

***Every Body Eats
and
Let's Get Active***

**The OMSI–SMRC
Partnership
2005–2010**



A Summative Evaluation Report

Prepared for

Oregon Museum of Science and Industry

by

Patricia A. McNamara

Independent Evaluator

Chicago, IL

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I think the “C” [“collaborative”] in the SMRC acronym really is the key for our success. And then, of course, getting all the different ideas from everybody, anything from wiring ideas to how am I going to market that, or how many people are you bringing in, or what are you doing, what are your board members doing?

[April-10 focus group]



As with all collaborative ventures, it takes a while to figure out what your role is and how to work effectively within the group. As a director of a small facility you're pretty much in on everything from cleaning the bathroom to speaking to a group of donors. So going from running the show to being an intern is hard or maybe just a weird row to hoe. The staff at OMSI has helped to make this transition go smoothly. They have treated us with the utmost care, have always respected us as museum professionals, and have been great in keeping in touch with us and walking us through the process.

[Aug-06 survey]

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Introduction

Between 2006 and 2010, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) worked in partnership with the Small Museum Research Collaborative (SMRC) to develop two 800 square foot exhibitions developed to especially meet the needs of small and very small informal education venues. Grounded in current research in nutrition and physical activity, these exhibitions (*Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active*) were designed to promote intergenerational learning about healthy eating and activity.¹ OMSI's SMRC partners brought the experiences and resources of five geographically and thematically diverse small museums to the collaborative development of this project. Table 1 offers an overview of these five institutions.

- **Bootheel Youth Museum** (BYM; Malden, MO) serves 11 southeast Missouri counties described as 52% rural, 8% African-American, and 1% Latino/Hispanic (U.S. Census 2000).²
- **ScienceWorks Hands-On Museum** (SW; Ashland, OR) primarily serves one northern California and four southern Oregon counties, an area that is 35% rural, 6% Latino/Hispanic, and 2% American Indian (U.S. Census 2000).
- **KidZone Museum** (KZ; Truckee, CA) primarily serves Nevada County, California, which is 43% rural, 6% Latino/Hispanic, and 1% American Indian (U.S. Census 2000).
- **Palouse Discovery Science Center** (PDSC; Pullman, WA) serves two eastern Washington and two northern Idaho counties that are described as 25% rural, 2% Latino/Hispanic, and 2% American Indian (U.S. Census 2000).
- **Las Cruces Museum of Natural History** (LCMNH; Las Cruces, NM) serves one east Texas and four southern New Mexico counties. This region is 10% rural, 71% Latino/Hispanic, and 1% American Indian (U.S. Census 2000).

Table 1: Background information about SMRC partners

Museum	Exhibition area (square feet)	Total visitation (2010)	Families ³	School groups	Full-time staff	Part-time staff
Bootheel Youth Museum	20,000	30,838	40%	60%	3	4
KidZone	2,000	22,000	80%	20%	4	4
Las Cruces Museum of Natural History ⁴	2,500	152,135	70%	5%	4	7
ScienceWorks	8,000	43,000	80%	20%	4	22
Palouse Discovery Science Center	11,000	17,000	80%	20%	2	7

¹ *Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active* were produced and are toured by the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. These exhibits were made possible by a Science Education Partnership Award (SEPA) grant from the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Additional information about the completed exhibitions can be found in a separate summative evaluation report.
² U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *Summary file 1: Tables PT2, QT-P1, QT-P34, QT-PT3, QT-P17*. Retrieved March 31, 2005, and available from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=DEC&_lang=en

³ Percent of total visitation.

⁴ In 2006, LCMNH reported that approximately 25 percent of visitors were adults unaccompanied by children.

Over the course of a five-year project, OMSI staff worked with their SMRC partners to develop and evaluate components of *Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active*. While this project's primary products were the two traveling exhibitions, project activities were also designed to increase the capacity of the partner museums and offer professionally rewarding experiences for the individual staff participants. The OMSI project team outlined several goals and outcomes for this collaborative:

- **The partner museum staff will express satisfaction with the collaborative process and the resulting exhibitions.** Participants will feel that they were substantively involved in the development of exhibit components and the evaluation process, they will be enthusiastic about the quality of resulting exhibitions, and consider those exhibitions appropriate for their own audiences.
- **Participating staff will describe how their participation in this project has increased their museum's capacity** to better understand their audiences, develop effective exhibitions and programs, and network with other small museums.
- **The participating staff will also identify ways in which their involvement with the collaborative has been professionally rewarding.** For example, they will develop stronger working relationships with staff at OMSI and their SMRC colleagues, be more familiar with resources in their own communities, and feel better equipped to undertake similar projects within their own institutions or regions (albeit on a smaller scale).

To support the partner museums' engagement with this project, OMSI organized a series of one- to two-day meetings. A total of 11 such meetings took place between February 2006 and April 2010. Meetings were scheduled more frequently during the exhibitions' development phase (e.g., six meetings took place between February 2006 and December 2007). OMSI hosted six meetings; the remaining five sessions were scheduled at the partner museums to give everyone an opportunity to tour their colleagues' facilities, meet additional staff at each site, and learn more about each partner's operations, exhibitions, programs, community, and audiences.

