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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BRIDGES CONFERENCE

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Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC)
The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2011
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On June 20-22, 2008, the Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC)\(^1\) conducted the Bridges Conference for museum/community partnership programs that serve families. Sixty-five individuals representing twenty-five organizations (museums, community programs, advisors and funders) participated.

The conference was funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant (DRL# 0734835), which covered planning, implementation, evaluation and dissemination. The Franklin Institute took the lead for the project deliverables: presenting at professional meetings, national networking for family outreach programs, producing a website, and developing this manual of best practices.

The Bridges Conference (also referred to as Bridges in this document) built upon a prior museum/community partnership conference held in 2004 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The AAAS conference had a broader focus, including many programs that focused on youth. However, the goal of the Bridges Conference, the fifth in a series of PISEC projects, was to shift the focus to programs serving families, to lay the foundation for the creation of a museum/community outreach network, and to formulate a set of best practice guidelines (this manual) for such programs to be shared with the broader informal science education community.

The Bridges Conference was designed to bring together professionals involved with long-term museum/community relationships, and to offer opportunities to share and develop new strategies to (1) address

\(^1\) PISEC is a collaborative involving four Philadelphia area institutions: The Franklin Institute, the Philadelphia Zoo, The Academy of Natural Sciences, and the New Jersey Aquarium and ten community partner agencies.
practical issues inherent in funding, developing and managing museum/community collaborations aimed at bringing science and math to underserved families, and (2) focus on the unique challenges and benefits of collaborating to work with families. Information shared during the conference was intended to contribute to advancing the field of intergenerational learning and informal science education as a whole.

Attendees were required to apply for conference participation as a team, which included a museum professional and a community partner organization. The criteria for consideration included a focus on bringing science and math to underserved families, the appropriateness of the organization’s programs to the content of the conference, and the ability of the project team to add to best practices discussions and guidelines based on the experiences and outcomes of their programs.

The two-and-one-half day conference consisted of four elements: networking, poster sessions, a motivational keynote speaker (Lily Yeh, artist and award-winning founding director of Barefoot Artists, Inc.), and facilitated breakout sessions. Participants were divided into four groups that rotated through four topics of discussion. The notes from those sixteen sessions formed the basis for this manual.

Before Bridges: The Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC)

The Bridges Conference was an extension of the programs offered by the Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC), consisting of The Academy of Natural Sciences, The Franklin Institute Science Museum, The Philadelphia Zoo, and The New Jersey Academy for Aquatic Sciences.


From 1995 to 1999, PISEC undertook the creation of its first community collaboration, Community Connections, to develop museum programs designed to reach non-traditional visitors. Community-based
organizations (CBOs) became partners in the creation and implementation of a rich set of museum learning experiences for families.

Community Connections was followed by Families Exploring Science Together (FEST) (1999-2003), which combined community center programs with museum programs. Integrating the familiarity of the community with the novel experience of the museum helped newcomers adjust to the museum in a more comfortable manner.

From 2003-2009, PISEC conducted Community Ambassadors in Science Exploration (CASE), which trained teens and adults from community agencies to provide hands-on science programs for families in community settings. Through CASE, PISEC was able to empower members of CBOs to create and present science workshops in their own communities. CASE’s 144 trained Science Ambassadors reached a geographically widespread audience of roughly 12,000 people.

CASE served as a new model for encouraging the appreciation and understanding of science among underserved families through:

- A corps of teen and adult peer presenters (Science Ambassadors)
- A curriculum of hands-on learning experiences for families of diverse ages and backgrounds
- A regional network of museum/community collaboration
- Integration of community and museum resources through joint programming
- A longitudinal research study of program impacts

Communities of Learning for Urban Environments and Science (CLUES) (2010-2014) emerged directly from the CASE program. CLUES focuses on environmental education and attempts to create a new model of family learning and professional development for members of underserved communities by building the capacity for science education within the community organizations (CBOs) themselves.

CLUES programs focus on families as individual learning units, engaging children and parents together in science learning experiences. Project goals are to:

- Develop a training program to build educational leadership capacity within CBOs
- Empower CBO-based educators to direct the focus and content of programming
- Support ongoing collaboration among families, community-based educational leaders, and museums

Note: Throughout this manual, the term “museum” is used in a broad sense, and includes a variety of informal science learning institutions, including zoos and aquaria.
For museums, collaboration with community-based partners (CBOs) has become an increasingly popular method of expanding audiences, services, and funding opportunities. For CBOs, museum collaborations offer the benefits of science expertise and programming, increased capacity and new opportunities for constituents, and the potential for developing new funding sources.

The mutually rewarding nature of collaboration may make the value of connecting and working together seem obvious. However, museum-CBO collaboration is often fraught with conflicts of culture, expectations, and egos. In the case of collaborations that serve families, some of these issues can become even more complex.

What Makes Collaboration so Challenging?

Museums and CBOs may have very different languages

When museums first developed collaborative relationships, they tended to reach out to individuals and organizations within their own communities with similar missions: educators, schools, and other cultural institutions. Today, the emphasis is on reaching out to underserved communities. All too often, museum professionals and CBO staff and members speak different languages—in some cases both figuratively and literally. The institutional language of museums, for example, may be more education-oriented, as compared to a more social services approach for CBOs. In addition, CBO staff may be more likely to include members of local communities who are not native English speakers.

Additional challenges arise when museum educators provide direct programming services to CBO audiences. It is difficult enough, for instance, to reach out to English-speaking youth in after school programs, where the expectation is that children are there to learn and grow in the setting. It is far more challenging to work constructively with, for example, a group of recent immigrants who have limited English skills and whose expectations and culture may be very different from those of the average museum professional.
Museums and CBOs may have very different missions

Museums exist to engage and educate; they may also be involved with research, curating, preservation, and scholarship. CBOs, on the other hand, are about the people they serve. Their missions may include provision of basic human needs: food, clothing, shelter; legal aid; basic education (ESL, GED); medical services; etc. While there may be interest in expanding services to include science education, science is rarely at the center of a CBO’s mission.

Museums and CBOs may have very different cultures

Museums, by and large, assume that visitors will behave within certain guidelines. Some items are for touching; some are not. Talking is acceptable; yelling is not. Parents are expected to engage with their children, and to oversee and manage their behavior. Museum professionals are accustomed to visitors who register for events and arrive on time with the number of people they said they would bring. All of these practices are culturally-based and may not be familiar to families connected with partnering CBOs.

Museums and CBOs may have leaders with different styles

In theory, collaborations should involve partners with equal status. Yet, all too often one or both partners feel that they should take the lead, and attempt to do so using very different leadership styles. Leadership style is very much culturally-based, which can cause conflict when styles clash.

Museums and CBOs may have conflicting financial expectations

In many cases, museum/CBO partnerships are created in hopes of attracting grant funding. The process of seeking and managing grant funding is fraught with potential pitfalls, especially when the parties involved have different financial situations and expectations, as is typically the case with museums and CBOs.

When museums and CBOs partner, they are beginning a complex relationship

The partnership programs that participated in the Bridges Conference involve not only museum and CBO staff, but also represent large numbers of individual families. The relationships that exist among these partnership programs are varied in form and substance, and many of the programs have been successful in diverse ways. Outcomes include new levels of interest in science learning and careers among families and individual family members, new audiences for museums, and new funding opportunities for all concerned.

How is it possible to create a museum/CBO collaboration that combines positive relationships, effective management, appropriate procedures, and constructive outcomes? Finding the common elements was the focus of the Bridges Conference. In this manual, lessons learned from Bridges participants are supplemented by lessons available through existing museum and community program literature.
While all of the organizations represented at Bridges are already in “committed” museum/community relationships, the decision to make such a commitment is not taken lightly. In fact, there are a number of questions to consider before taking the first steps toward partnership. These range from mission-oriented questions (will this collaboration help us to fulfill our mission?) to financial issues (will this collaboration make or lose money?) to practical questions (do we have the time/space/staff/equipment to make this collaboration successful?).

Once the decision is made to reach out to a potential partner, the question becomes, “which potential partner(s) will be the best match for our goals, needs, capabilities, and style?” While in many ways it is easiest to connect with a partner whose members and goals are similar to one’s own, such a partner may not provide the opportunity to reach a new or underserved community. On the other hand, working with a very different type of organization raises complex issues, ranging from differences in cultural style to resources and staffing issues. As with any collaboration or relationship, organizational questions arise, such as “Who is in charge? Who handles the money? What happens if a partner fails to fulfill its obligations?”

