

## EDITOR'S NOTE

In the last several years, a popular area of research has been misconceptions that students and the general public hold regarding science. Misconceptions are not the exclusive domain of students and the general public. Articles in this issue suggest that many professionals who work with visitors have their share of misconceptions also. Some misconceptions are related to how museum professionals perceive visitors. Marilyn Hood's article, "Misconceptions Held by Museum Professionals" addresses some of these notions (e.g., "People who come once to the museum will be seduced into returning."). Bill Ford's summary on page 5 also addressed a common misconception about visitors: that people's verbal reports are accurate predictors of their behavior. My article, "Common Beliefs About Visitors..." on page 6 offers a few more such misconceptions.

Another form of misconception deals with how professionals view visitor evaluation. Jeff Hayward (see below), in his article entitled "Four Common Misconceptions About Visitor Research and Evaluation" discusses preconceptions he has found in his work. Several of the items on Marilyn Hood's list also apply (e.g., "Survey research is simple/easy to do..."). On pages 11-12, I contribute several other common beliefs. [Readers who disagree are encouraged to submit their thoughts for future issues of *Visitor Behavior*.]

In addition to the misconceptions of visitor studies, this issue contains information on the 1991 Visitor Studies Conference and membership in the Visitor Studies Association. We hope that readers will consider both.

Steve Bitgood, Editor

### Four Common Misconceptions about Visitor Research and Evaluation\*

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#### Misconception #1: Evaluation means "good" vs. "bad."

In most cases, evaluation research is planned to investigate "how" and "why" rather than "good" or "bad." The designer or program director should help set up the goals for evaluation, asking questions such as: "Do people use this exhibit in the same way that we thought they would?" and "How well does this program work for school groups compared to family groups?" and "How could we experiment with the labels so that visitors will better understand the instructions?"

#### Misconception #2: Evaluation is done AFTER the project is completed.

The conventional view of evaluation is that it starts after an exhibit opens to the public ("How can you evaluate

something if it isn't built yet?). Unfortunately, this approach reinforces the first misconception because all the key decisions have been made already -- the main questions being asked after the exhibit opens are "Was this an effective project, or a waste of money?" and "Should we do it this way next time?" Instead, evaluation CAN be conducted before an exhibit or program is implemented. It can take the form of analyzing the likely audience (their interests, patterns of behavior), evaluating existing models or precedents for the new project, or pre-testing parts of the project in mock-ups or demonstrations. Certainly, evaluation should also include analyzing visitor use and reactions to the completed project, but it should start at the beginning of the development process. It is especially important to have an early discussion about the *decision* to do evaluation, because it will affect other project decisions such as whether to set aside a portion of the budget for revisions.

#### Misconception #3: Evaluation always costs a lot of money.

Most practical evaluation activities are a small component of a project, and can be quite effective for as little as 5-10% of the overall budget. For this effort, there should be a professional-level person to design the evaluation strategy, supervise the process, participate in team meetings, analyze data, and prepare summaries of the results. When choosing a person to coordinate the evaluation, remember that his/her role will require "bits and pieces" of time throughout the project -- it isn't usually the type of task which someone can be assigned to for a block of time.

#### Misconception #4: Anyone can do it.

Experience with evaluation helps to clarify the evaluator's role as different from designer, educator, developer or administrator. Museum staff should participate in every evaluation process, with the role of evaluator added to the team and probably conducted by a person without other roles on the project. There are potential problems if the evaluation is directed by the same person who develops an exhibit or program (the person who is also responsible for opening on time, making changes, starting to work on the next project), as it may be difficult to maintain impartiality or to emphasize one's own successes. Also, there are a variety of research skills to be learned: an experienced evaluator should know how to help define and measure objectives, how to create an evaluation strategy (including topics such as sampling, appropriate research methods, interviewing bias, techniques of observation), and have solid skills in teamwork and data analysis. Experience also brings a sense of perspective; for example, if 42% of the visitors learned something from the exhibit, is that high, low or average? A researcher/evaluator can help to interpret such results.

\* Adapted from an article published in *Children's Environments Quarterly*, Spring, 1987, 4(1).