Partners had the opportunity to participate substantively in the development and evaluation of exhibition components. In addition to brainstorming exhibit ideas and possible exhibition titles with OMSI staff and project advisors, the partner staff also reviewed conceptual drawings, offered feedback about exhibit prototypes and related educational programs, collected front-end evaluation data from visitors at their own sites, and critiqued key support materials (including exhibit crates, set-up/operation manuals, and marketing materials).

The SMRC sites also served as the initial tour venues for the completed exhibitions (and this opportunity represented the partners' most tangible compensation for their commitment to the project). The exhibitions' tour of the partner sites provided additional opportunities for feedback and review, which supplemented that offered by the project's more formal remedial evaluation (conducted at the partner sites by the project's outside evaluator).

Methodology

A variety of quantitative and qualitative tools were used to track and document the partner staff experience over the course of this project. Table 2 summarizes the study's evaluation activities and corresponding sample sizes.

Brief written surveys were used throughout the project to gauge participants' overall satisfaction with their role in the project and solicit periodic feedback about the meetings themselves and ongoing project activities. Characterized as "meeting evaluations," these were distributed at the close of the partner meetings. Three more broadly focused surveys were distributed during the project's initial 18 months (in February 2006, August 2006, and August 2007).

One-on-one telephone interviews offered opportunities for more in-depth discussions with participants. Both the OMSI project team and partner museum staff were interviewed within the project's first three months; partner staff were interviewed again in September 2007. The collaborative evaluation culminated with a focus group discussion at the project's final partner meeting (April 2010).

Table 2: Summary of evaluation activities and sample sizes

Activity/instrument		Number completed	Number of museums represented
Initial written survey:	February 2006	8	5
Follow-up surveys:	August 2006	4	4
	August 2007	4	4
Partner interviews:	February 2006	7	4
	September 2007	5	5
OMSI staff interviews:	February 2006	5	1
End of project focus group:	April 2010	7	5
Meeting evaluation surveys		32	5

A total of 14 individuals at the partner museums completed at least one survey or interview. These included seven directors and seven other staff members (most often educators or exhibit staff). Note that there was considerable staff turnover during the course of this project: three directors resigned and were replaced by others and the same was true for two educators. The level of individual involvement also varied over time, depending primarily on availability to participate in project meetings.

Principal findings

In addition to collecting background information about the partner museums and staff, this evaluation addressed five broad topics:

- the partners' understanding of the overall project
- the perceived benefits for partner museums and staff
- the partners' reactions to *Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active*, the exhibit support materials, and tour logistics
- how effectively the collaborative functioned
- the partners' interest in and suggestions for future collaborations

Background information about partner museums and staff

The February 2006 survey included items that addressed museum visitation, staffing, and facilities. This information has been recently updated and summarized in the introduction to this report. Additional items prompted partner staff to indicate the extent to which their museums rely on in-house staff to develop new exhibitions and education programs, describe their own responsibilities at their museum, and rate their own level of confidence in three broad areas (developing exhibitions and educational programs, assessing visitor responses to exhibitions, and identifying community resources to support exhibitions and programming).

At three museums (PDSC, SW, and KZ), both exhibits and programs are typically developed by in-house staff. LCMNH relies on in-house staff to develop educational programs but typically rents exhibitions (rarely developing those in-house). At BYM, that situation is reversed.

A majority of the eight staff members who completed the February 2006 survey reported that they were "often" involved in the development of exhibitions and programs at their institutions. Five of the eight also reported that they often assessed visitor reactions to exhibitions and programs but were less likely to be experienced in the assessment of visitor learning.

Even when respondents described themselves as experienced in these areas of their museum's operation, they did not necessarily feel confident in their ability to do so effectively. The partner museum staff members were most confident in their ability to develop educational programs and identify community experts and resources that could support or enhance exhibitions/programs. They were least confident about their ability to meaningfully assess visitor reactions and learning. Table 3 summarizes partner staff ratings for these survey items. Assigned ratings ranged from "1" (rarely) to "4" (often).

Table 3: Partner staff average ratings of their involvement with professional activities and their related confidence (N=8)

Professional activity	Level of involvement	Confidence
Developing exhibitions	3.5	3.1
Developing programs	3.6	3.3
Identifying community experts and resources	not asked	3.3
Assessing visitor reactions to exhibits and programs	3.5	2.5
Assessing visitor learning	2.8	2.5

One museum director added these comments:

Our exhibits committee is entirely volunteer. Most are elementary teachers or moms. We have been to other children’s museums but no one has exhibits expertise or background and few have an early childhood background. [Feb-06 survey, S-2]

Partner understanding of the project

Since this topic was addressed during the February 2006 interviews, it is not surprising that the partners’ understanding of the overall project (and their responsibilities within the collaborative) varied considerably. Two of the seven partner interviewees offered relatively complete project descriptions, mentioning at least three project elements (e.g., the exhibits, the topic/content, the partnership between OMSI and the SMRC museums). An overview of the project offered by an OMSI team member is included for comparison.

