Working Together

Museums and Community Partners

Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC)

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Table of contents

Introduction 1
The Collaborative 5
Community Connections 8
Insights 14
Next Steps 18
Resources 19
Introduction

If you’re thinking about starting a collaborative...

Working as part of a collaborative is like being part of a family: everyone has a job to do, everyone gets an allowance, and it can be lots of fun, but someone has to take out the trash. If work isn’t shared and expectations aren’t communicated, relationships deteriorate and the benefits of working together or living together are lost. Four museums in the greater Philadelphia region decided to create a “family” to nurture community relationships through the development of education projects. PISEC, the Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative, was created in 1994, and this booklet, Working Together, is the story of how the collaborative started, what the members accomplished, and what they learned. Their story may be useful to you.

What is PISEC?

PISEC is a four-museum partnership focused on education - the Academy of Natural Sciences, The Franklin Institute Science Museum, the New Jersey State Aquarium, and the Philadelphia Zoo. In addition to working together on a number of smaller projects such as teacher training and youth overnights, the PISEC team developed two related initiatives: Community Connections and Family Learning in Museums. The Family
Learning in Museums team conducted research at the four museums aimed at improving family science learning. Families who were part of the Community Connections project participated in testing new exhibits and offered suggestions that helped designers and educators create guidelines for developing museum, zoo, and aquarium exhibits that meet the needs of urban audiences. A separate report, Family Learning in Museums: The PISEC Perspective, has been published on that project, and this report will focus on the Community Connections initiative.

What is Community Connections?
To achieve one of PISEC’s goals – involving families in urban neighborhoods in science learning – the museum partners created the Community Connections project. Community Connections helps families associated with urban community organizations learn more about the science education resources available to them in and around their neighborhoods. Through this initiative, the four PISEC museums also hoped that they would learn more about the communities in which they operate and how museum programs might better serve diverse audiences.

Earlier efforts led PISEC to believe that, as a collaborative, they could forge a long-term relationship that had significant educational impact. The PISEC museums began planning Community Connections more than two years before receiving funding for the project. The museums were committed to broadening the understanding of science and developing collaborative, cost-effective methods of programming for diverse groups within the region.
Museum leaders also recognized the opportunity to create a national model for such collaborative programming. With these shared goals, museums and community partners embarked on PISEC Community Connections.

In creating the collaboration, the four founding museums selected community groups with whom they were familiar and with whom they wished to develop a closer relationship. Four community-based organizations (CBO's) were part of the first year program, and four additional groups joined in year two. Members of the initial groups helped plan the program and advised on development of the grant proposal.

**Who were the partners?**

PISEC Community Connections partners included:

Academy of Natural Sciences
   Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center
   Norris Square Neighborhood Project

The Franklin Institute
   African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas
   Ivy Leaf School

New Jersey State Aquarium
   Camden City Board of Education
   Rutgers University Project LEAP

Philadelphia Zoo
   West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce/
   West Philadelphia Partnership
   Youth Service Inc.

The Academy of Natural Sciences, founded in 1812, is the oldest and one of the most distinguished natural history museums in the United States. The Academy’s original partner, Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center, serves families in a diverse neighborhood in southwest Philadelphia. The Norris Square Neighborhood Project joined Cobbs Creek and the Academy in the second year of the project. Norris Square serves predominantly Latino families in north Philadelphia.
The Franklin Institute is one of the nation’s leading science centers. The African-Episcopal Church of St. Thomas joined with the Institute in the first year of PISEC. The church has a long-standing interest in family programs and science education. In the second year, Ivy Leaf School, a private African-American school, joined the partnership.

The New Jersey State Aquarium, established in 1992, was developed with the mission of educating the public about aquatic life and conservation. The Camden City Board of Education was the Aquarium’s first partner, with families from Camden schools participating in PISEC programs. Families from Project LEAP at Rutgers University joined PISEC in the second year. These organizations serve primarily Latino and African-American families.

The Philadelphia Zoo, America’s first zoo, chartered in 1859, has long been a leader among zoological parks. The Zoo’s first partner was the West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, a neighborhood business association located near the Zoo, with many African-American members. In the second year, Youth Service Inc., a social service agency serving families throughout the city, joined the partnership.

Demographic characteristics of PISEC museum visitors are roughly similar across the four institutions. More than 95% of visitors to PISEC museums attend in groups of two or more, and most attend in family groups. Overall, 82.1% of visitors to PISEC museums are white; 7% are African-American, 4.2% Asian, 3.2% Latino, 3.3% multi-racial, and 0.2% American Indian. The Zoo attracts the highest percentage of African-American visitors (8.8%), the Franklin, the highest percentage of Asian (6.0%), and the Aquarium, the highest percentage (4.4%) of Latino visitors.

