors and non-visitors, fostering shared authority with the communities we serve. Moreover, our methodological bricolage showcases a way forward in defining community without overlooking individual experiences, aligning with the conference's focus on robust discourse and defining new pathways for amplifying and honoring community voices.

11:15-11:45 AM Concurrent Sessions

Rebuilding Conservation Learning Programs via Community Needs Assessment

Kaylan Petrie, New England Aquarium

Lauren Watkins, Ph.D., Impact by Design

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This Community Needs Assessment focused on three research themes (each with several associated research questions); 1) Who are we working with and learning from? 2) What does this work look like? 3) How do we communicate and measure this effort?

Abstract: Amid the sweeping changes induced by the pandemic, cultural institutions like the New England Aquarium (NEAq) faced significant programmatic and staffing shifts. Recognizing the need to adapt and create new education offerings, NEAq embarked on a strategic reevaluation of its Conservation Learning department, aiming to co-create mutually beneficial conservation learning programs with and for its community.

NEAq, supported by Impact by Design, began the co-creation process by conducting a Community Needs Assessment. The goal was to engage with residents and community leaders to develop relevant, useful, and engaging conservation learning initiatives. This session details the participatory research methods employed, including project design, methodology, and key insights from Summer 2023 to July 2024.

The three-stage Community Needs Assessment focused on understanding the local communities' needs and assets to inform program development. It prioritized asset-based participatory planning, fostering long-term community engagement, and strengthening partnerships with local leaders and organizations. This presentation reports on the preliminary findings of this effort and discusses plans for integrating insights into a redeveloped suite of community-based conservation learning initiatives and programs.

Participants will learn tips for needs assessments that engage their communities in the co-creation of a shared goal and its impact on program development. Participants will also gain insights into how such assessments can guide the redesign of programs to better serve community needs, ensuring the programs' sustainability and relevance. This initiative represents a model of how institutions can use community input to guide programmatic decisions, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and aligning more closely with the communities they serve.

2:30-3:30 PM Concurrent Sessions

Visitor Experience Preferences and the Whole Visit: An Emerging Toolkit

Donnelley Hayde, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Laura Weiss, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Elisa Israel, St. Louis Science Center

Jacob Higgins, Conner Prairie

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Presenters will share a suite of whole-visit study instruments designed using the IPOP (Ideas, People, Objects, Physical) framework, as well as their experiences with implementing and applying the research at two institutions. Speakers will represent both the core research team and team members who have contributed from specific sites in the study. Attendees can expect to learn more about both the theory and practices that have supported this research, including how we have worked together to adapt data collection in ways that honor the unique needs and contexts of our sites. This session will also introduce three tested instruments (a rubric for use with staff, and a questionnaire and an adapted reflective tracking interview for use with visitors) and invite participants to discuss possibilities for applying the instruments in a range of settings. This session offers an opportunity to learn more about a specific project, but also the chance to contribute feedback about how our emerging toolkit might be most germane and helpful for museum professionals who implement and use visitor studies. In keeping with this year's conference theme, we hope to challenge ourselves and attendees to ensure that this federally funded research meaningfully contributes to real-world practice at varying scales.

Abstract: Visitor Experience Preferences and the Whole Visit is an IMLS-funded research project that explores how visitors' preferences about museum experiences interact with what they do in museums, as well as how their takeaways may vary from what museums intend. We are measuring visitor experience preferences with the Smithsonian's IPOP model, which addresses four dimensions of experience: Ideas, People, Objects, and Physical Experiences. IPOP uses visitor ratings of leisure activities to determine which museum experiences visitors will be most drawn to (Pekarik et al., 2014). Our study moves this model from single exhibition experiences to whole museum visits and to the applied work of internal assessment for museums.

Our approach to the research prioritizes equitable collaboration, positive experiences for research participants, and practical applications. In addition to our core research team, the project engages the original developers of IPOP and paid teams at four research sites (a living history park, a science center, an art museum, and a zoo). Data collection is underway, and it involves both museum professionals (via a rubric for documenting their perceptions of experience opportunities) and visitors (via exit questionnaires and adapted reflective tracking interviews). We have tested each tool's validity, usability, and length, and we have conducted materials testing for the tactile components of our interview activity. This work contributes two

novel tools (the site rubric and interview protocol), and the suite of instruments makes progress toward covering new theoretical ground – namely, the potential gap between what museums design and what visitors perceive as they authentically experience museums. To maximize practical application of this work, a major goal for the last year of the project is sharing the suite of instruments alongside tactical elements to support their use (e.g., instructions and code for running analyses in freeware, as well as guidance on materials preparation and logistics).