Well, it’s an exhibit project that we’re working on with a group of small museums to jointly create a traveling exhibition on children’s nutrition, fitness, and health and my understanding of the relationship between OMSI and the small museums is that we’re going to be able to participate in the development of the exhibit, providing our own particular perspectives on what works and what’s needed for small museums and what are the components that we would...that would be the most useful. [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

That’s a good question...let’s see...are you talking about specifically this grant, SEPA? It’s designed to bring external entities like the BYM together with OMSI and put together a nutritional and/or health-related exhibit that can travel. [Are you aware of any other project goals?] Well, we’re still kind of working on some of that stuff, so the answer is right now, not really. [Feb-06 interview, D-1]

There are so many aspects to this project, I think. In general for the visitors, it’s obviously educating them about nutrition so that they can make healthy choices. When it comes to the actual project, I think a lot of it has to do with collaborating with other museums and partners to create a larger project that will have more of an impact, not just the exhibit, but the ancillary materials. But then, basically creating a small exhibit that will work for a variety of small museums and incorporating that feedback to create sort of a successful exhibit. I think that’s pretty much it! [Feb-06 interview, OMSI-1]

The remaining partner staff mentioned only the exhibitions or the educational content, and two interviewees seemed confused about specific elements of this particular project.

You're talking about SMRC? I have no idea. I'm confused on all...I'm involved in two different...collaborations with OMSI right now and to tell you the truth, I've only met on one. ...It's unclear to me, other than it's a collaboration to see how small museums can offer feedback to make traveling exhibits a better fit. I know that much. And I know the subject is about nutrition, but yeah, it hasn't been made real clear. [Feb-06 interview, S-7]

Only one of the partner museum interviewees (a museum director) offered a relatively complete description of their own responsibilities relative to this project:

I don't know if I have those really clearly defined. They may exist somewhere, but off the top of my head, my understanding is to participate in the planning meeting, to provide our staff input on the exhibit ideas, to provide—I know there's an opportunity [and] this is something that I'm excited about—to provide regional experts, in our region, who can provide input on the creation of the exhibition. So that it's not just working with OHSU in Portland, but maybe some other research institutions, maybe experts that are in our area, which is nice in terms of creating a maximum impact for us. So, providing that, participating in...questionnaires and surveys on our site and surveying our audience and constituents. We've done that already, in some early stages and also prototyping exhibits on our site and doing evaluation on our site. So that involves providing the staff to be trained on those things. I guess that it was much clearer than I was thinking. [laughs] [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

Responses offered by other staff members reflected a more limited understanding of both the overall project and their own roles within it.

I think that my main responsibilities are to come to the meetings at OMSI, help brainstorm and do that kind of stuff, keep involved in that as it goes along. I think that they want us to do some evaluation at our museum. I think that we did a survey already for them, that we went and kind of surveyed some of the people at our museum. And I'm not sure whether they're going to continue doing those or not. And I thought that they said that there was some...that they were going to train some people or train us to do some of that surveying? Once again, I'm not remembering whether that was through SEPA or the NASA thing. [Beyond going to the meetings, do you have a sense of how you might be involved with the project?] You mean me, personally? Not really! I'm assuming that we're going to get the exhibit and help with installation and be kind of a go-between, between the museum and what's going on. Like let people know what's going on and the timeline and things like that. And help with the evaluation if there is any. That kind of stuff. [Feb-06 interview, S-2]

My main responsibilities are I guess, sort of consulting, providing input to my museum manager. I won't be going to Portland, but she runs stuff by me. I'm the education curator, so I'll be doing education programming for the exhibit, so I have to be a little bit familiar with it when that time comes. And sort of a sounding board, to bounce ideas off of, or do I like this, stuff like that. [Feb-06 interview, S-4]

Remaining topics were addressed with participants over the course of their museum's involvement with the project. Surveys were self-administered; interviews were conducted by telephone and were recorded. Survey responses and interview transcripts were reviewed to identify common themes and ideas and participant comments were grouped by topic addressed (regardless of whether responses were prompted by specific survey or interview prompts). Excerpts from survey and interview responses are included here as appropriate (and generally identified by instrument and participant code). When necessary, participant quotes have been edited slightly to improve their clarity.

How did partner museums and participating staff benefit from their involvement with this project?

When considering this question, the museum partners were most likely to mention how much they had learned from OMSI (or what they had gained from their affiliation with that larger and more well known museum). Every staff member who completed an interview or participated in the final focus group made comments like these:

So it's kind of like bringing the knowledge and quality from OMSI to our museums, which is great! It's phenomenal. They have some other expertise that we do not have, they also have—this is the stuff that we get blown away by—they have a fabrication room! [laughs] We're also hoping that we'll benefit from other things. Like looking at their strategic plan. [laughs] We are actually getting other information, just about museum operations, that's helping us already. It's great. I'm going to hopefully meet with one of their finance people up there about how they track their grants and stuff up, so it's going to be great! [Feb-06 interview, D-2]

I got into this business clueless about it. [laughter] Seriously. And [OMSI staff] have been absolutely tremendous. ...But I mean it's really the ability to talk...I mean, even in the car last night, we were heading home and [one of the OMSI staff] was talking about the SMEC, the bigger exhibit collaborative that's amongst the big guys. And just to know a little bit of the inside scoop and how it works and how decisions really are made about some of the biggest exhibits in the country, and really in the world in a way...I mean, it's just awesome to be part of it. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

