

Institutional Acceptance of Audience Research

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The special *Visitor Behavior* issue on the theme of "The Institutional Acceptance of Visitor Evaluation" (Volume 11, No. 2, Summer, 1996) offered pertinent and valuable guidance.

As a Visitor Studies Association member who specializes in audience research rather than evaluation, I'd like to describe additional situations that affect or inhibit the institutional acceptance of audience research — both the concept and the findings from research projects.

1. The proposed study timetable is often too short to produce quality results that are worth institutionalizing. It is not unusual for a museum to request a proposal for a sizable audience research project in March, expect the study to begin in May, and want to have the results ready to implement in August.

The most important phase in audience research is the initial planning and conceptualizing stage, in which every step is anticipated, discussed, and prepared before any action is taken. When this stage is shortchanged, the project is unlikely to produce data that will be of value in decision making and future planning. Sometimes, when museums discover that conducting quality research will require more than a few months to accomplish, they cobble together a "quickie" version of a study that is incapable of producing valid and reliable results. Institutionalizing faulty results garnered from a hasty project is not beneficial and can be damaging.

2. The sequencing of audience research and of strategic planning is out of order. Frequently, the institution's decision to conduct audience research follows the completion of its strategic plan, when it should have been the first step in the plan. Data from audience research should be the basis from which other aspects of the strategic plan develop.

When research data dispute or negate conclusions already reached in the strategic planning process, the research data are ignored because of commitments already made. The rationale is: "We're too far along in the process to accommodate the research data that disagree with our strategic plan decisions. We can't change our current direction — even though it may be the wrong direction."

3. Valid and reliable research findings may not be implemented because to do so would require changes — perhaps major changes — in the way the institution operates. However, research is conducted primarily to learn something new, not merely to confirm what is already known or being done.

We should expect that research data will lead us to different conclusions than we would have reached if we had not conducted a study. Accepting the concept of research as a tool by which to gain knowledge and improve one's institution implies that one is ready to accept and make changes; otherwise, there's no point in undertaking the research in the first place.

4. Staff members who are committed to leading implementation of the research results leave for other jobs. This usually means that no one is eager to push institutional acceptance of the results, no one has the dedication, enthusiasm, time, clout, and resources to insure that the results are integrated into decisions and actions.

Then, the research results are shelved, current staff members fall back into old ways, new staff members are unaware of the findings, and things go on as if no study had been carried out. Just as Michael Spock (1996) pointed out that evaluation will not become imbedded in an institution's culture unless a senior staff member gives it encouragement and protection, so is this true with the implementation of research results, which are often farther-reaching and longer-term in their application.

5. A major impediment to institutional acceptance of research results is in not realizing the amount of

time, effort, time, commitment, time, money, and time that the project will require — not just within the active planning, data gathering, and reporting of results, but over the long term.

Changes in direction require careful, sensitive development, not brusque imposition. Some research results *should* be implemented over a period of years because of their overall impact, both for the institution and its users. However, when desired changes don't take place immediately, it is easy for staff to become discouraged with the process and to lose enthusiasm for audience research generally.

One of the most important benefits of any substantive research project should be learning how to conduct research correctly, to be able to utilize this knowledge in future studies. Unfortunately, when institutionalization of results from the original study falters, enthusiasm for research may diminish, the lessons about conduct of research may be forgotten, and the organization may never undertake another audience research project.

6. The biggest drawback to institutional acceptance of research results is not bringing into the project at the outset everyone who will be affected by the results. When people are not offered opportunity for input at the beginning, they have no stake in implementing the results.

When trust in the process and its outcomes is built from the beginning and throughout the study by soliciting input and keeping everyone informed as the study progresses, people have some reason to "buy in." There is no surer way to defeat the goals of a project than to hand someone a report and say, "The research results say that you, or your department, should do this." Their most likely response is to ignore, demean, or subvert.

Conclusions: Therefore, if the institution allows adequate time and resources, solicits input and develops support for use of the results, and prepares several staff members to carry out implementation, the institutional acceptance of research results will be facilitated and the goals of a project will be accomplished.

Reference

Spock, M. (1996). Evaluation climates and conversations. *Visitor Behavior*, 11(2), 8-10.

A Summary of Recent Research and Evaluation Studies in the University of Florida Program on Learning in Informal Settings

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Introduction

The Learning in Informal Settings Program at the University of Florida is housed in the College of Education and the Florida Museum of Natural History. Studies are also done in cooperation with faculty and students in the Latin American Studies Center which has a museum studies minor, as well as with the Program for Studies in Tropical Conservation housed in The Department of Wildlife and Range Sciences.

Research and evaluation that has been done in recent years uses as its guiding model four interacting variables: (1) visitor characteristics; (2) visitor processing activities; (3) exhibit type; and (4) other variables. The researcher or evaluator attempts to control to as great an extent as possible, the variables in one or more of these categories while manipulating the variable of interest. Outcome variables are a major consideration in all research and evaluation studies.

Research Studies

While evaluation studies in informal settings are guided by evaluation models (Screven, 1990), research studies will usually have a theoretical foundation (Koran & Koran, 1995). Cognitive psychology research and theory and recent "Constructivist" extrapolations have formed the basis for most of the research studies that have been done at the University of Florida in recent years (Koran, et. al, 1988a; Koran, et al., 1984; Koran, et. al., 1983).

Two studies which are the best recent examples of this work have been Foster (1992) and Ellis