*The creation of rewarding relationships between the museum and the community is not the sacrifice of individual group identities, rather the creation of new, productive entities merged from multiple established identities.* (Bridges Conference, 2008).

In addressing the topic of establishing partnerships, the participants at the Bridges Conference were asked to consider four main points:

1. How does an organization select a community partner?
2. Why should partners sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)?
3. In what manner and how often should partners communicate?
4. How do partners provide access to the community?

**Selecting a Community Partner: Insights from the Literature**

Before choosing a community partner, an organization needs to assess its own goals, assets, and strengths. Is the museum ready for such a step? Upon committing, the museum should provide the partner group with
a list of resources available for sharing. These resources include both tangible tools such as space, technology, and materials, and intangible tools such as staff knowledge, understanding, trust, and effort (Crowther, 2004).

Careful selection of partner groups is necessary to ensure a productive and effective partnership. Organizations do not have to be similar nor do they have to have absolute cooperation or equally divided responsibility. An appropriate partner depends on the goals of the relationship.

Every community is unique; therefore, the selection process, too, is unique. The Guide to Developing Educational Partnerships (Tushnet, 1993, pp. 1-2) has outlined the following principles for successful partnerships, which organizations should keep in mind during the selection process.

1. A partnership must address real problems that are shared concerns.

   A partnership should be developed if there is a shared concern about a real problem that can best be addressed by organizations from different sectors working together. (Tushnet, 1993, p. 3)

2. Partnerships can take many forms. A coalition involves dividing labor among partners. Each partner offers different skills, but they agree on key issues. Though partners may have different broad goals, they believe that solving the common problem will help them move towards those goals. This is a very common form of partnership.

3. Another type is the collaborative. Typically, this kind of partnership becomes a new organization. An equal division of labor supports “decision making as a continuous process shared among partners” (p. 7). Collaboratives are difficult to maintain because they demand trust, understanding and open-mindedness from all of the participating organizations. Gass (2008) maintained that one of the most important dimensions of a partnership is a high level of trust and respect. This trust needs to be developed at the beginning of the partnership when discussing the topics of program content and organization.

4. A third type of partnership is the primary partner/limited partnership. This relationship involves one dominant partner that receives services from other secondary organizations. Secondary partners are not paid. They benefit by association with the primary organization, which holds the power through funding or legal or political factors (pp. 6-9).

5. Before the project begins, partners should discuss the program’s content, focus, and organization.

6. When the work begins, partners should communicate with those in the community being served. Community members should be aware of who the participants are, what is offered, what each partner is contributing to the project, what the long term goals are, how the project will begin, and how community members can gain access to the services offered. Having clear lines of communication helps to facilitate the development of clear goals, rules for engagement and decision making processes, which in turn leads to the success of the partnership (Gass, 2008).
7. Every project needs a leader. The leadership team needs to fit the project and the participants’ personalities. Leadership can be facilitative – multiple representatives on the leadership team dividing responsibility among many – or visionary – one leader dominating the direction of the project (Tushnet, 1993, p. 21).

8. Changes within the partnership or partner organizations may require new resources and technical support. Otherwise, the partnership can neither evolve nor have its anticipated impact. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the partner organizations helps to facilitate decision-making, project development and budgetary issues. This understanding is one of the determining factors of a successful partnership (Gass, 2008).

9. It is important to gather evaluation information before, during, and after the project, looking beyond the individual project to consider community characteristics such as economic impact. Evaluation studies can point to necessary changes that will strengthen the partnership.

Selecting a Community Partner: Insights from the Bridges Conference

One can view the process of partner selection as a “dating game,” during which partners get to know one another well before formalizing a relationship.

_We like to say that we date informally for a while when looking for an organization. It kind of follows an arc of a relationship and we go out to festivals and fairs and things like that and we kind of assess each other to see if we like how things are run here, see if the facilities are going to work for us and find a common ground. And then we might go out on a second date. Eventually…we get married. It has been good for us._ (Bridges Conference, 2008)

One way for a museum to connect with the community is to send a staff member to work directly with community members. In this way, social networks are formed, as well as business connections. It is a way to see if the program can thrive before making a long-term commitment.

It helps to select a partner based on shared goals and/or audience. It is helpful to identify those groups that serve as centers of influence within the community. In addition, it is important that new ideas come from the communities, not funders. Matching values and creating understanding will support the longevity of a successful partnership.

_It has to be a two-way thing. I have to share my partner’s mission and they would have to share my vision of my organization because that is what drives my agency. Both agencies would have to have the same passion and go after the same thing to really make a difference._ (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Museums and CBOs need to be selective about choosing a partner. Every organization has unique traits and talents. It is necessary to take time to find a good match. Look at the strengths of potential groups. Is
the entire group interested in partnering? Or are only one or two people invested? Each partner should have a clear role in the relationship, which ensures proper sharing of responsibility and mutual benefit, despite relative group size or who obtains the funding. From the start, an agreement needs to establish the relationship as one of partners, different groups deserving equal respect. The relationship should be cooperative, not competitive.

One of the initial concerns to overcome included the person bringing the funding to the table. In our case, it was us. We had half a million dollars and our partner wasn’t bringing money, but they were bringing recognition. I know that initially…community partners were worried about being swallowed up—that their identity as a community organization might be somehow diminished or overrun by our particular ideas. We created a partnership to decide what both sides were all about. The new name for the program emerged from that partnership. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Partnering does not necessarily mean that the relationship involves a grant. Simply sharing resources could benefit partnering groups. Partnerships are most successful when partners empower one another to find ways to thrive without threatening domination.

The museum looked at who was coming to the museum; who we could better serve. We wanted to do two things: bring in a community of people and families that were not using the museum, and also develop a partnership, specifically a close neighborhood partnership… It was realized that many families were not using us for various reasons… So what we looked for was a neighborhood program that we could use to develop a long term and intimate relationship. We found that in a similar manner as you mentioned. Who is compatible with us? Who is open to learning science and bringing families into the museum? (Bridges Conference, 2008)

When starting these relationships, community groups are often wary of a power imbalance between a big museum institution receiving money from a funder and the relatively smaller community organization. The museum may be output-oriented and may not understand the recipient’s need for audience cultivation. Both partners need to be comfortable with how program time is spent.

Can we afford to go to all these meetings developing these ideas? We don’t have funds up front to do that and I have to get back to my program! (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Partnering is a museum’s key to the community. Museums know their discipline (e.g. science, history, art, living collections). Partners know the community. Groups should find partners that have complementary strengths, so that both partners are enhanced.

Creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) are critical for the success of a partnership. MOUs put the terms of agreement in writing. It is important to use clear and explicit language that is understood and mutually agreed upon by all involved in order to avoid later conflicts. Since approaches vary, develop an agreement that defines a common ground and explicitly addresses the nature of the relationship and resources involved.

An MOU institutionalizes the goals of the partnership. It is a way to visualize what has to be done and who is responsible for which parts. It addresses issues of cost and liability that can give financial staff and attorneys a
concrete source of information. It helps to create organizational buy-in for the partnership, particularly from the Executive Director, detailing the nature of the relationship. It can serve as a timeline or checklist. At the end of each year, the organization and its evaluators can look back at the MOU and see to what extent goals and objectives have been met.

The MOU document spells out the capabilities and organization of the servers (us), the organization and the needs of the served agency (them), and the methods of operation. (Palm, 1998)

With an MOU, staff changes are less likely to threaten the relationship. The MOU can serve as a guideline as new employees are introduced and new relationships are formed. No matter who created the initial connection, all participants need to operate under the same assumptions. There need to be multiple ties between the groups in order to maintain institutional connections.

While the MOU serves as a formal description of the partnership, open and regular communication is also crucial. Therefore, beyond the MOU, a strong partnership depends on open and frequent communication between and within groups. Cooperating organizations need to understand one another’s concerns and constraints. Regular meetings provide an opportunity to share ideas and resources, to exchange feedback, and express support for one another, which promotes program participation. Communicating future plans and reminding group members how important the coalition is supports longevity.

When agreements are put into writing, partners have the opportunity to stand back, take their time, and consider whether they are comfortable with all the elements of the collaboration. If there are disagreements or misunderstandings, discussion of an MOU can provide the opportunity to air differences before a commitment is made.