I mean, for me, in this small science center that we've got, it really adds credibility being a partner with Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. I think that makes a really big difference. One of the commercials that I was telling you about, the one that's running now says, "this is your last chance, Let's Get Active leaves in May and after this it goes back to OMSI, which then turns it around and tours it around the country for the next 8 years to some 40 museums across the country—that's some pretty big stuff. So it's a real driver, too, to our museum, which we wouldn't have otherwise. Being associated with the OMSI name has made a big difference for us. [April-10 focus group, D-5] I definitely second that, I think it's huge, the ability to leverage that locally. It gives credibility when we're out doing new projects and out talking to individual donors and the fact that we're relating in this way, it really supports rural museums, I think, in a way that you'd never get that kind of credibility without...you just make a lot of promises, you know, but having some team thing like this is really, really tremendous. [D-7]

When we were visiting St. Louis, I mean, look at all these [business] cards that I got from all the other places that we went, you know? That was also really exciting, too, that their OMSI door opened the door to me, a little person from my museum. [April-10 focus group, S-3]

The SMRC partners also described what they had learned from each other (specific examples can be found throughout this report). As this staff member explained,

A lot of [collaborations] that I've gone through, especially—I'm going to bring up Nano again—they've sent me to a lot of huge museums. I can't "steal" stuff from them. But the smaller museums, I learn a lot more. Stuff that I can actually do. I can't do the stuff the big museums are doing. With this group, I'm able to do a lot more. And have other ideas. [April-10 focus group, S-1]

Participants were also very likely to describe what they had learned about using evaluation or developing exhibitions. Seven staff members (representing four museums) highlighted such experiences at least once over the course of this study.

Some direct benefits would be training staff in how to conduct surveys, using surveys so that we get a better sense of how to create them on our own. How to take an exhibit idea from the idea stage to the creation stage, learning how to truly prototype an exhibit versus which is what we tend to do, which is create something that we hope that's going to be final, but really it's not. [laughs] [We realized that the evaluation] wasn't as hard as we thought. We were impressed with the question instruments because they were... we've been trying to do similar things, but our questions aren't as friendly, kind of interesting to fill out. The instruments—I thought that they were clever at how they got at different age groups. That feels a little daunting still, the idea of developing survey instruments like that. [Feb-06 interview, D-6] Well, one thing that we've learned is needing to allow adequate time to train the people who are doing, gathering the information. And I don't think we had done that much in the past. Also, the complexity of putting together a good survey, so that you get good results. [Nov-07 interview, D-6]

One is that we get a chance to see what a larger museum does as far as the process of putting together an exhibit and putting together educational resources and whatnot and that kind of thing. So that's a great thing for us. And the other thing that's helping us right now is that we had to survey our guests as part of this project and we hadn't really done a lot of that. And so it was really interesting to hear what people were really looking for and to see how far off the mark we are on some things—it gave us a chance to really look and see how we might change the surveys that we do. [Feb-06 interview, D-1]

[Working with the outside evaluator] influenced our museum in a huge way. I think that's been hugely eye opening for our museum. Learning how to do surveys, asking the right questions, and going through a good process. Also, I think just knowing that you guys have more than one rendition of...like you get to try it over and over. When we got invited to St. Louis and we went into that big huge science museum and we saw that whole little room just to do a prototype...I would have never seen that if I had not been part of this whole organization. I would have thought it was a really cool idea, but that someone was really doing it was beautiful. [April-10 focus group, S-3]

Their involvement with project-related, front-end evaluation activities also provided four staff members at three museums with insights about their own audiences.

I guess I've gotten a better idea of just what...about our audience. I think that for me it's interesting because my last job was in Maryland, so for me, I thought it was interesting, the different demographic. So I think...I'm not exactly sure what the museum has learned, but I know it actually helped me a little bit, to get an idea of more of the public that does come here, what our particular museum audience is looking for, I was interested in that. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

I was surprised that most people didn't really know that much about nutrition, if you wanted to get down just to content. And it's even harder if you're from Mexico. There's even more disconnect about how things... A lot of nutrition is based on how much it costs for food. [Nov-07 interview, D-2]

I guess mainly the importance of doing [evaluation] and I've heard some people describe it like, it's like once you know something, you forget what it is to not know that thing? So it reminds us that a lot of our visitors aren't necessarily steeped in science. I think that was the biggest thing was to take a step back and say, oh wait a minute, we've known about this for a long, long time and a lot of our visitors don't necessarily [have a science background], so I think that was, to me that was probably the most, the critical reminder for us on how to approach them. [Nov-07 interview, S-6]

Even though it was not the benefit mentioned most often, the SMRC museums obviously valued the opportunity to host the two traveling exhibitions that grew out of this collaboration. Those who specifically highlighted this benefit (three participants representing three museums) discussed both the exhibitions' level of quality and the subject matter that the exhibitions addressed.

I think one [benefit] was is that we'll get a cool exhibit. Most of our exhibits we just build ourselves, so it's nice to get an exhibit that's a little bit of a more professional caliber. [Feb-06 interview, D-2]

And then the direct benefit will be hosting exhibitions here, specifically an exhibit on childhood nutrition, which will get into health, life sciences...those are exhibitions...those content areas are harder for us to develop as a small institution, especially when taking advantage of current research. So for us to be able to do that, I think it would be kind of tough. It really helps to have an exhibit like that. [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

The SMRC directors and staff who were most directly involved with the project also identified a variety of more personal benefits. Project participants especially valued their interactions with fellow museum professionals, both OMSI staff and their colleagues at the smaller partner museums. Staff from four of the five partner institutions emphasized the importance of these opportunities to learn from and network with staff from a variety of other museums.