In a 1998 survey, PISEC families from all four museums indicated their primary reason for visiting was to have a social outing (62.7% overall). On average, 10% of respondents were first-time visitors. Participants at PISEC museums also indicated they visit other PISEC sites: 57.4% visit the Zoo, 45.0% visit the Franklin, 35.5% visit the Aquarium, and 25.6% visit the Academy. This finding was also supported by a 1999 study, encouraging PISEC partners to continue working together to create a culture of museum-going that would enrich family learning and social experiences.
Why establish a collaborative?

- Collaboration encourages sharing of knowledge and experiences. PISEC museums learned about each other's programs and shared information. The PISEC museums have also conducted joint programs such as overnights, teacher training, and youth programs. Museum staffs exchanged information about new vendors, and offered informal mentoring and support for one another. In the course of the project, one museum recommended a new design firm to the partners, and others recommended evaluation and research consultants.

Museums have shared staff and provided a trained labor pool and a four-museum career ladder with many professional opportunities for employees. Although PISEC museums already circulated job descriptions prior to embarking on the PISEC project, the frequency of personal contact and the close relationships between PISEC partners caused staff to recommend employees to one another.

- Collaboration enriches the work experience of staff, giving them a broader perspective and a sense of participating in a larger professional community. PISEC meetings and activities allowed staff from different departments (for example, education, exhibits, public relations) a chance to meet their peers in other institutions.

PISEC enabled one of its partners, the New Jersey State Aquarium, a new museum at the time the collaborative was created, to become quickly assimilated into the local museum community.
Through this collaboration, some museum staff were also introduced to new professional publications and associations, and made conference presentations.

- **Collaboration provides a cost-effective way to introduce museum staff to new information.**

  The Collaborative conducted a two-day formative evaluation workshop for its museum education and exhibits staffs with a nationally renowned evaluation consultant. PISEC also presented a series of 15 seminars with distinguished speakers open to the greater Philadelphia museum community.

A pool of trained data collectors efficiently conducted project research (and evaluation). The four museums shared data collectors, with each museum training at least one staff member in data collection techniques. These trained employees are now available for other research and evaluation projects.

- **Partners in a collaborative have greater access and exposure to new audiences.**

  PISEC Community Connections introduced eight community agencies to local museum resources and introduced the member museums to new audiences. Members of these CBO’s have joined the museums and serve on advisory boards.
Earlier research showed that attendees of one museum also attend other museums; partners engaged in a museum collaborative can help build the tradition of museum-going in underserved audiences.

- **A successful collaborative spawns others.**

  All four museums were recipients of YouthALIVE! grants from the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC). As a result of this association, all museums have at one time or another conducted joint programs for YouthALIVE! participants.

  The Franklin Institute later became engaged in a national collaboration with other planetariums and public radio stations with members of PISEC *Community Connections* partners on the advisory board.

  PISEC has received requests for information from many other museums and two cities are now considering establishing similar collaboratives.

- **Collaboration increases access to funding sources.**

  Many foundations encourage collaboration as a way to spread their contributions further and disseminate projects to a wider audience.
The Inside Story

What were the goals of the Community Connections project?

PISEC Community Connections strove to strengthen partnerships between PISEC museums and families in their communities, by engaging families and community leaders in educational events at the museums and at community sites. At the outset, museum and community staff and volunteers developed overall program goals:

→ to promote the use of science museums and their programs by communities which are underrepresented in current institutional audiences;

→ to provide experiences which will encourage families to learn science together; and

→ to provide recreational and career-oriented opportunities for underserved groups.

Museum staff also wanted to know how families learn in their museums and what strategies might enhance learning among family members. The guiding approach was that museums and community-based organizations would work together to plan and implement events, in the process learning more about each other and the environment they share. After more than five years of working together, team members can say with certainty that they learned much about each other and, with equal certainty, that they still have much to learn.
What kinds of activities did Community Connections undertake?

Family Events
Three different educational events were held annually. *Celebrate Science!* was an outreach program held at the eight community sites where each museum presented a science education demonstration. A second event, *Wake Up To Science* breakfast at the museum, allowed families to participate in a sampler of programs at the partner museum and spend time exploring on their own, before the museum “woke up” and other visitors arrived. Summertime *Family Fun Festivals* were held at each museum for members of all partner community groups. Through their participation in these events, families earned program credits which allowed them to return to the museums on their own, redeeming the credits for memberships and education programs. All events were free to participants.

*Science Carnival*, the culminating event in the project, gave all four museums and all eight community partners a chance to celebrate accomplishments, learn about other community environmental education resources, and enjoy each others’ company. *Science Carnival* was held at the Philadelphia Zoo, the
largest site. PISEC families took part in science demonstrations, enjoyed animal shows, made animal crafts to take home, sang folk songs about the environment, and learned ethnic dances.