I think MOUs are really good because they put it in writing. You have had these discussions; you're at a meeting with lots of people and lots of partners at the table and you say you know what you're doing, and then you all go back and you all have different understandings. When it is in black and white on paper it really helps keep it focused, and everyone agrees. If there is some problem early on, you can say that's not what you agreed to and then you can move forward mostly on the same page. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

MOUs are particularly important when multiple institutions are involved – or when money, publications, or presentations are in the picture. A mutually agreed-upon written document can save time, money, headaches, and tempers – and provide a basis for negotiation, should a disagreement arise.

Another question is: how do you work with multiple and diverse partners? How do you think about your partnerships beyond the initial grants? Is it a partnership or is it a project run by a grant? So in these partnerships, should you be jointly presenting at meetings? Should you be publishing together? Mostly people, when talking about the partnerships, are really bringing people together around money. They have written the grant and gotten some money and now partner together. But when people ask if you should
have an MOU, it doesn’t necessarily mean you have a grant–it could be a partnership where you are sharing your existing resources. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Another important purpose for the MOU is communication among staff members who are not personally involved with the collaborative project. With an MOU, the details of the agreement are all written out clearly, so that every member of the staff can access the same information.

I think that in addition to clarifying the expectations between partners, I have also found that, while at an operational level we may deal with somebody at an organization, some higher-ups in administration may not know all the details. If we have them sign off on the letter of agreement, it keeps them aware of everything their organization is doing to support the partnership. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Communication among Partners: Insights from the Literature

I do not question for a moment that collaboration is both the genius and the future of our essential cultural institutions (Carr, 2003, p. 123).

Communication is the key to every successful relationship, whether personal or professional. In museum/community collaborations, consistent and effective communication can lead to outstanding outcomes. Poor or limited communication, on the other hand, can create negative relationships – and, in the long run, bad feelings on both sides.

In some cases, communication may be somewhat easier. When partners know one another well, work within the same community, and have similar cultures and goals, this may be the case. Even with the best intentions, it can be extremely difficult to communicate across cultures – and most difficult of all to communicate among many different cultures.

According to Portia Hamilton-Sperr (1992), “Particularly for partnerships consisting of organizations with no history of cooperation, establishing and maintaining effective staff contact proved difficult…communication difficulties and misunderstandings multiplied in direct proportion to the number of partners involved.”

To ensure smooth communication, museums and their partners need to make a special effort to schedule meetings and generally keep the lines of communication wide open. Often, events planned as business meetings can become social, leading to opportunities for closer relationships.

While the logistics can be a challenge and expensive (coordinating schedules, transportation, hours), making joint presentations at conferences of both museums and community groups allows
the audience to receive multiple viewpoints representing the full spectrum of the relationship. In addition, introducing different faces to projects makes the projects more personal.

**Communication among Partners: Insights from the Bridges Conference**

Frequent meetings help partners address problems in a timely manner. They reassure those involved that the partnership is still functioning and the benefits are still present. While it is difficult to gather everyone involved because of busy schedules, regular meetings need to be a priority. An annual meeting to discuss goals is not enough. Quarterly meetings may be sufficient, but ideally, meetings should take place monthly.

> Our monthly meeting does so much. The idea is that all the community groups–our CBOs (Community Based Organizations) and our museums–all get together and try and make that meeting. In some cases it's very social, but what it does is it keeps it going, and I think it becomes a very personal thing because everyone is involved. It's so much fun when we all get together. We have little snacks, and sometimes we sit there talking and catching up. Sometimes we get to business, but it's not hard business. It's just that keeping in touch. I just recently got involved with another grant-funded project, and they hardly had any meetings. I realized that I needed to make a really big effort to contact people and talk to people or I would have no idea what was going on. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

A face-to-face relationship needs to evolve between partnering groups in order to communicate information efficiently. It is important to get to know multiple people in the partnering organization, so that if the original contact changes positions or leaves the organization, projects do not have to start from the beginning.

> When partner A calls partner B, multiple people in organization B should be able to identify partner A as a partner.

We are working with nine different science centers, and our school district, and the university…What we do is have meetings every six weeks to two months because it's good for everyone to get together and know it's working. We have 100% attendance. I think within the coalition, we are able to say we are invested in the mission and [are able to] be community oriented. I think setting the table as a place to share resources and ideas, and saying we are here to support one another, really has taken off and been very successful. I believe strongly in communication, regular communication--saying, "This is coming up" and reminding them of how important they are, how important this coalition is, when they come together. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

In many partnerships, relationships go beyond formal business connections and become social. This means that people have a personal commitment to the partnership and to one another. In general, say Bridges participants, such social relationships are well worth cultivating.

> I'm the director of a coalition of museums. Part of what is powerful, I think, about us working together is that we have time to connect with each other on a personal level, and it's not always about business. There are some social aspects to it as well: weddings, funerals, graduations, awards, etc. (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Links to New Audiences: Insights from the Literature

Museums typically reach out to the community through means that are likely to reach only those community members who have already communicated an interest in the programs or exhibits that the museum has to offer. Mailing lists, print advertisements, and even radio announcements are typically aimed at the “museum audience.” As a result, museums tend to attract the same audiences over and over again—it can be difficult to reach out to and engage audiences who do not already see the museum as a potential destination.

Community organizations, on the other hand, may serve an audience that is traditionally underserved or unaware of museum offerings. CBOs may serve communities that are non-English speaking, economically disadvantaged, and/or with no tradition of visiting museums. As a result, community organizations have the potential to open whole new markets for museums and the museum may connect a CBO with a new network of interested families.

Connections among different community organizations can be beneficial for all concerned and help develop new audiences. For instance, a local network of museums, libraries, schools, and religious organizations can jointly promote one another’s programs at low cost. Examples of community involvement that promote multiple organizations include:

- Career fair
- Multi-level advisory board
- Exchanges with radio stations and other media
- Newsletters and other mailings.

Museum staff members may be able to join the boards or committees of community organizations. This helps to build trust between organizations and builds networks, which is useful for identifying new potential partners, developing joint projects, and expanding audiences.

Links to New Audiences: Insights from the Bridges Conference

Not only can partners help museums and CBOs to reach new audiences, but they can also provide their partners with credibility relative to that new audience. For museums, the CBO can provide entrée to a community for whom the museum is alien, intimidating, or simply uninteresting. For CBOs, museums can provide the cachet of intellectual or educational status. By essentially vouching for one another, collaborative partners can help to establish their collaborator in a new community.

…”Our partner is the science museum…one of the strengths they bring, aside from an amazing staff, is their ability to reach out to those audiences in a credible kind of way…they have a reputation that shows that they are going to deliver a quality program and support the youth from your organization. So they bring the credibility and reach out to that audience because we couldn’t do it, because they have no idea who we are. So we are a different kind of partner than their community partner, but that’s why it works.

(Bridges Conference, 2008)
Creating Mutually Rewarding Relationships between Museums and Community Groups

The process of developing and formalizing museum-CBO relationships should be intentional, purposeful and careful. The fact that such a relationship is possible does not necessarily mean it is a good idea – or worth the dedication and hard work required to make it successful. Important steps to take to ensure a high quality relationship include:

- Taking time to observe prospective partners in action, getting to know them fully, and considering the possibilities for collaboration before leaping into a formal partnership.

- Ensuring that partners share common goals. While two or more organizations may have similar or complementary programs and resources, this is not enough to establish a solid collaboration. Unless all parties share common goals, they may wind up working at cross-purposes.

- Careful construction of a mutually satisfactory memorandum of understanding (MOU) that lays out not only the fact of the collaboration, but also detailed information regarding each partner’s rights and responsibilities; any financial agreements; and processes to be followed in the event that one or more parties wishes to end the association.

- Developing clear and regular procedures for communication, which include opportunities for formal interaction, and social gatherings.
Traditionally, museums have been destinations for an educated, relatively wealthy audience. Over the last half-century, however, the mission of museums has broadened and their audiences have broadened as well. Today, museums are striving to engage and communicate with a very wide audience, including “underserved” and “nontraditional” communities of all ages from various ethnic and economic backgrounds.