Well, I think already—my first meeting with OMSI—it helps me to see how the big guys do it, in terms of scheduling, planning, prototyping, evaluation. I mean, everything down the line. A lot of times, we fly by the seat of our pants and things get done the night before the opening and there's often no follow-up evaluation—you know, we're just so thin. [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

I've never been to OMSI. I've only seen it on the website and heard about them and read about them. They're like Paul Newman and we're only [laughs]...we're like the acting student, taking a class and we get to be with Paul Newman. [laughs] [Feb-06 interview, D-2]

I'm just kind of starting this job and it's really growing and changing every week. I'm a teacher and I moved here and I have two young children so I started on the exhibits committee and then I started teaching classes and now I'm doing research and exhibits and classes. So for me it's been really great to meet people at other museums. Because I don't have that much experience in museums, so it's really benefited me to see what other people are doing, how larger museums are professionally doing it and to make those kinds of connections. [Feb-06 interview, S-2]

Just getting a fresh look at things, seeing how people approach problems that we all face, has been great. [Nov-07 interview, S-6] *So not only have we seen how much nicer these newer exhibits are, but also I think, as the guy who ends up building our exhibits, that's been a great thing to see how [OMSI] approaches stuff there and get more ideas.* [April-10 focus group, S-6]

Being able to actually visit each of the partner sites played a key role in fostering this mutual learning.

[Visiting other sites] is the exciting part, because I'm also like...ooh, I like what they did there, I might have to copy that. Or, I like that idea, or that works, or that might not work in my building. But yeah, I always like going to other museums, just seeing what they're doing. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

One SMRC director anticipated how relationships developed during this project can build practitioner communities with a “small-town” feeling:

I think that the big thing here is that I'm from a small town. We're little and everybody around here knows everybody and the advantage to that is if I need something or if an event's going on, I find out about it. If I see somebody and I go, "oh, I need to talk with them about that fly fishing camp," I know that if I don't say it the first time, that if I run into them the second time, I can do that. And so I have the ability to rely on the people that surround me. I sort of see this [collaborative] as the same kind of thing, like us bringing the small-town atmosphere together with all of these other organizations, where I can drop something in an e-mail or make a phone call and I know people aren't going to just disregard it. They're going to go, "oh! I know who that is!" [Feb-06 interview, D-1]

For some participants, project activities offered opportunities to build their experience or skill in specific areas.

As an exhibit designer and builder, I really enjoyed talking with the guys that are out fabricating the exhibits about things. It's been great to talk to them as well. [Nov-07 interview, S-6]

This is something very new for me, I haven't been on this end of developing a...it's not how we do exhibitions at our museum. I perceive that this would be a real eye-opening experience for us and if we do want to do some traveling exhibitions, I think that there's a lot that we can learn, I can learn and pass on. [Feb-06 interview, D-4]

Well, one specific way is that I'm trying to work at the national level with small museums to become a little more organized and I'm actually trying to form a network of small museums, so I think it will give me some specific experience in how you form a collaboration and in this case, OMSI's taking the lead on it and so I can learn from that experience. [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

Partner feedback about Every Body Eats and Let's Get Active

The participants' comments primarily addressed the overall quality of the two exhibitions, their audience response to (and the exhibitions' appropriateness for) their audiences, the amount of label text, and the usefulness of the ancillary materials (including educator resources and programming suggestions).

This partner director compared *Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active* to other exhibitions circulated by OMSI:

One of the first exhibits we had [from OMSI] were Brain Matters and Make it Move and I think honestly one of the biggest changes is the quality of Every Body Eats and Let's Get Active and now even View from Space [an earlier exhibition], I think are superior to some of those early OMSI exhibits that are still out there. [Every Body Eats and Let's Get Active] look more professional, they're well made, they're visually based and we get a lot of kids so they see those and they're like, "whoa!" So I think that would be one of the first things that pop in my mind, if there's been a change, it seems like the quality of the exhibits that we've been showing in the last three years—well, that's three of my shows, right there—but we've had a lot of comments about how they liked those shows. [April-10 focus group, D-3]

Other participants did express concern about the amount of text displayed on exhibition components:

Well, I think especially the SEPA ones, Every Body Eats and Let's Get Active, we knew upfront that they'd be text heavy, and I think that...and actually in [the] critique on ExhibitFiles, [OMSI

staff] talked about that, and even when they did the tabletops [they talked] about really editing down the text as much as they could. I think that was kind of the biggest hurdle, getting people past the fact that there was a whole lot of text there. That's my reaction, just when people would walk toward these things and some of them were just so text dense. [April-10 focus group, S-6]

We have had strategic planning going on this week, so we had a lot of people, a lot of our board, come through and see [Every Body Eats], even though it just got here, and we also had a museum consultant as part of that and his assessment was that—so this message got to the board—that “it's not a good exhibit for you.” [laughs] “It's way too text heavy.” But when the museum consultant comes in and proclaims it “not a good fit,” too text heavy, too “old,” too “not good for our visitors,” then of course that message went to the board. [Nov-07 interview, D-6]

Our target, or what people expect at [my museum] was that these exhibits were different than what [our visitors] expect. Less interactive, less...you know, the text-heavy thing, they were just kind of like, wow...I mean, it was a totally different feel. And sometimes it was in a good way, I mean, seriously the quality just blows away what most of us can do. But then, so much text and so much content. You know, our [goal] is about creating the spark and not so much the education. I mean, they get the education eventually, but we're trying to create the spark and interest in people. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

This participant observed that the messages conveyed by the text (especially in *Every Body Eats*) might have been more of an issue for museum audiences than the overall amount of text.