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<https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12048>

One Program, Three Perspectives: Vitality Arts & Essential Evaluation

Alyssa Carr, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Rita Deedrick, Deedrick Consulting

Juli Goss, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Liya Wizevich, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This session fits into the conference theme of Redefining Visitor Studies by addressing “what happens when best practices meet the realities of real-world evaluation contexts”, and ways in which the “evaluation community has come together to support or inform a project or initiative”. “Older adults” or adults aged 55+ are a complex population, spanning a large age range. We expect participants will learn how methodologies and needs differ within the same program depending on evaluator roles. Participants will learn how to navigate different program needs. Finally, participants will learn when and how to make changes to a study using the Vitality Arts Initiative as an example.

Abstract: The CDC predicts that within the next 10 years, people aged 55 and older will be the largest age demographic in the United States. Research shows that the arts are incredibly useful in increasing well-being and social connection for adults ages 55+. This panel presentation will discuss the unique roles and collaboration of three strands of evaluation related to an art workshop program for adults 55+, Vitality Arts: site-specific evaluation conducted by internal evaluators, site-specific evaluation conducted by an external evaluator, and a cross-site evaluation of twenty-four museums. Panelists representing these various perspectives will weigh in on topics and questions. A moderator will pose questions to the panel while allowing time for dialogue and input from session participants. Proposed topics include; evaluating unique communities, adaptability in conducting evaluations, measurement of well-being, and differing roles of evaluators. We will also cover navigation of specific program needs such as creating a greater awareness of what aging and ageism means, consideration of how anti-

ageism applies to the work of the evaluator, and consideration of the wide range of motivations and experiences present among older adults and how this variance impacts evaluation measures.

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2:30-3:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Building Practitioner Capacity to Strengthen the Cycle of Continuous Improvement
Matthew DeSalvo, Chicago Zoological Society

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: As our field redefines visitor studies, it is important to recognize education program evaluation relies on building capacity of both evaluators and program practitioners to contribute to the cycle of continuous improvement. This presentation by an internal evaluator describes a project in which a professional development program for zoo education staff members was implemented. The professional development program included both workshops and the intentional engagement of practitioners in logic modeling and various evaluation practices such as identification of intended outcomes, instrument development, and results debriefs. The presenter will explore how the complementary expertise of evaluation and education staff members may serve to support collective aims to serve our audiences. During this presentation, attendees will recognize ways to provide professional development to

practitioners on partnering in the evaluation process; and through reflection and discussion, identify elements of their current evaluation practices that may cultivate productive practitioner-evaluator relationships focused on the cycle of continuous improvement. This project offers ways to embed professional development into everyday practice and suggests how commonplace evaluation activities may be considered as professional development for program practitioners.

Abstract: This presentation explores Brookfield Zoo Chicago's (BZC) "Zoo Practitioners as Evaluation Partners" project, which supported professional development for BZC education practitioners to build capacity to be partners with evaluation staff in the cycle of continuous improvement. The presenter, an internal evaluator, will discuss three components of the project: professional development workshops, embedded professional development, and logic modeling. Workshops centered on expanding practitioners' toolkits to participate in the cycle of continuous improvement. Embedded capacity building activities included collaborations between internal evaluation staff and practitioners on logic modeling, goal and outcome setting, and instrument development, and evaluation results debrief meetings.

External project evaluation was conducted by ExposeYourMuseum LLC and revealed several key findings including: practitioners appeared to be supportive of evaluation and had interest and confidence in being a partner in evaluation, there appear to be opportunities for additional capacity building in practitioner understanding of and confidence in the use of logic models, and there was a wide range of self-reported skill levels among practitioners in using evaluation findings to inform practice; thus there appear to be opportunities for additional capacity building in turning evaluation results into action.

The presenter will share lessons learned about ongoing progress cultivating productive relationships between the internal evaluator and program teams and how embedding professional development on evaluation and the cycle of continuous improvement into practice resulted in data gathering strategies better aligned to intended program outcomes. The presenter will invite attendees to reflect on and discuss how their organizations cultivate practitioner-evaluator relationships and how staff work in partnership within the cycle of continuous improvement.

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services [IMLS grant MA-40-19-0243-19]. The views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this presentation do not necessarily represent those of the IMLS.