To attract such audiences, some museums have made changes to their exhibits, signage, programs and advertising. In some cases, museums have become more entertaining, hands-on centers for discovery. Even the name “museum” has been replaced with names like “Exploratorium,” “Discovery Place,” and “Imaginarium.” Exhibits exploring different cultural and historic topics have become more popular, as have “blockbuster” exhibits designed to attract very wide audiences. These changes (along with associated marketing campaigns) have been successful in attracting and engaging new audiences in the form of families with young children, inner-city school and camp groups, and even young adults and teens. Despite significant efforts, however, it has been difficult to reach out to ethnically and economically diverse families.

Museum-CBO collaborations can be an effective form of outreach to non-traditional audiences. By working directly with organizations that serve non-traditional families, museums are able to create new relationships, open new doors, and build on shared values and interests. Along with these benefits, however, come significant challenges. Museum staff and CBO members very often come from different worlds, including the institutional mentalities of their respective organizations, cultural and educational backgrounds, and approaches to serving the “customer.” As a result of these variations, communication can be difficult and misunderstandings are not unusual.

How can museums and CBOs cross cultural boundaries, develop a shared language, and build programs and relationships based on mutually held beliefs?

In addressing the complex topic of cultural issues, the participants at the Bridges Conference were asked to consider two main points:

1. What are the barriers to diversifying museum audiences?
2. What are some of the keys to developing and maintaining audience diversity?
Barriers to Diversifying Museum Audiences: Insights from the Literature

The United States is no longer referred to as a “melting pot.” A preferred term is “mosaic,” because complete assimilation is no longer the goal of most immigrant and ethnic groups. When viewing communities through the lens of a “cultural mosaic,” which is complex and multi-faceted, it becomes evident that certain groups tend to attend museums while others tend to stay away.

Inexperienced museum goers feel “psychologically and physically ill at ease amid unfamiliar objects” (Hood, 1993). Those who do not frequent museums do not know how to maneuver within them. They tend to find the environment uninviting and intimidating, which prevents them from wanting to return. Traditional museum exhibits do not encourage interactive learning or discussion. Visitors who enjoy socializing and group activities often feel bored and disconnected from the museum.

Some of the reasons why non-visiting groups tend to avoid museums are discussed below.

Financial Barriers

The simplest concern to address is financial: many people find the sheer cost of a museum visit to be prohibitive. Discounted tickets, free public events and similar programs can minimize the financial barrier, and some non-traditional audiences do visit museums when financial barriers are diminished or eliminated.

Lack of Awareness

Another issue, which is relatively easy to address, is awareness. Immigrant groups, and even native-born Americans, may know little or nothing about museums in their community. While it requires some creativity to reach non-traditional audiences with information about museum programs, exhibits, camps, and events, many museums have successfully used radio, television, print, and web promotion to invite new audiences to visit.

Lack of Personal Connection and/or Comfort in the Museum Setting

Some groups avoid museums despite being aware of their offerings and having enough money for admission. These groups may stay away because they feel no sense of connection to the institution, because they feel uncomfortable with the environment (e.g., perceived rules of behavior, unfamiliar surroundings, inexperience in “engaging” with museum exhibits), because they are uninterested in exhibitions, or because few people in
their social or cultural group think of museums as worthwhile destinations. When this is the case, museums must do far more than simply advertise and provide low-cost passes: they must rethink their offerings, their hiring policies, and their staff training procedures.

Barriers to Diversifying Museum Audiences: Insights from the Bridges Conference

Participants at the Bridges Conference echoed much of the information found in the literature as they discussed the challenges inherent in reaching non-traditional audiences. Overall, the sense is that even today museums are often perceived as elite institutions with boring exhibits about irrelevant topics.

An important additional point is that economics may not be a deciding factor: families may simply choose to spend their discretionary income on activities unrelated to education (sports, restaurants, movies, etc.). The idea of visiting a museum may not even occur to a family—or, if it does occur, it may be set aside in favor of an activity that is more familiar, or more likely to be entertaining and fun as opposed to educational and perhaps challenging.

*People see our institutions as meant for the upper class. Like, ‘It’s not for me,’ or ‘They can’t relate to us.’*

*As a child, I was told that we couldn’t afford it. Did that mean that we couldn’t afford the transportation or that we couldn’t afford the entrance? I never understood that. Now a lot of institutions have free family nights. We are trying to do everything possible to say, ‘You are welcome here.’*

*It’s not about economics. It’s really about ownership, ‘How am I connected to that museum?’ Not just, ‘Can I pay to get in?’*

*Ownership or being a stakeholder transcends programs and exhibitions. For many years, museums have been reaching other communities through diverse programs and exhibitions; but you need to talk about the actual facility, how the facility is laid out, is the entrance visible? Is it something that invites you and welcomes you into the place? The front line staff: are they people who invite you or are they people who say ‘don’t touch this’.*

*For our group, most of the families are immigrants and they have this perception about the museum that it’s a place where you have to get dressed up and you have to be somewhat educated before you go there. It’s not somewhere you go to have fun.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Keys to Developing and Maintaining Diversity: Insights from the Literature

*Engaging the Entire Community: a New Role for Permanent Collections*, a publication of the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund, describes the work of four art museums, which took on the task of engaging non-traditional audiences. Each museum reached out to its local inner city community and worked directly with artists, schools, employers, and social service agencies to create exhibits, programs, and opportunities that specifically targeted the interests and needs of residents. Such work, says a museum director cited in the
publication's introduction, “starts when museums climb down from the ivory tower and begin talking directly to people.” Key lessons learned by the four museums include the following:

- For museums to successfully reach out to new audiences, employees at every level of the institution must be actively involved.
- Long-term, ongoing relationships with partner organizations are vital to sustaining participation among new audiences.
- Willingness to respond to a partner's needs—even if it is risky—can result in new visitors to the museum.
- Responding to people's perceptions of the museum demonstrates the museum's commitment to serving audiences.
- Reaching out to children through their schools can lead to participation by the whole family.

(Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, 1999)

**Diversity Training**

Once new and diverse audiences begin to connect with the museum, a new challenge arises. It becomes critically important for museum staff, particularly visitor services and education staff, to understand cultural differences and to respond appropriately to unfamiliar patterns of behavior and expectations. Museum administrators should consider requiring their employees to take a course in world customs to prepare for the variety of guests visiting the museum. Incorrect gesturing could quickly alienate a guest. For example, the American handshake could infringe upon a guest’s code of modesty. Attention should also be focused on sensitivity to words, symbols, gestures, or traditions (e.g. sensitivity to the emotional impact of the word “passport” to immigrant populations, given the popularity of “passport programs” to guide museum visitors). Sheppard (2007) states, “Communication depends on clarifying this language. Even more sensitive are areas of cultural and ethnic meanings, where the differences in language need to be carefully examined and discussed. Not understanding and openly discussing language use can lead to unintended but deep offense.” Though it is impossible to anticipate every situation that may arise, raising the cultural awareness of museum staff can contribute to a respectful and welcoming atmosphere (Lee, 2005).

Diversity training helps museum volunteers adjust to being out of their comfort zone, so they can maintain poise and respect in any situation. Comfort is a two-way street. Visitors need to feel comfortable coming into the museum, but volunteers and museum workers must also feel comfortable hosting a diverse group of visitors.
Staff Diversity

In addition to training staff in welcoming diverse audiences, museums can strive to broaden the diversity of staff members, with a goal of mirroring the community audience. Research suggests that visitors may be most comfortable when they are initially approached by individuals to whom they can relate due to similarities in language, appearance, and cultural behavior. Museums’ Human Resource departments might consider developing recruiting strategies that include new methods, such as working closely with community partners to identify appropriate job candidates.

Attention to Wayfinding and Messaging

In some communities, multilingual signage, careful use of imagery and language, and “user friendly” way-finding tools can mean the difference between a positive and negative museum experience. New visitors, especially those from underserved communities, may be anxious about entering the museum. By anticipating needs and allaying concerns (Where is the bathroom? Where is the restaurant? Where are the most popular exhibits or programs?), museums can ensure a good start to new relationships.

Keys to Developing and Maintaining Diversity:
Insights from the Bridges Conference

Know the People You Invite to Your Museum

In order to reach out to diverse communities, it’s important to understand those communities and how they are similar to or different from one another. One common error, for example, is the assumption that large global regions have a single set of cultural practices and ideologies. While all Chinese, Japanese, Philippine, and Indian visitors are considered Asian, they have very different customs and traditions. The same applies to Africans, Latinos, and Europeans. In addition to cultural differences, varying levels of cultural assimilation create diversity.

