



# PORTAL to the Public



## Progress Update, March 2010

*Portal to the Public is a proven, scalable guiding framework for Informal Science Educators to engage scientists and public audiences in face-to-face interactions that promote appreciation and understanding of current scientific research and its application.*

Portal to the Public, a 3.25 year initiative funded by NSF, began in July 2007. Our program development model centers around three distinct iterations of professional development for scientists and public programs at each of the three museum institutions: Pacific Science Center, Explora and the North Museum of Natural History and Science. Currently, in March of 2010, we find ourselves at the end of our third program iteration. The guiding framework we developed continues to evolve and improve as we learn from our experiences, each other and the field.

## Professional Development for Scientists

At each museum site, Portal to the Public teams have developed and executed a variety of professional development experiences, workshop series, one-on-one support systems and models of collaborative activity development. The professional development elements all support a common set of intended impacts on participating scientists. We have drafted a suite of resources that can be applied to fit unique scientist and program needs at any institution, and will complete final revisions to materials by October 2010.

### Professional Development Impacts

1. Scientists develop communication strategies that support inquiry.
2. Scientists and ISE staff work together to design and facilitate materials-rich and other learning experiences that actively involve and affect all parties.
3. Scientists understand the importance to learning of developing personal connections with audiences' based on shared experiences.
4. Scientists develop a broader understanding of how people learn and the nature of informal learning environments.
5. Scientists and ISE staff develop an understanding of the organizational culture of each other's institutions.



*"Our relationships with these scientists are casual, comfortable, jovial and collaborative. These scientists were very excited to be a part of the project, very eager to understand more about how people learn, very willing to make a substantial time commitment (the scientists each spent at least nine months with us) and very willing to accept us as the experts on developing physical materials that will help visitors have direct engagement with the scientists' work."*

Kristin Leigh, Portal to the Public co-PI at Explora



## Public Programs

Public programs brought scientists and public audiences together in meaningful face-to-face interactions at all three museum sites. We used a variety of program formats, including a large scale event with over fifty scientists, traditional presentations, and small-scale interactions in intimate program spaces. In many cases, families have sat with scientists and engaged with physical materials related to their work, sometimes for over an hour.

## Research

Initially, we conducted front-end research with science center visitors, researchers/scientists and ISE staff to gain deeper insights into attitudes, interest, perceived barriers and needs. Professional development activities and public programs were evaluated formatively at each of the three core sites to provide general feedback. Our goals in this period were to improve practice and to extract unique and shared aspects of approaches and strategies, which ultimately informed the guiding framework. We have now moved to the research portion of the project where data collection has begun and full analysis will be complete by October 2010.



## Building a Professional Learning Community

Portal to the Public continues to reach out to and learn from the broader Informal Science Education community. We published a document of key findings from the Portal to the Public Synthesis Meeting (held in January 08) titled *Face to Face with Scientists*, meant to be an enduring resource for the field (available at [www.pacificsciencecenter.org/portal/synthesis](http://www.pacificsciencecenter.org/portal/synthesis)). We also hosted a successful extended session at the 2008 ASTC conference titled *Critical Issues in Building a Portal to the Public for Current Science Research* and a pre-conference workshop on Professional Development for scientists at ASTC 2009.

## Pilot Dissemination

Portal to the Public welcomed five more institutions in to our team within the last year. We began this effort with a three day training workshop in Seattle in June 2009. These museums have nearly completed their implementation of the Portal to the Public guiding framework at their sites. The group includes: **North Carolina Museum of Life and Science, Explorit, Adventure Science Center, Discovery Center of Springfield and Discovery Center Museum.**



*"Although not technically required by the grant, we need to explore ways to have a sustained engagement with scientists and with members of the public."*

Dennis Schatz, Portal to the Public PI at Pacific Science Center

*"We couldn't be more pleased with the ability to provide visitors with the opportunity to engage in experiential activities with the scientists who are neighbors in their community."*

Kristin Leigh, Portal to the Public co-PI at Explora

*"Our strategic goal--to be a 'resource to the community' is being realized through Portal to the Public, and we are becoming the place to tell those personal stories that led to an interest in science."*

Margie Marino, Portal to the Public co-PI at North Museum of Natural History and Science



For more information please visit [www.pacificsciencecenter.org/portal](http://www.pacificsciencecenter.org/portal) or contact Lauren Russell, Portal to the Public Project Manager at [lrussell@pacsci.org](mailto:lrussell@pacsci.org). Portal to the Public is made possible with funding from the National Science Foundation under Grant No. DRL-0639021.