Additional Links

<https://www.brookfieldzoo.org>

3:00-3:30 PM Concurrent Sessions

Alchemy in the Vision Lab: Transforming Feedback into Organizational Growth

Victoria Eudy, Missouri Historical Society

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance: This session explores the transformative journey of the Vision Lab at the Missouri Historical Society (MHS), demonstrating a groundbreaking approach to exhibition development and visitor engagement in a focused space. By integrating visitor feedback into the curation and development process, the Vision Lab not only represents a significant shift towards a more interactive and participatory museum experience for visitors, but has also contributed to shift in organizational growth to reflect a more collaborative, and experimental culture.

Abstract: The Vision Lab at the Missouri Historical Society is an innovative exhibition space dedicated solely to generating visitor feedback about upcoming projects, exhibitions, and programming. While It enables visitors to influence the scope and content of future exhibitions and initiatives at the Missouri Historical Society, it has also had unforeseen influence on organizational culture and growth. This session overviews the anatomy and methods of the Vision Lab, explores the challenges and opportunities of cross-collaboration in determining Vision Lab content, and the wider organizational implications of the space.

The session will address several key questions:

- What are the benefits and challenges of cross-departmental collaboration in creating visitor-centered experiences?
- In what ways can evaluation affect organizational growth and culture?

At the end of the presentation, attendees will be able to....

- Identify and address internal (staff) and external (visitors) pressures in directing an evaluation space, and practical solutions to those pressures
- Apply takeaways from the Vision Lab experience to their own organization (such as best practices in generating visitor feedback in an exhibition setting, fostering cross-collaboration, and response reporting)
- Discuss practical methods for generating and analyzing visitor feedback to guide exhibition development.
- Discuss parallel evaluation efforts at their organization and share advice from the field.

3:00-4:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

(Dis)closing Costs: LGBTQIA+ Perspectives on Data, Representation, and Allyship

Abby Chamberlin, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Cat Scharon, KID Museum

Maria Robinson, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and importance: This session will provide space for discussion and inquiry in regards to LGBTQ+ best practices in evaluation. To guide this session presenters will use the Principles of LGBTQ+ Evaluation journal issue in combination with individual lived experiences to explore ways that evaluators currently collect demographic data and encourage themselves and others to take the next step in accurately and ethically collecting or not collecting this data. Participants will get a chance to discuss when and how this framework shows up in their work, as well as consider ways that evaluators can de-center heteronormative and white hegemony in their evaluative practice.

Abstract: This facilitated discussion will introduce the Principles of LGBTQ+1 Evaluation journal issue from *New Directions for Evaluation* (Phillips, et al., 2022) and prompt participants to think deeply about demographic data collection and analysis regarding LGBTQ+ people and others from non-dominant communities. Gender and sexuality demographics are often collected at museums and other cultural institutions (Lussenhop, 2018), but soliciting, interpreting, and sharing these data raises ethical questions about what is accurate and necessary. Social science instruments often fail to “capture a person’s individual experience or expression which can vary significantly within identity groups as well as shift throughout one’s lifetime” (Felt et al., 2022, p. 36) and can often feel invasive, othering, or even threatening. This consideration is in tension with the reasonable desire to understand what perspectives are or are not included in the data, lest we downplay or erase important lived experiences. The growth of LGBTQ+ Evaluation as a subfield provides a promising model and context for conversation about the underpinnings of Visitor Studies as we host this forum for listening and sharing.

The three facilitators of this discussion are all part of the LGBTQ+ community, with their own positionalities that vary in gender, orientation, race, professional context, and other dimensions. We invite VSA attendees of all identities to respectfully participate and will begin by acknowledging the inequities of privilege and establishing shared communication norms.

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3:45-4:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

What Makes You, You? Exploring Instruments that Contextualize Identity in ISL

Sonya Harvey-Justiniano, Museum of Science Boston

Emmett Fung, Museum of Science Boston

Katharina Marino, Museum of Science Boston

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance: Although learning disabilities (LD) (i.e. dyslexia and ADHD) account for many people with disabilities in the United States—roughly 20% of the population—most accessibility work has focused on physical and sensory access. When exhibit design fails to take into consideration the variety of ways people absorb and process information, and how they understand and use language to communicate, people with LD may encounter obstacles to their ability to learn and participate in museum activities. This session will help build capacity for researchers to apply what we learned from this study around accessible data collection, for the benefit of those with learning disabilities.