Instead of viewing different cultural ideologies as roadblocks, Bridges participants recommended that museums view them as enrichment opportunities. An awareness of the differences that exist among ethnic groups and within a cultural group can help museum program planners recognize and effectively address diverse needs and goals.

*Communities are not monolithic. If you’re talking about Latino or Black or Asian communities, you really have to understand the nuances of each of those communities and be able to apply those nuances so you can work with them appropriately so that they feel welcome and they feel respected. Talking to them on their terms, that’s key. I think that once they see that that...you’re reaching out to them based on respect and understanding, then they will engage with the museum.*

*You can’t just presume that all people from a particular community feel the same way.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Connect to the Community

It is essential to reach out to a variety of community partners. A diverse group creates a new entity that combines different strengths, networks, and spheres of influence. It is also advantageous to network with leaders in the community who can share their extended network of contacts. Additional contacts increase the knowledge and resource pool. This is useful for recruiting members of community advisory boards, as well as, identifying advocates and information brokers for the target community. It is helpful to identify and make allies of individuals who can act as advocates and convincingly convey information about the museum’s proposed program to target audiences. This group might include religious leaders, community organizers, business and educational leaders, local community “heroes,” etc.

Members of community-based organizations can provide invaluable information about the culture of that community. Their guidance can help program directors tailor programs and exhibits, so that they fit the community’s culture. Such input gives the museum staff a basis for determining whether a program would appeal to the specific community.

Advisory boards are wonderful tools that invite voices from different constituencies to be heard. A community advisory board should represent a variety of backgrounds and professions. In addition, if at all possible, it should include key “gatekeepers” for the target community (i.e., civic, religious, or cultural leaders whose opinions are respected by members of that community). Participants can be compensated with free museum memberships. The community advisory board is a valuable source for reviewing pilot programs, as well. Advisory board members know the community. With their help, the museum is better able to develop programs that bridge the gaps in education and fulfill community needs. Advisory boards help museums directly serve their communities, building interest and trust with potential visitors.

We formed a 10-15 member community advisory board, and they said, ‘This is what our community needs.’ Every year our programs are developing under their watch, based on what the kids are not getting in school. We developed programs based on the needs of all four of our communities. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Focus groups are another tool for learning more about diverse communities, while also building relationships with members of those communities. By asking for input and recommendations, museums are indicating a willingness to listen to community representatives and to create relevant programs. In response, members of focus groups may become advocates in their home community for the museum, exhibit, or program.

We brought them in for a focus group to find out what they thought in terms of science, what their kids would like to know about, and what they would like to know about as a group. Through that focus group…we created a whole curriculum around their needs. That was very powerful for them, because they really participated and then it helped to retain their participation because they felt like we were asking them what they felt. A lot of them didn’t come from a science background, didn’t have a science education, but they knew that healthy eating, healthy living, learning about the body’s systems was something that could really impact them. And so that’s now how we’re building exhibits in the museum. (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Community partnerships can use the museum’s subject matter to bring together diverse groups, diffusing intergroup tensions by building relationships and mutual respect. Museums might consider developing activities that create mutual appreciation and understanding.

*If you can have kids of different schools working together and developing friendships, then those tensions go away.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)

**Design with Relevance in Mind**

Communities are constantly changing. It is important that museums evolve with the community. Just as museums have to be sensitive to ethnic differences, they must be sensitive to the ever-evolving forms of family. For example, many children are being raised by a grandparent or guardian. Be sure to discuss guidelines for participation in family learning with your community partner early on in program development. If an adult is needed, be flexible about who counts as an adult and an appropriate chaperone for a child, and what the required adult/child ratio is.

It is important to tell people what they can expect from a program to avoid surprises and discomfort. Museums can make the invitation to participate explicit and culturally appropriate by using communication tools and strategies of the target population. Outreach through community-oriented media can be very effective. Combined with appropriate programming and staffing, such promotion can make a whole new audience aware of and engaged with the museum.

*We talked with Somali TV, and its public access cable... and they came and even videotaped throughout the museum. We had a Somali volunteer at the time as well, and so she was doing a bunch of activities—that really helped. It was on Somali TV with Somali people watching. They saw that it was safe, that it was reinforced by community helpers.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Bridges participants noted that it is important to focus on specific target audiences for each program or exhibit. Building a connection to these audiences will enhance the program’s content and the audience’s comfort.
Provide Staff Training and Preparation and Obtain Buy-In

Staff cooperation is essential for developing long-term museum/community relationships with diverse audiences. Museums must be ready to train their staff to adopt new approaches, as needed, and to speak and dress in a manner that is most effective for welcoming the organization’s audience. For many visitors, staff clothing, mannerisms, and even use of language are important to feeling comfortable and engaged in the museum setting.

Now everybody wears bright colored lab coats, converse sneakers, and jeans, so that when the public does come in, they can feel like, 'Oh, scientists are cool. They don't just wear lab coats with glasses and pens in the pockets.' So, they had to change the way the museum felt on the floor, and I think that's made a difference that we're now seeing. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Take the Museum to the Community

One approach to reaching a community that is uncomfortable or unable to visit the museum is to take programs “out” to where the people are. Throughout the country, museums have developed successful outreach programs for their communities. For example, the Community Ambassadors in Science Exploration (CASE) program developed by the PISEC collaborative is a “teach the teacher” model in which community members from the partnering sites are trained to facilitate and implement science workshops in local environments that are accessible and familiar to the target communities. The four collaborating museums supply all the needed materials. Training community members as the teachers increases the capacity of the local community to share in science education. Confidence in the museum develops because people trust the local teacher who represents the museum.

The PISEC museums also host a free family event with transportation provided. Museum exhibits and programs are already familiar to families because of their workshop experiences. This familiarity increases their interest, connection, and sense of belonging.

Part of the solution is taking science to the community and encouraging parents to make science a part of their everyday lives. Introduce simple activities that you can do at home. (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Lessons Learned: Museum/Community Partnerships

Issues Regarding Visitor Diversity

• Building a diverse museum audience is a challenging, multi-faceted undertaking.

• Provide diversity training to museum staff (paid and volunteer)

• Know the audience with whom you are working. Take their wants and needs into account when designing exhibits and programs.

• Develop a key group of individuals who are part of the target community to serve as ongoing advisors.

• Engage members of the target audience in program planning and development.

• Be aware of the differences that exist within a cultural group.

• Recognize that tensions sometimes exist between cultural groups.

• Diversify the museum staff so everyone feels at home in the museum.

• Be cognizant of significant barriers to visiting the museum.

• When appropriate, consider taking programs out to the community.
Museums in the United States depend on multi-layered funding. Income is derived from a mix of public and private sources. Unlike international cultural establishments, which often depend on funds from a central government, American museums look to public appropriations, grants, tax receipts, individual and foundation donations and corporate gifts, as well as funding from earned income (admissions, program fees, food services, and gift shop sales). Some regions also subsidize cultural institutions with a “cultural tax” through the state or local government.

Fundraising can be difficult, but there are opportunities available to develop and win large, multi-year grants in support of particular programs and projects. Community programs for underserved youth and families are of great interest to many funders. Most funders are interested in seeing organizations collaborate to produce the greatest impact with their gifts. Grant funding is a reasonable option for collaborative projects between museums and underserved communities.

When grants are forthcoming, projects can begin and thrive. But what happens when the grant funding ends? This chapter discusses strategies for securing initial funds and later achieving financial sustainability for programs for underserved audiences. The literature is fairly sparse on this subject. Program evaluations, which normally culminate in a report summarizing project results, rarely include consideration of a project’s sustainability after the conclusion of a grant.

Topics considered at the Bridges Conference under the heading of financial sustainability included:

1. Collaboration as a Strategy for Securing Funds
2. Funding Through Grants
3. Building Financial Sustainability for Community Programs

Collaboration as a Strategy for Securing Funds: Insights from the Literature

Museums face many challenges when trying to obtain funding for programs. A current economic challenge is that funders have less money for contributions, and that more organizations are applying for these diminishing funds. As a result, many funders today are specifically looking for projects that bring together the strengths of several organizations to ensure that: (1) efforts on behalf of a particular population are not
duplicated; (2) the resources of each organization complement one another; and (3) larger audiences can be served.

