

Natural Partners: Science Centers and the National Academies

By David A. Ucko, Ph.D.

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Science centers are “audience-rich.” They have tremendous capacity to educate the public, reaching millions of visitors in communities around the globe. At the same time, they usually struggle with finding ways to engage families and schoolchildren in current science topics and issues.

The National Academies, on the other hand, are “content-rich.” Chartered by President Lincoln in 1863 as “advisors to the nation,” the not-for-profit National Academy of Sciences and its sister institutions--the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council--conduct more than 200 studies a year on a wide range of critical issues related to science, engineering, and health care policy. The resulting reports provide balanced, unbiased, evidence-based advice to U.S. policymakers and to leaders in business, education and health care. Recent topics have included genetically modified crops, ways people learn, emerging infections, science education reform, and the implications of new technologies, to name just a few.

Although the Academies’ research reports are disseminated beyond a small circle of decision makers, they remain a largely untapped resource for increasing public understanding of the links between science and society--particularly where science-based issues touch people’s lives. Bringing together cutting-edge content and audiences eager to learn more about how that content affects them seem a natural basis for forming productive partnerships.

Efforts to make this connection are already under way at the National Academy of Sciences, where the Koshland Science Museum is building on Academy resources to develop interactive experiences based on current scientific issues. These are being designed not only as a means to encourage thought and discussion among visitors, but also as a way to stimulate interest in, and further understanding of, underlying basic science, including the nature of scientific inquiry. Our goal is to create modules for our Washington, D.C. site (with the capacity built in for regular change to keep them current) that can be replicated for use at interested science centers. Such modules would enable science centers to present “hot” topics while allowing us to reach a far greater audience by serving as a “feeder” museum.

Other opportunities exist for “information transfer.” For example, the Academies’ Center for Education, which produced the National Science Education Standards, continues to study learning, teacher training, math education, standardized testing, and related areas. Science centers that choose to make this latest research available to teachers and parents could become focal points for grassroots advocacy to catalyze local school reform.

As part of our science outreach efforts, we are also working on a mechanism for linking the Members of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine with science centers located near where they live and work. Many of these eminent scientists, engineers, and health professionals would be pleased to play a role in exhibit development, public programming, teacher workshops, local educational reform, staff professional development, outreach efforts, and perhaps even fund-raising. In those cases, all that will be needed is to make the connection.

As an initial step toward collaboration, the Academies have developed a free monthly electronic newsletter for science centers and their members. “Academy Horizons” contains brief summaries of the latest studies, with hyperlinks to the complete reports, which are available and searchable online. (To request an electronic subscription, go to www.nationalacademies.org/ksm/subscribe.)

The knowledge-based economy of the 21st century has made the need for a “learning society” stronger than ever. By creating partnerships between content-rich organizations like the National Academies and audience-rich educational institutions like science centers, we can create synergies that further each other’s efforts to achieve common goals.

David A. Ucko, President
Museums+more LLC
2528 Queen Anne’s Lane, NW
Washington, DC 20037-2148
202.270.1873
ucko@MuseumsPlusMore.com