The difference that I got from you guys, I think, not as much that the amount of text turned people off, was they started reading the text and then suddenly realized, oh, they want me to change my lifestyle. And that's when you saw people...like when you read about the Coca Cola and how much sugar, they're like, “oh, okay, I'm done.” We seemed to notice more of that, than was too much text. It was the fact that, you know, after a point they were like, “I don't want to read this anymore.” Or “this is something that I don't want to deal with.” [April-10 focus group, D-3]

Two participants noticed differences in their audiences' level of engagement with the two exhibitions:

I noticed that I had more people for Every Body Eats get involved and stay involved with it than I did with Let's Get Active. I don't know if it's just more educational, or that they wanted to learn more than wanting to sit there and try to do so many sit ups or squat against a wall or anything. They just didn't want to...we've got lazier people, I guess, [laughter] but they actually sat there and read the stuff with Eats, whereas with the exercise, they'd just walk right by. [April-10 focus group, S-1]

With groups [in Let's Get Active], we'd have a lot of people who would like compete each other, which is what OMSI said would probably happen. You'd get people who would... “oh, I could do it better than that.” Individuals and small groups, not as much. But when you have like school groups come in, oh there was the competition. “Oh, I can do that or I can do better than that.” But I agree, I think that we had a little more public involvement with Eats. [April-10 focus group, D-3]

Two participants specifically critiqued the exhibitions' appropriateness for their museum and audience. Both partners would have preferred a mix of exhibit components that were designed to support repeat play/visitation.

We can't really put these exhibits in our museum, because they're for older kids, so we have been looking for other locations. Because if we put them in our museum, the parents are going to be mad. Because that's the only...it's not like we have an extra, like another room. We're trying to

grow into a bigger museum to serve older kids, which would be great. Because we'd have busloads of kids coming to see these exhibits. But, we just don't have the space. ... You know, we did give a lotta lotta lotta feedback about how it should be more repeat play, but since we're the only ones serving that [pre-school audience], there's maybe like one component of the exhibit like that, but it's not enough for us. It's going to be good for other museums though to have that one component for those little kids, so I hope that we're helping with that part. [Nov-07 interview, D-2]

I think that for a museum of science like OMSI, it's not so critical because [an exhibition] just takes up one little portion of the museum and it's a great experience. Someone goes, they learn a lot and the next time they come, well there are many other things for them to do. But for [museums like ours] where [an exhibition] may take up a third or maybe a half of your exhibit space, it's disastrous if it doesn't encourage repeat visitation. [Nov-07 interview, D-6]

Although this evaluation did not assess the extent to which the partners actually used the accompanying educator resources, partner staff comments indicated that such materials were used in a variety of ways at their sites.

It's good, you know, for us, the educational material, whether we use it or not, it gives our educators an idea of what they might be programming or how they might be able to use something? So we definitely...in other words, I printed that all off, then had a meeting with [our educators] and said, "this is what this is going to be about, look at this, review it, see what you think," and then I think [one of our educators] incorporated that into her daily activity lessons. [April-10 focus group, D-5]

We do a team investigation for the school groups that we have coming through and we usually...create an investigation that includes those exhibits on the floor. The kids get broken up into groups and then they have to find and do certain things, learn certain things in the museum, based on the exhibits. But once they get to [an exhibit], they have to do something. So the point is it's an investigation more than it's just finding the exhibit and pointing to it and walking away. And anytime we change exhibits, we tweak the team investigation to include that... So maybe [our educator] might have used some of the [OMSI] information and then cut that into her own investigations. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

One of the partners adapted OMSI materials to better suit the museum's Latino audience:

We used the educational materials a lot. The only thing that we did differently—and this was specifically for Every Body Eats—we felt it was not relevant to our clientele. What we actually did was we took [the educational materials] and I gave them to my education department and I encouraged them to develop their own education packet. So they used the OMSI one as the base and then they actually did calorie and nutritional values on [food] like enchiladas. Or like I think that we took a turkey dinner, the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and then we also did one, like a traditional Christmas Mexican feast or whatever. And we went out and figured out the foods and the nutritional values and so I think that we customized it a little bit so that it would be more relevant to our particular audience. [April-10, LC, Director]

Tour logistics and technical support materials

A considerable portion of the April 2010 focus group session was devoted to a discussion of the practical challenges faced by these small museums as they prepared for and installed these exhibitions. Lacking the facilities, resources, and equipment of larger museums (e.g., a full-size exhibit department, loading dock, fork lift, and backstage storage areas), the majority of staff at

the partner sites found it difficult to handle the crated exhibit components and accommodate the empty crates.