Diversity training
Given the chance to start over, all agreed that diversity training should be the starting point, not science education programming. After working together for three years, PISEC partners realized that they still had a lot to learn about diversity - and about building effective and lasting relationships. Hindsight was a great teacher. Differences had been evident at the start and the team had worked through some issues. But, members realized that even if the collaborative disbanded after the current funds ran out, future relationships would benefit from diversity training. An investment in training appeared to be a sound decision, and a consultant was hired.

PISEC members' shared commitment to the project goals and basic respect for one another had made the project work as well as it did, but three areas to strengthen and improve emerged in planning the training. These areas were:

- identifying and working through existing cultural biases;
- developing sensitivity and understanding of different cultures; and
- improving communication.

Although the team started the project with standards and processes for meetings, organization leadership, project expectations, group “norms,” and
so forth, they seemed to have abandoned some of the standards along the way. The one-and-a-half-day diversity workshop and follow-up session were just a start, but valuable nonetheless. Strategies were identified to open communication and encourage feedback, stay on target in discussions, deal with conflict, and build a stronger team.

How was group identity established?
Creating “products” helped establish PISEC’s identity and brought them together as a team. This shared identity may have helped avoid some of the roadblocks and difficulties faced by this diverse group of individuals and organizations.

Logo: Creating a logo was one of the first things the team took on. It helped people get acquainted and galvanized the team. One of the museums drafted sample designs, presented them for group review, modified the design, and created the logo in use today.

Brochure: Next, two brochures were produced, both in Spanish and English, one about the PISEC museums, and the other about the Community Connections project specifically. These were distributed to the CBO’s and to families at each of the PISEC events to help disseminate information about the museums, create an identity for the Collaborative, and spark interest in the project.

Event Invitations: A printed, professionally-produced invitation was mailed to each family for Family Fun Festivals and Science Carnival. This approach made families feel that the PISEC events were “special” and worth their time.

Holiday Card and Coupons: A specially-designed PISEC holiday card with discount admission coupons was sent to all families on PISEC’s mailing list.
*Passport:* Families were mailed a PISEC Passport that would admit them to partner museums for special events. Once a family’s passport was stamped at each destination, they could redeem them for prizes, including museum memberships.

*Logo Stickers/Pins/Pencils/T-shirts:* Stickers, pins and pencils were distributed to families at the various events. T-shirts were initially given to staff (both museum and CBO personnel) as their “uniform” for PISEC events. These generated so much enthusiasm on the part of participants that a “non-staff” version was created for sale at the events.

**How did the team work?**

Each Community Connections team consisted of a project director and education support staff from the museum. From the community organizations, a local project committee chair and local project committee members assisted with planning and implementation of events. The Community Connections advisory committee included project directors, CBO chairpersons, and at-large members with relevant experience. Since the PISEC collaborative was not an incorporated not-for-profit organization, one museum (the Zoo) served as the central project office, providing administrative and fiscal oversight. All organizations shared equally in project funding and responsibility, with a small budget allocated for central office responsibilities.

Team meetings were held monthly, with at least one representative from all museums and CBO agencies expected to attend. The goal was to have at least 80% participation in all meetings, since the team believed that personal communication and representation in decisions and project activities was essential to an effective partnership. Decisions were reached by consensus, with all parties active participants in the discussion. Local project teams met as required to plan events. All partners were consulted on decisions affecting the group.

Different organizational structures among the partners required different methods of communication and presented certain challenges. The PISEC partnership included a church, a school and a school district, a fledgling environmental education center, two social service agencies, a parent/school
organization, and a business association. Some groups were entirely volunteer, while others assigned paid staff to the project. The size of the agencies varied widely, too - from large bureaucracies like the school district to small start-ups like the environmental education center. Some organizations had access to office equipment such as fax and computers, while others depended largely on volunteers operating from their homes.

These differences created communication challenges. Museum staff, accustomed to operating in a quasi-corporate business culture, assumed that computers, photocopy machines and facsimile machines would be commonplace in their partner agencies, but soon learned that these familiar office tools were unavailable to some.
Insights

What were some of the stumbling blocks?

- Organizational Culture

Every organization has its own culture, its own way of doing business. For PISEC, organizational cultures revealed themselves in everyday things, such as how people dressed, what they ate, how meetings were conducted, and what everyone laughed at. In building the partnership, sometimes cultures clashed and the team had to find ways of neutralizing these differences in order to move forward. Sometimes community needs and interests were in conflict with museum organizational needs. For example, one CBO leader suggested less reliance on a formal registration process and forms for events, which were unfamiliar to her community. Museum staff felt that a formal, standardized registration process was important for data collection and reporting purposes. Culture clash, yes, but not an insurmountable obstacle.
• Individual Differences (Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Preference, Age, etc.)
PISEC brought together individuals of different ethnicity, gender, age, race, sexual preference, education level, and life experience. On the surface, members “got along great,” but occasionally realized later on that they hadn’t really been listening to or hearing one another. Some skirted issues that seemed too painful to tackle, or that they didn’t understand. Diversity training helped open the door for more “real” communication to occur.