Sometimes, museums (particularly larger institutions) have significant experience in developing grant proposals and managing major grant projects and may have reputations among funders as well-managed, outcomes-oriented awardees. However, museums may have difficulty in securing grants if the funds seem to benefit only traditional museum-goers, who are often perceived as relatively wealthy and thought to require less grant funding. CBOs may serve the at-risk or economically disadvantaged communities that many funders seek to support. Together, museums and CBOs combine a mix of experience, solid reputation, and underserved community audiences that is attractive to many funding organizations.

**Collaboration as a Strategy for Securing Funds: Insights from the Bridges Conference**

In order to economize and thrive, and keep collaborative programs operating, museums and CBOs have used a range of fundraising strategies, which will be discussed in the examples that follow. Some of these strategies, in addition to simply keeping the original program going, also move the project forward with new partnerships, elements or initiatives.

In addition to partnerships with community organizations, conference participants mentioned partnering with schools. Quite a few museums partner with public schools. Science is now included in standardized testing. Required science curriculum topics open the door to new relationships with local school districts, which may be willing to trade some of their content responsibilities for a program of visits to a science museum.

*I think there are a few places that are trying to contract with the school districts and trying to become embedded in their science curriculum more successfully, because of the pressure that schools or teachers have in fulfilling the science standards nationally and state-wide. To become more embedded in the schools as a part of their operating experiences, we can collaborate with schools, and that’s a great partnership and we can write great grants.*

(Bridges Conference, 2008)

**Funding Through Grants: Insights from the Literature**

One of the issues with grant funding is that all grants are time-limited. Once the grant funds are exhausted, if plans are not in place for sustained funding, programs may simply collapse. There are, however, options for sustained funding from other sources, including city, state and federal government.
Support from city, state, and federal representatives can keep the museum anchored in the community. Some legislators have been successful in earmarking a percentage of the state or city sales tax or a cultural tax for out-of-school educational programs. Useful relationships that can lead to acquiring such funds can be established at the local, state, and even the federal level, and typically take ongoing efforts on the part of the museum’s leadership team.

Annual reports, donor walls and tax forms (e.g., Form 990, submitted by nonprofit organizations) can also provide museums with helpful grant funding information, as well as knowledge about celebrities and individuals of wealth with a special interest in particular types of projects. For example, David Letterman provides financial support to the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis. Tom Hanks is a major donor to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

Online databases and other funding resources exist to help organizations search for funding opportunities. Some examples include:

- COS, a comprehensive online database for funding research (http://www.cos.com)
- GrantsNet, a free online research tool for funding science-related projects (http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/funding)
- The Research Assistant, an NIH database of funding options for science-related projects (http://www.theresearchassistant.com/funding/searchFdb.asp)
- AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) (http://www.americorps.gov)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (http://www.epa.gov)
- FAA-Industry Training Standards (FITS) (http://www.faa.gov/training_testing/training/fits)
- Gates Foundation (http://www.gatesfoundation.org/)
- Headstart (http://www.nhsa.org)
- Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (http://www.hud.gov)
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (http://www.imls.gov)
- US Department of Education (http://www.ed.gov/)
- National Science Foundation (http://www.nsf.gov)
- Science Education Partnership Award (SEPA) (http://www.ncrrsepa.org).

Collaborating with other cultural organizations helps to obtain funding. Organizations that work collaboratively attract interest from funders, because funding agencies can support multiple organizations with one grant award and leverage their philanthropic dollars. Some organizations, such as local universities, have a federal mandate to use a percentage of their grant funding for community education. Museums might explore the possibility of collaborating with such organizations.

**Funding Through Grants: Insights from the Bridges Conference**

At the Bridges Conference, frank discussion of funding options and issues made it clear that grants can be a useful resource, but can also create stress, as funds are depleted. Local foundations, corporations and government agencies can provide “seed” grants to get projects started. Often such projects require larger startup costs than the museum itself can provide. Once funds from seed grants run out, a successful
Lessons Learned: Part three Museum/Community Partnerships

A collaborative program may be able to attract additional grant funds. There is no guarantee, however, that this will be the case. In fact, most funders are wary of projects that require annual injections of cash and typically will not provide such ongoing funding.

Involving the state can be a fruitful method of subsidizing costs. One organization represented at the conference that has many outreach programs ensures that its state legislator receives credit for his efforts on their behalf. Representatives from this organization reported that this helps all parties: the legislator has a positive image, the organization receives support for its programs, and the community gains access with minimal cost.

_The top administration makes sure that we are connected to local and state [governments]...Then they can show that there is a really clear network in terms of the flow of money into the state, and lines of communication can be established at the federal level. So we have our lobbyist at the state level, and also at the federal level._ (Bridges Conference, 2008)

When museums think of requesting grants, they may be most likely to think of a small group of museum-oriented agencies to approach. However, museum/community collaborations may be engaged in work that is of interest to many different types of funders, thereby expanding grant funding options for such projects. Museums that think beyond the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the National Science Foundation may have less competition from other museums and may have access to larger funding pools.

_“[NASA] did some research around what keeps people in the STEM pipeline, and the number one indicator was ‘a quality, out-of-school time experience’. So, if you’re running an afterschool program in a science museum or planetarium, with content related to space exploration, aeronautics, space science, Earth science, or microgravity, NASA might be a potential funder for you.”_

_We also work with EPA because our science center is environmentally focused around…Lake Champlain…We can [put] some of that money towards helping underserved populations. It’s not an elitist issue, but an environmental issue._ (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Building Financial Sustainability: Insights from the Literature

Once a program gets started, can it be institutionalized through the museum’s annual budget? The decision to do this can be difficult: museums rarely have “additional” funds available for previously grant-funded programs. One option for finding ongoing funds is the Museum’s annual appeal. The problem with this
approach, however, is that annual funds are typically intended for general operating support (building maintenance, repairs, electric bills and the like).

Annual giving [by institutional donors] of $20 billion represents just over 10% of total giving in the United States, with individual donors giving by far the lion’s share of 75%. Therefore, helping a promising program prove its worth so that individuals will continue to support it is a way to leverage this relatively small pool of funds. (Butterfield, 2001)

Building Financial Sustainability: Insights from the Bridges Conference

At the Bridges Conference, participants discussed techniques for building financial sustainability relative to the museum's size, capacity and staff capabilities.

Hosting Public Events for Potential Donors

One way to initiate new financial relationships is to host an event at which potential funders can mingle and network. Some museums host dinners or exhibit opening parties, giving guests the opportunity to learn about their programs. The host provides a festive meal, and participants are free to talk to museum personnel. The goal is to create enough interest to secure future donations. Sometimes, these events become a lead-in for conversations about planned giving — bequests to the museum in support of specific programs.

Publishing

It is useful to create a printed program description to disseminate information about the program, particularly to potential funders.

We have published, and anything we have published has been contributed to and supported by the publishers. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Generating Income through Programs

Program fees may become necessary to support a collaborative effort. However, it is important not to discourage first-time museum visitors. There is an unresolved debate about whether or not to charge low-income families for programs. Most organizations do not like charging underserved populations, yet they must ensure that the costs of programs are covered. Partial subsidies can dramatically reduce program costs. A corporate sponsor made it possible for one organization to cut its afterschool program fee in half.

If you are trying to reach a group of parents who really never take their children to the museum, and then start charging them for this commitment, you’re never going to get them.

It feels like accountability — it is a value thing that way. Like, when you were a kid, if your parents handed you a new bike, you would probably trash that thing in the first year. But, if you bought the bike
out of your own allowance, you probably took care of it, and it’s sort of that same analogy about the value of something that you’re at least paying something toward. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

People seem to enjoy experiences more when they have invested something in them. Fees demand commitment. A research study performed by C. B. Bhattacharya (1998) supports the idea that visitors are less likely to maintain their membership when that membership is received as a gift. When there is no fee, people may undervalue the program. However, appropriate pricing depends on the audience. Program fees should reflect the abilities and experience of the community.

When we’re not using our classrooms for outreach programs, we use our classes for ages two through fifth grade, for families who want to bring their kid in once a week for a class on science and nature. They pay the tuition, the annual tuition, for that class and they continue throughout the program. They can start at two years old and continue and then graduate in fifth grade. That helps us pay for whatever it is that we need for the outreach groups. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Renting Out Space

Museums rarely use all their space all the time, and rentals have become a common way to increase income. Depending upon the type of space available, renters may range from wedding parties to schools.