Abstract: This session will draw on the collaborative work between the Museum of Science, Boston, the Rochester Museum & Science Center (RMSC; Rochester, NY), and university and non-profit partners. We will specifically focus on youth with learning disabilities and discuss the methods and instruments used to learn more about this population in our evaluation. We will start by briefly presenting different strategies used in different phases of the study and share reflections on lessons learned from previous phases that informed how we conducted evaluation in the following phases. We will discuss accessibility considerations when evaluating youth with disabilities and conduct an activity emulating one of the data collection methods we used. We will then reflect on the tool and consider how we may adopt or modify it in other areas of our work.

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Additional Links

<https://www.informalscience.org/intrinsic-motivation-science-museums-learning-and-broadening-participation-visitors-learning>

Bio-Muse: Applications of Wearable Technology to Understand Guest Experience

Garrett Stone, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Susan Foutz, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Amy Niedbalski, St. Louis Zoo

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance: Museums today navigate a rapidly evolving landscape shaped by technological innovations and changing visitor demographics. The challenge lies in enhancing the guest experience while maintaining the integrity of informal learning environments. Wearable biometric technology emerges as a promising solution, offering direct, unobtrusive insights into visitor behavior and impact that can complement traditional methods like surveys and interviews. By exploring cutting-edge research and innovative evaluation practices, this presentation provides attendees with the tools to adapt to the changing realities of institutional environments. Through smart technologies and data collection methods, museums can redefine visitor studies and elevate their ability to cater to guests' needs and expectations. The session

also encourages a collaborative exchange of ideas and experiences related to direct, unobtrusive measures, including wearable biometric technology. Attendees will have the opportunity to share resources, approaches, and best practices beyond the projects presented by the panelists. Ultimately, participants will be equipped with the confidence to leverage partnerships and utilize biometric technology effectively. This knowledge will enable them to gather, analyze, and interpret data more meaningfully, leading to a richer understanding of their guests and a more engaging, responsive museum experience.

Abstract: This session explores the transformative potential of wearable technology in museum settings, presenting three innovative cases that showcase the impact of this technology on visitor experience evaluation: In Case 1, Thanksgiving Point educators and evaluators partnered with the Connection through Designed Experiences (CoDEx) Lab to examine guest immersion in a butterfly conservatory and insectarium. Utilizing Immersion Neuroscience Software (INS), the study measured heart rate changes linked to the release of dopamine (psychological engagement) and oxytocin (emotional empathy) (Bromberg-Martin et al., 2010; Domes et al., 2007; Immersion Knowledge Center, 2023) during one of three insect encounters. This approach provided insights into how visitors connect with immersive experiences; In Case 2, the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis collaborated with the University of Southern Indiana’s Biometrix Discovery Lab and employed eyetracking glasses to study guest wayfinding and sign engagement (Savin et al., 2022; Tang, 2020). The findings offer valuable guidance on optimizing signage and directing visitor attention, benefitting marketing and exhibit design; In Case 3, Saint Louis Zoo staff conducted two studies measuring the health impact of zoo experiences on visitors. One study focused on evaluating changes in mood and heartrate via engagement with a stingray touch tank exhibit (Sahrmann et al., 2016), while another investigated changes in salivary cortisol and blood pressure in an immersive naturalistic exhibit (Coolman et al., 2020). Both studies found positive effects on visitor stress reduction. After introducing each case, panelists will guide discussion and Q&A exploring opportunities and challenges in data collection, analysis and interpretation; partner identification; strategies to leverage ubiquitous technology (i.e., everyday smartwatches, smart glasses, etc.); ethical considerations associated with unobtrusive measures; and applications of wearable biometric technology in other contexts. Attendees will engage with scholarly and practical critiques of the technology and science behind it, gaining insights for future applications in informal learning contexts.

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Additional Links

<https://www.usi.edu/business/news/2023-news/usi-s-biometrix-discovery-lab-collaborates-with-the-children-s-museum-of-indianapolis-on-wayfinding-project>

Evaluating With/For Youth: Participatory Methods and Empowerment through Data

Cat Sharon, KID Museum

KT Todd, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh

Reid Henkel, KID Museum

Hosted Presentation

Proposal Narrative: Two children's museums with strong STEM and maker elements are evaluating programs for middle and high school students, which design for outcomes spanning a range of social, emotional, and identity-related dimensions (as opposed to strictly knowledge and process outcomes). Crafting tools that are both developmentally appropriate and engaging is a challenging reality for evaluators seeking quality feedback. This session will explore two promising strategies that engage youth with a degree of transparency about the evaluation process without detracting from enjoyment and learning in the programs themselves.

