

Portal to the Public: An approach for supporting scientists in their public engagement work

Informal Science Education organizations (ISEs) are well recognized as an ideal partner for education and outreach-based Broader Impacts work: individual STEM PIs often seek out ISEs as partners for BI fulfillment, and ISEs have significant interest in growing relationships with universities and colleges around BI work. In many cases these collaborations are transactional, but BI work presents an opportunity for a deeper connection between the goals and priorities of individual PIs and potential partnering ISEs. In order to take full advantage of this opportunity, it's critical that ISEs are acknowledged as more than just providers of a venue for education/outreach work: they bring valuable expertise, structure, resources, and community contacts to BI work and partnerships.

Portal to the Public is a professional learning community for those working in science communication and public engagement, which has long advocated for the value of ISEs in accomplishing the broader goals of education/outreach work. Led by the Institute for Learning Innovation, Portal to the Public offers an approach designed to help organizations connect public audiences with the scientists working in their communities through face-to-face interactions at public programs and events. The approach is backed by research and has been funded by both the National Science Foundation (NSF) and by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Currently the Portal to the Public project is the basis for another NSF-funded initiative, Partnerships for Broader Impacts Design (BID), which is specifically focused on supporting university/ISE partnerships around BI work.

The hallmark of the Portal to the Public approach is a flexible guiding framework that gives organizations the ability to design and scale specific strategies to fit their own goals. The framework focuses on three key components:

1. Building relationships between ISE staff and the scientists and science-based organizations in their community
2. Professional development that prepares scientists to have conversations about their work in informal learning environments
3. Public programs that feature face-to-face interactions with scientists

In the twelve years since initial funding, more than 60 organizations across North America have worked with the Portal to the Public team to develop a comprehensive plan for integrating the guiding framework into their operations. Many others have adopted components of the framework independently. Originally focused on science museums, the community has expanded to include zoos, aquariums, natural history museums, botanical gardens, research centers, scientific associations, and university groups.

Through their work with Portal to the Public, each of these organizations is prepared to provide comprehensive support to a scientist who seeks to participate in public engagement activities, from initial training through final program logistics. Each of these components is most effective when linked to the others: within the Portal the Public approach, professional development for scientists is designed around the particulars of the outreach program or event that the scientist is preparing for. Similarly, scientists are supported as they develop goals and expectations that correspond to the kinds of impacts that are achievable in informal learning environments. The

approach emphasizes the notion that good public engagement work has beneficial impacts on both public audiences and on the scientists themselves, who often describe themselves as energized and inspired by their work with ISE partners and by public engagement work.

Organizations that adopt the Portal to the Public approach build on the skills that are typically found among staff members of ISE organizations, including expertise in building community partnerships, event planning and program management, exhibit and curriculum design, activity facilitation, and producing learning experiences for people with a wide range of needs, motivations, and interests. These areas of expertise are all valuable parts of creating effective education-based broader impacts experiences, and ISE organizations are often happy to direct these assets towards BI support, as long as their efforts are appropriately reflected in the budget.

To learn more about the Portal to the Public approach, visit popnet.instituteforlearninginnovation.org, or contact Eve Klein at eve.klein@freechoicelearning.org