Selling Sponsorships

Corporations that give few official “grants” may be motivated to support high profile programs that carry their corporate name and logo. A museum-CBO collaborative that is often in the public eye can attract a local corporation with an interest in reaching the community and creating goodwill. Working through specific contacts is a good way to target corporate funders who are appropriate for a particular project.

Tapping Lists and Databases

A straightforward technique for locating individuals or charities with an interest in your project is by looking at the donor lists for other, similar projects.

Almost everyone credits their funders on flyers when they have events and, at the risk of sounding like you’re stealing someone else’s list, there are some really nice suggestions there. You start finding out that there are funders in your community by seeing who has been listed on someone else’s list. And I think ultimately, most people want to be multiple funders of other efforts. (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Strategies for Attaining Financial Sustainability

- Consider the financial sustainability of a museum-CBO project early in the process.

- Be aware that grant funding may be available for museum-CBO collaborations, but that such support may only finance the start-up phase of a program.

- Look into programs with city, state, and federal governments.

- Explore options for ongoing funding, including local foundations, corporations, and individuals, charging for services, renting out space, and building the costs for the program into the museum’s operating budget or annual giving.

- Think about options for partnering with schools, universities, or other local agencies and working together to write grant proposals and/or raise funds.

- Personal contacts with corporations, celebrities and/or wealthy individuals can lead to ongoing financial support for a worthy program.

- Think creatively about unusual sources of funding that may be interested in your programs and explore donor lists for other programs and institutions.
Museum-CBO collaborations often involve subsidized opportunities for CBO members to visit the museum. Special programs are developed to ensure that participating families feel welcome and comfortable. Subsidized programs may enable museum staff to provide refreshments, and even gifts (e.g., educational/promotional items). Yet, even when their first experience in a museum setting is so positive, few participants take it upon themselves to visit on their own and even fewer become museum members. Why might families continue to feel out of place, bored, or confused in a setting that has gone out of its way to welcome them?

Converting to Museum Visitors: Insights from the Literature

Non-Traditional Visitors in the Museum

Traditional museum visitors come with an understanding of what a museum is, how it is organized, and how to access information about galleries, programs, and events. As parents, they bring their children to the museum, both to offer cultural enrichment and to provide them with early lessons in how to access and enjoy all that museums have to offer. For such visitors, standard museum wayfinding tools, docents, labeling, and programs are familiar and accessible.

As museums open their doors to a more diverse audience, however, it becomes increasingly important to understand the needs of new audiences. How do they feel in a typical museum gallery? How comfortable are they with wayfinding, labels, docents, and other interpretive programs and materials? So far, the research suggests that museums must make quite a few changes to welcome and retain nontraditional visitors.

Grant McCracken (2003) studied visitor behavior in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, uncovering a variety of issues confronting museum visitors.

1. A young mother always felt overwhelmed when she took her ten-year-old daughter into the museum. She fell into the habit of “floating… simultaneously purposeful and directionless…but she could not find a place to begin” (p. 139). She felt embarrassed asking a museum volunteer for help when her daughter needed an explanation – “there is too much information, too much reading” (p. 139).

2. An older woman had just returned to the museum after a twenty-year absence. She felt the museum atmosphere was demeaning – dry and academic, like it always knew more than she.
3. Three twenty-something year-old men visited the museum together to mock its old-fashioned exhibits. They had a great time going through together, but left without the slightest feeling of self-improvement. They said that museums need to keep up with the times.

The very different responses of museum visitors described above are unlikely to come close to the diversity that now defines our urban communities. Even in 2002, Eric Jolly, CEO of the Science Museum of Minnesota, reported that the immigrant population in the United States was growing rapidly. In addition, he said that “80 percent of the increase in the U.S. population over the last 10 years has occurred in what is identified as the ‘minority population’.”

*These demographics are no longer trends; they are descriptions of what our world looks like now.* (Jolly, ASTC Dimensions Jan/Feb 2002)

Clearly, the cultural and linguistic needs of new populations must be taken into account as museums plan for the future. Simply providing an open door and a welcome mat will not be enough. In the case of museum-CBO collaborations, it seems critically important to ensure that the museum is prepared to make new populations feel comfortable and engaged before extending an invitation to come and visit. Without the involvement of members of that target population, it will be difficult for museums to become the diverse, welcoming places they aspire to be.

*It seems a shame that families and young people are ignored in the planning and treated hostilely when they do show up.* (Hood, 1993, p. 721)

*The very quiet and security that frequent visitors find enhancing to their comfort are environmental factors that resonate negatively with occasional and hardly-ever guests.* (Hood, 1993, p. 716)

**Ensuring the Right Promotional Package**

In order to reach non-traditional audiences, it is critical to have the right marketing and advertising strategies. Marilyn Hood recommends developing a psychographic report on each target community to better understand potential members’ “attitudes, opinions, interests, values, concepts of self, personality traits, goals, activities, group memberships, social position, and consumption behavior. These factors explain motivation, expectations, satisfaction, and willingness to be involved with museums” (Hood, 1993). Find out which newspapers and radio and television stations are most widely supported in a given area and apply that information. When those depicted in advertisements look and sound like one of the community’s own, it draws more interest from the public. Seeing a familiar face also communicates a sense of safety and support for the community.

Community service announcements and community bulletins are useful resources for informing the public about the museum. In addition, a trade with another organization can help both parties involved. For example, a museum partnering with a radio station could agree to host the station’s event at the museum. That way, there is free airtime for the museum and event space for use by the station.

Advertising and promotion should take into account not only economic incentives and buying habits, but also potential new members’ lifestyles. For example, it is important to know which visiting days and hours are best for the specific group. Do people go out on Saturdays or Sundays? What times of day do parents generally
Lessons Learned: Part Four Museum/Community Partnerships

work? Which seasons attract the most attendance? Every museum has lull time, which can be filled with organized groups or other programs. Work with the community’s schedule to achieve the best fit.

Enhancing the Non-Traditional Visitor’s Experience

When people can comfortably maneuver their way around the museum, they are better able to enjoy the exhibits. Adequate signage supports museum navigation. Hood (1993) reported that infrequent visitors are less likely than frequent visitors to ask for directions. If people cannot comfortably get around the museum themselves, they are more likely to have a negative experience. Furthermore, providing adequate accessibility and child-friendly facilities ensures that the museum properly acknowledges its family audience.

Providing seating is another way to tell visitors that they are expected to relax and enjoy their visit, not rush around until they leave completely exhausted. Comfortable seating around the exhibits gives the museum a welcoming feel and invites guests to take their time.

Helping Visitors Feel Comfortable With the Staff

Guests are attracted to organizations where they feel represented. If the community has a large representation of a specific group, it is important to have someone on staff who is fluent in their language. In general, museums need to hire staff that is culturally diverse. This increases the chance that anyone can walk into the museum and feel comfortable. Being greeted by a member of one’s own community increases the attractiveness of the unfamiliar.

Some museums have reported difficulty in diversifying their staff, especially in teaching positions. Diversity may not be represented in the applicant pool. One suggestion for those in that situation is to create a ladder of opportunity (“career ladder”) that attracts young people from a previously uninvolved community and train them so they have the opportunity to move up through the ranks. Youth programs can serve as a source for diversifying staff. If students get involved in the museum culture, they will eventually become a potential source of staff. (Sickler and Johnson, 2009).

Another approach is to raise general awareness in the community. Working in a museum is not a career that most people know about or consider a feasible option. Posting job opportunities in broadly read newspapers, as well as local circulars, tells the community:
‘We recognize you and know you’re out there,’ it also says, ‘We value you and want you and others like you to be part of our staff.’ (Steuert, 1993, p. 30)

Helping Visitors Feel Comfortable In the Exhibits

Language and literacy can be barriers for some families. Some museums have had success by translating exhibits into multiple languages. This is important, but costly. Pictures, digital voice recordings, or cell phone tours in multiple languages can serve as helpful supplements. Digital alternatives supply multiple language options without taking up large amounts of space. Soliciting feedback to identify the specific needs of the community and asking their thoughts on the matter will reveal the most fruitful solutions.