The one complaint that I do have, particularly when it comes to the crates is...I think it was around that time, when we were in Ashland, and I said, when we get Let's Get Active, I need the crates on wheels. Because [my museum is] in the mall, and at the time, particularly, we had to go through the Food Court [laughter] and all the way through the mall and I said to [OMSI] repeatedly, "I need these crates on wheels!" And at one point, I was told, "oh, they're going to be on wheels." And then when I found out that some of them weren't on wheels, I was not happy. And then to find out that some of the heaviest pieces were not on wheels.... We had a horrible time. And so I was a little frustrated with OMSI because I had told the design people, "not all of us have the loading dock," I need these things on wheels. I have very little to complain about when it comes to this whole process. That would be the one grief. [April-10 focus group, D-3]

Even so, other participants noted that OMSI staff did redesign other crate features to address partner difficulties.

I know that this goes back to View from Space, but that's where we started [working with OMSI]. I brought up that moving [the crates] was so hard, we can't use a pallet jack or anything. They changed that for Eats by putting boards under there and with Active, now that you can fully do it. So it does feel to me they did take something out of it, at least. [April-10 focus group, S-1] Oh I think that, yeah, along the way, changes were made. [D-7]

At one site, installation challenges were exacerbated by inaccurate crate markings:

You know, [OMSI staff] say, oh well, you know the person [at your site] will just use the forklift and unload [the crates] and they go into the back storage area. Well, there's no forklift, there's no this, there's no that. [April-10 focus group, D-7] And the crates are wrong, marked wrong [laughter]. [D-5] Yeah, that's one thing that we've got to give them the feedback on, you've got to teach these people to use a tape measure so they can actually measure the crate and write the right size on it and write the right size on the list. [S-6] If you look on one of those crates right now, you can see my frustration. Cause I think I had a pencil—"it's not 85 inches, this is more like...." I mean, like I scribbled it. Because I didn't want anybody else to have the same challenge. [D-5] The one that was supposed to be 67 inches tall—it was 80 something. And it wasn't six and a half feet, it was over seven feet. [S-6] We had to take screws out, we were rocking the thing...not planned for. [D-5]

As these exchanges suggest, however, the collaborative structure did at least offer opportunities for the partner staff to share information about potential installation challenges before an exhibition actually arrived at their own site.

Yeah, I remember when we went down to Ashland, that was when you guys had Every Body Eats. And we saw the stack of crates for that back in your [storage area]. And we returned and I said, we're going to need a bigger storage space. You know, there's no doubt about it. I mean, that was such a huge stack from Every Body Eats. [April-10 focus group, S-6] They were very nice crates. I'm serious. They were some of the nicest looking crates I've ever seen. [D-7]

Two focus-group participants commented on the weight of exhibit components, while another observed that *Every Body Eats* seemed to be more solidly and durably constructed than *Let's Get Active*.

But I mean as far as the quality of the exhibits and all that, I thought was really good. I mean, I need to talk to the shop guys about how everything doesn't have to be solid steel. [April-10 focus group, S-6] Yeah, it wasn't built as a traveler, really, with the weights. [D-7]

I'd like clarification on one thing. I seem to remember at one of the earlier meetings that—'cause I thought this was asked—did OMSI use heavier duty materials for Every Body Eats and then skimp a little bit when it came to Let's Get Active? The quality level between Every Body Eats and Let's Get Active, when it comes to a construction point of view, [it was a] noticeable difference and that's one of my beefs. ... They didn't hold up as well either. The bolts getting ripped out of the text panels and a lot of those things. It just seems like Every Body Eats held up better. [April-10, LC, Director]

As is the case for all of the exhibits that it circulates, OMSI staff provided host sites with a variety of support materials, including an installation manual, a marketing kit, and the aforementioned education manual. Again, focus-group participants noted differences between the manuals and marketing kit provided for *Every Body Eats* and that distributed for *Let's Get Active*.

We utilized the Every Body Eats promotional and educational material far more than we did Let's Get Active. In fact, I don't think Let's Get Active [manuals and education packet] was even ready or completed by the time we got it. Yeah, I just don't remember using it at all. [April-10, focus group, D-3] And it was hard to get. I think that we had asked a couple of times, "where is our booklet, where is our manual?" Then, you know, "to save time, we sent you a 200-page PDF." [laughter] And then I'm sitting there as, you know, I'm already busy enough. I sent it to [another staff member] but it won't open on her computer. I'm like...aaaahhhh.... And I was just like, you know what, I don't want this. If I'm opening a box or something or.... Or what OMSI used to do, send me a packet and all I had to do is open it up. Boom, it's right there. This is yours. This is yours. This is yours. Okay, this is for me. And everybody got their piece of it and it was done. So I don't want to print anything. I mean, I want them to send it to me ready-made. Don't make me do that. [D-5]

Well, there was an [installation] manual in the [Let's Get Active] book, but it was wrong. There was a lot of wrong stuff in it. [April-10 focus group, S-1] You know what it was? It was a combination... it looks like somebody cut and pasted Every Body Eats and dropped it into Let's Get Active. Because it was Every Body Eats stuff with the title, Let's Get Active. And so, I don't know what happened. [D-5] Throwing in straps and stuff and crates that aren't there. [D-3]