The first presenter leads evaluation and research at an experiential museum and makerspace for K-12 youth and their families, specializing in- and out-of-school time programs that engage participants in deeper learning over multiple sessions. The Teen Innovators program provides a year-long cohort experience for high school students with weekly after-school sessions and project days building towards a weeklong intensive project build. In addition to exploring technical skills, constructivist learning, and facilitation skills, teens iteratively design, prototype, and revise their own final projects in teams. The Museum's learning framework includes a dimension of Perspective Taking, which is emphasized in the teen program and is deeply embedded in playtesting and evaluating their prototype designs. Evaluation staff will partner with the teen program as they plan, collect, analyze, interpret, and share their user data this winter and spring, culminating in an opportunity to share their learnings in this session through pre-recorded media and contributions to this very presentation.

The second presenter leads evaluation and research at a large metropolitan children's museum where a range of different age youth can experience the "real stuff" as they play and learn. The Museum offers programming with middle school students at a charter school sharing the museum's campus, providing opportunities to work together on maker activities and art. Through pilot testing and experimentation, a card-based "fill in the blank" activity has shown to be an effective way to harness storytelling for data collection. By elevating youth voices and encouraging reflection, this method builds evidence for social-emotional learning and provides a collaborative experience that represents youth voices with authenticity.

These strategies are linked not only by their similar contexts and desired outcomes, but also in the way that they give agency to evaluation participants in a way that is not often seen in traditional academic approaches. This agency fosters intrinsic motivation, rich qualitative feedback, and an entry point to understanding the ways that data can be collected and used. While developing creative and embedded instruments is more commonly accepted for evaluating youth in informal settings, it is an example of ceding some of the formal authority to participants themselves, and has important lessons for visitor studies with other communities and identities.

Practicing Inclusion When Interacting with Visitors: Our Reflective Practice

Scott VanCleave, Science Museum of Minnesota

Juan Dominguez, Science Museum of Minnesota

Ashley Hausch, Science Museum of Minnesota

Stormi Allen-Knight, Science Museum of Minnesota

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance: As evaluators and researchers, we incorporate a variety of protocols to collect reliable, unbiased data as we aim to better understand our visitors' needs. But how

can any approach to gathering visitor data ensure to include the voices of marginalized folks who may not be inclined to participate?

It often falls on data collectors to make visitors comfortable enough to share their voices and experience in our data. So, how can we equip data collectors to better understand reasons visitors may not be inclined to participate and then to help alleviate some of these tensions in order that visitors do participate?

One approach evaluation staff at the Science Museum of Minnesota uses is to continually talk about their experiences in a reflective practice. Premised on exploring real experiences, data collectors share with each other through a process of description, question, and feedback considering things like approach, language, and underlying assumptions, all towards setting strategies that further the goal of inclusivity and, ultimately, the gathering of good data.

We'll share our experience at understanding more strategies for inclusive data collection and to show the importance of reflective practice as a professional tool to support data collectors and data collection processes.

Abstract:

Introductions

We are Museum Evaluators for the Science Museum of Minnesota, and we regularly interact with visitors collecting survey data. And while this work is very structured, our experiences vary greatly. We each offer a brief introduction to get to know us and to illustrate our diverse experiences, and to frame the starting point for the formation of our reflective practice.

History

Following introductions, we talk history of the ME position, contrasting the individualistic approach of the past with our current practice of routine check-ins, multi-modes of communication, and impromptu meetings. We also explore how the museum's effort at expanding its audience through diversity, equity and inclusion work synergistically assisted the creation of the ME team's reflective practice and empowered department managers to foster our efforts.

A Reflective Practice

Here we share our particular reflective practice model that employs a double loop learning approach. Through a guided discussion, we identify elements of our visitor facing work and ask the audience to fit these elements into the model as a means of understanding single loop learning that might, for example, focus on protocols or strategies, over double loop learning where problem solving can mean exploring deeply held beliefs and assumptions.

Role Playing

Then we draw upon our experiences and role play scenarios and ask the audience to talk about them within the context of the reflective practice model, to identify the kind of learning, and to provide feedback on addressing the issues raised.

Final Reflection

In small groups, we prompt others to use the reflective practice model to share a personal experience. Returning to the full group, we stress creating space for reflection in an ongoing way. Audience members will be invited to join a Slack community reflective practice with other evaluation and research professionals.