• Staff Changes
During the course of the project, six out of twelve of the organizations experienced staff changes, so that teams were often “reinventing” themselves and working hard to make newcomers feel welcome and informed. Equal participation by all parties was a core value, and the partnership established guidelines for attendance at meetings that would facilitate this participation.

Community Partners Speak Out
Two opportunities offered community representatives and families a chance for their voices to be heard outside of project meetings and events. Adult family members were selected at random from the membership of the CBO’s to participate in four focus groups, and more than 300 individuals took part in telephone and in-person interviews as part of final project evaluation. Feedback was sought from families who had attended PISEC events as well as from the members of the CBO partner agencies who attended meetings and worked side-by-side with museum staff to carry out the entire project. To ensure objectivity and anonymity, outside consultants conducted both initiatives. Here’s what PISEC families and community group leaders had to say.

“The overall experience was phenomenal.” In general, both museum and CBO leaders believed the project met its goals and were enthusiastic about continuing the collaborative.

“I think there are many successes. But I think access and ... developing that comfort zone where you feel that this is a place that I have some significance and a place that is significant to me as an adult and a lifelong learner ...
I think that’s the greatest success.” Since one of the project goals was to bring together new audiences and museums, this type of feedback was truly rewarding to the project team.

Several comments helped the team realize that CBO families wanted more involvement, more exposure to museum staff, and more extensive marketing efforts. “It was not advertised enough to the general public.” “[There was not good follow-up of] the people we had on the mailing list.” “We needed to do more work with the parents before the PISEC experience began.”

“...my particular institution...identified [someone] who did not represent the community to interface with the advisory group...at the meetings, if I was missing, then there was no representation.” Museum teams did not include many people of color - one issue the project was designed to address. It wasn’t always possible to identify a museum staffer who represented a particular community group, and for one CBO, at least, this was a difficult and uncomfortable state of affairs.

After five years of working together, PISEC museum staff and community members alike agreed that “keeping in touch” was important, and that a long-term relationship, designed with the same priorities in mind, was a desirable outcome of Community Connections. When asked what she’d tell someone who didn’t participate in PISEC, one parent replied: “You missed out!”
Lessons from PISEC

Value diversity.
Take advantage of individual strengths. Allow some social time before meetings to develop personal connections; friendships among participants helped cement the team. Open minds open doors; seek new ways to approach things. Respect others’ ideas.

Allow all participants a voice. Communicate often and openly to prevent misunderstandings.
Learning to adjust to each other’s schedules slowed the process, but proved necessary for effective communication. Finding time to communicate was sometimes very difficult. Define a conflict resolution strategy so you can deal with the inevitable.

There is no substitute for personal relationships.
Little things mean a lot. Food, gifts, and hugs help any relationship. Little things gave the group the personal touch - remembering birthdays, and sharing in events both happy and sad that were important to the members.

Ask for feedback and learn from it.
Feedback often helps clarify the original idea. Make sure everyone has the same information. Remember, knowledge is power - don’t leave people powerless. It’s better to “get things on the table” than risk festering resentments.

Collaborations require much effort, but the results are worth it.
Establish expectations and define roles and relationships to avoid hurt feelings and disappointment later on. All parties should fully understand what membership requires and work together to meet the goals of the collaborative. Each organization may have its own agenda but the goals of the collaborative should take priority over individual needs.

Observe deadlines.
Deadlines should be established with both the museums and CBO’s in mind. Sometimes it’s easier for partners with more resources to meet deadlines; don’t forget to do a “reality-check” with everyone, since some organizations count on volunteers and have limited office equipment.

Institutional commitment is important.
Support from the top down and bottom up is crucial. If everyone’s on board, events will run smoothly and funds may be easier to raise.

Change is a way of doing business, not a project.
Keep the process going once the grant is over. It’s vital.
Based on positive feedback from museum staff and CBO leaders, and the enthusiastic response from families who had taken part in events, PISEC partners agreed to seek funds for new initiatives and to keep working together even in the absence of new grant support. PISEC partners were eager to continue the relationships they had developed, provide new science education programming for families, and build on their developing skills and sensitivity in valuing diversity.

The first five years of the partnership were a time of discovery, of learning, and of finding common ground. The future promises to be a time of bonding, and of growth and enrichment. With new grant support in place, the Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative launched its latest initiative, *Families Exploring Science Together (FEST)*, in spring 2000. And so, PISEC partners keep *Working Together*. 
Resources

PISEC's videotape of focus groups, "PISEC Presents: Community Connections/Building Shared Memories," is available from the New Jersey State Aquarium at 856-365-3300 ext. 382.

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