Exhibits should be engaging and interesting. Ted Ansbacher, in a 2002 article in *Curator*, reported that the most successful exhibits are experience-based and connect to daily life. Interactions should be thematically related so visitors can create mental bridges between the interactions and their own prior information. It may also be important to create and promote exhibits that specifically include some content related to diverse cultural and ethnic groups.

Overcoming Stereotypes

Despite a desire on the part of museums to invite and include visitors of all backgrounds, negative feelings persist on the part of individuals from non-Caucasian backgrounds. In essence, there is a general (though not universal) feeling that “museums are not for us.” According to John Falk, in an article entitled “Leisure Decisions Influencing African-American Use of Museums,”

> Although only a very small number of individuals expressly stated that they had observed or experienced racism in museums, there was a widespread sense that such problems still exist. (Falk, 1993)

Traditionally, museums are conservative, quiet places of learning. However, the digital age has given rise to exhibits full of texture, color, and sound. The shift towards interactive exhibits invites participation and engagement from new audiences. With interactive exhibits, people can feel in control.

When asked, most people say that science is hard and only meant for “other people.” It is the goal of science museums to show the public that science is accessible to everyone.

Converting to Visitors: Insights from the Bridges Conference

Make the Museum Affordable

In some communities, free and low-cost passes and coupons are available through public libraries. Other communities offer free or low cost museum coupons through the schools, through funded programs, and even through newspaper ads. If a family can walk in the door of the museum for little or no cost, and the right support systems, exhibits and programs are in place, there is the likelihood of turning a casual visit into a long-term relationship.
You can check it [the library pass] out like a book. The community service agencies, perhaps 52 community service agencies, have the same thing. They have this pass that can be borrowed and give a reduced rate to the museum.

We’ve got multiple passes out at libraries. We get corporate funding to have those passes distributed through the libraries.

In Chicago, it’s called a city pass. You can go to the library and check it out, and you can go to any museum in the city for free.

On Friday night we charge a dollar. It’s from 5-9 pm. We have regular visitors who come every week. If you think about it, they are paying for a full year membership, but they are paying a dollar at a time. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Incentives – free membership, passes, discount coupons, community nights, free nights – increase attendance by moving the museum up on the list of alternatives for leisure time activities. While the admission fee is not always what keeps visitors from coming, a lower price can make the venture more attractive. Some patrons who take advantage of a free night do not necessarily need to come on a free night. It is a way to get people in the door to discover what they have been missing.

Once you have them – you have them. They are coming back.

We got three times as many people as expected [coming to our free night], and now we have the same number of people over two days, because one day was too crazy. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Make the Museum Physically Accessible

Despite free and low-cost opportunities to visit the museum, other factors continue to deter visitors. Transportation is a large issue for some guests, even with a museum pass, how do they get there? If the cost of parking is high, that too could be an issue. Eight dollar parking, for example, could deter visitors from coming.

The coupons and passes really only address one of the barriers that keep people from visiting the museums. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

There are a variety of different models for museum passes that provide flexibility for non-traditional visitors. A multi-visit pass can be a useful tool for welcoming visitors who have unconventional work schedules. There may be no one time that the entire family can enjoy a museum together. With unorthodox work schedules and children participating in multiple activities, the multi-visit pass allows family members to use it when they can. They do not have to come all together or even know their schedules ahead of time.

A VIP (Very Important Person/Parent) program can support visits by groups rather than individuals or families. Another option is a reserved pass that provides access to the museum only on a specific day. Making the pass good for a concrete date enhances the value of the experience, and may make attendance more likely.
Creating a Sense of Ownership

Members of non-dominant groups tend to want to “see themselves” in the exhibit. If there is no connection, visitors may not be able to sustain their interest. Roadblocks that decrease connectivity include, but are not limited to, language barriers and unfriendly layouts.

*People don't see themselves in these exhibits. …There was a lot of discussion …about taking an exhibit, a very critical-looking science exhibit, and turning it into something very personal that makes this person connect so that people can walk in and see themselves. That's a very big discussion and I don't know that they ever solved the problem. I think sometimes that seeing yourself in that exhibit or someone who looks like you or experiencing something similar to you makes that connection.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)

Turning Program Participants into Visitors

What can be done to ensure that program participation turns into independent attendance? Museums have had success with a variety of approaches, from museum passes to free lectures, to classes.

*We partner with community service organizations that offer services to our underrepresented populations and do outreach programs to bring the families back to the museum and give them a pass, sort of trying to get them to be repeat visitors. The partnering organizations were community service organizations in the city and it's a marketing strategy.*

*When we have special exhibits, we will do a series of lectures around the exhibit or topic …and lectures are normally free. Some you have to RSVP for to get a seat. They will have authors, poets, and anyone that will be knowledgeable on the topic. We will invite the community to come in and participate in this lecture series. We're trying to target not just the kids, but also the adults who are responsible for bringing the kids in, and help them to build a connection with the museum.*

*We've had ESL classes at the museum. It's a twofer. They're doing a class they have to do anyway. And the ESL classes have themes! One could be global warming.* (Bridges Conference, 2008)
Engaging Family Visitors

The nature of the museum, its exhibits, and its programs all play a role in the level of visitors’ enjoyment. Do the exhibits relate to visitors’ interests and life experiences? Are the materials designed to communicate on a variety of levels? Are there opportunities for different types of learners to engage with the materials and enjoy the experience?

Some parents are intimidated to come to an institution focusing on math and science. How can a museum create exhibits where everyone participates in the same activity as a team without the parents feeling threatened or embarrassed?

Parents have to understand they do not have to have the right answer, rather there’s a process. (Bridges Conference, 2008)

One solution is to involve the whole family through a scavenger hunt. This is a fun activity that gives parents a special role. Parents can hold the question sheet, and the kids report back with the information.

Another way of preventing parental discomfort is to create easy, straightforward exhibit explanations using a process of formative evaluation. When parents can read and understand the material they can interpret it for their children. This is empowering for the parent, educational for everyone, and, most importantly, a shared experience.

Another approach is to hold group information sessions for the parents, focusing on math and science content. This way, the parents can become comfortable with new information before their children demand explanations.
Converting Subsidized Program Participants into Museum Visitors

- Start slowly by developing neighborhood programs, which gradually draw new guests to the museum. Building trust in the community is essential to increasing museum patronage.

- Free or low-cost coupons and passes are a good way to bring first-time visitors into the museum. Various models for such passes may encourage multiple or group visits.

- Once inside the museum, non-traditional visitors generally need to feel a sense of personal connection to the exhibits and staff. Exhibit material should be vibrant and diverse, with content relevant to the community.

- Staff should reflect the diversity of the community.

- The facility should be easy to navigate. The entrance should be visible and the floor plan clear and inviting.

- Content should be explained in the languages that are prevalent, or there should be staff members or volunteers who have the appropriate language skills.

- Volunteers and staff in the museum need to feel comfortable hosting a diverse group of visitors. Front line staff should be prepared to welcome new guests to the museum and to answer their questions.
The Takeaway Messages

The research and the findings from the Bridges Conference are surprising in their consistency and apparent simplicity. In fact, the question “how should museums reach out, engage, and collaborate with non-traditional communities” can be answered in just a few simple recommendations:

- Choose collaborators with care.
- Communicate well and often with your partners.
- Design exhibits and programs that are relevant and interesting to your constituency.
- Be sure that your museum staff, programs, and exhibits reflect the diverse community you have invited to your museum.
- Maintain an ongoing presence in the community by ensuring ongoing funding for inclusive programs and exhibits; do not drop the ball after one or two “inclusive” programs, exhibits, or hires.

While all of these recommendations seem simple, straightforward and actionable, their implementation requires effort. Differences in culture, difficulties with communication, lack of funding, and flagging interest can all negatively impact the outcome of a museum/community collaboration. While researchers and Bridges participants all offer clues to success, only creative, consistent, collaborative, well-funded efforts are likely to withstand the test of time.

Much of the discussion at the Bridges Conference was pragmatic. While questions about managing registration, event fees, and non-attendance at meetings may appear trivial, addressing such questions can mean the difference between success and failure. In theory, outreach and collaboration should be a positive experience for all. In fact, however, practical issues may intervene. Through the process of discussion and debate, participants in the Bridges Conference were able to “unpack” common concerns, present practical solutions to widespread problems, and air shared frustrations. It is hoped that the lessons learned through the Bridges Conference will be helpful to others engaged in museum/community partnerships.


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