One museum director recalled feedback that she had given OMSI staff about the usefulness of the marketing kits provided for both exhibitions:

The press materials...anyway, so what I noticed was what we got for View from Space was great stuff, really really good stuff, press releases. After that, it kind of went down a little bit. And I called [OMSI] and I said, "I'm just going to flat out ask you, what happened?" And I said this is looking different to me, the material is more commercial, it is not as factual, as scientific as it should be. Because if I'm going to write a press release, I can't make it look like an ad. It's gotta be facts—this is what happens, this is what you're going to get. And I said, did you get a new writer? ... They went with a new advertising agency, or PR firm or whoever. And that really really made a difference for us. It's good that they did like the 20-second and the 30- and the 60- [second spots] or whatever, for all different kinds of media. However, I had to go through so much of it. ... So if I'm writing the press release, I have to [figure out] what are the facts here, what am I looking for? So I had to go through [the education materials], which you really shouldn't have to

do. I mean, if OMSI is “paying” somebody to do that, that should just all be done and it should be easy. So, that’s a biggie. [April-10 focus group, D-5]

In spite of the logistical difficulties that the partners encountered, the focus group participants agreed that the project benefits far outweighed any costs.

The challenges that are presented are...you know, we get volunteers to come in to help us. Or miscommunication on who’s going to bring the forklift or you know, whatever. You know, all those sorts of things. It happens, it could happen with anything. But there hasn’t been anything—being part of this project—that has made it too difficult, that has taken away from what we’re doing. [April-10 focus group, D-5]

Partner feedback about the collaborative’s overall operation

The collaborative’s structure encouraged the SMRC partners to be substantively involved in the development of its exhibitions and programs. The partners met with advisors and OMSI staff to brainstorm ideas for the interactive components, they collected front-end evaluation surveys and interviews with adults and children visiting their own facilities, they reviewed and offered feedback about the prototype interactives, the exhibitions’ tour of the partner sites served as the project’s remedial evaluation phase, and the partners’ experiences with those completed exhibitions contributed significantly to OMSI’s improvement of individual components before the exhibitions’ larger national tour. Moreover, the project’s timeline demanded that the partners remain involved and engaged with OMSI staff over nearly four and one-half years and participate in a total of 11 meetings (either at OMSI or at one of the partner sites) during that time. The project’s periodic surveys and interviews offered participants several opportunities to consider and comment on their overall experience in the project’s varied activities.

Partner involvement with front-end evaluation and the exhibit development process

The SMRC partners collectively surveyed and interviewed approximately 175 of their patrons, a significant contribution to the front-end evaluation studies that informed the development of both *Every Body Eats* and *Let’s Get Active*.⁵ The project’s outside evaluator worked with OMSI staff evaluators to design the survey instrument and interview protocols, wrote the data-collection guidelines and instructions, and reviewed data-collection procedures with partner staff at project meetings. Much of the actual data collection, however, was conducted at the project sites by staff who did not participate in those training sessions and so were guided solely by the written instructions and information conveyed by their colleagues who had participated in the training sessions. Since the partners brought little or no evaluation experience to the project, this requirement was a challenging one. Participants highlighted issues that arose across the partner sites, especially when they were relating the problems they encountered as they completed the front-end interviews for *Every Body Eats*.

Finding the time, finding staff to do it and people to interview. [How could the process be improved?] *More training?? Or another one as a refresher. Maybe more time to get them completed. The late fall and middle of winter is when we get most visitors to interview.* [Aug-06 survey, S-2]

⁵ Data collected by the partner staff represented nearly 75 percent of the front-end database.

Adequately training our staff and volunteers to conduct the surveys in a consistent manner. There were a lot of steps and this made it challenging to make sure each interview was completed consistently. [How could the process be improved?] More concise survey instrument. [Aug-06 survey, D-6]

Time was a major factor because the surveys were completed during one of the slowest seasons. We pretty much interviewed everyone who came through the doors and fit the criteria. Most of the guests that were surveyed were from out of town and didn't really show the true cross section of our population. [How could the process be improved?] Main thing is to have more time or allow us to move outside our facility. [Aug-06 survey, D-1]

[Surveying] was a lot of work. It was...I do know that that was a lot of work, something that I understand is important, but wasn't exactly very popular. [laughs] We're actually going to make more of an effort to do these things and so it may not be popular but we're going to do it. And we understand the need and that's part of the deal and so we'll do it. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

As one director observed, however, the partners gained experience from their initial forays into the evaluation process (and the evaluative instruments and procedures were improved by their feedback). Many found that the front-end interviewing for *Let's Get Active* proceeded more smoothly:

You know, I didn't do a lot of the surveys, but I did sit down with some [of our staff] and talked to them, and I thought, because it had been our third go-round with actually doing some surveying, that it was easier for us and for the people that we were surveying, just because we had had experience doing it. Not only in making sure that we got as much data as we could, or as much information as we could from each person that was participating, but we were more comfortable with the process. You know, I don't think that people looked at us and thought, "these people don't know what they're doing" this time [laughs], and you know, I thought that the questions were good, they made sense to people, and most everybody was really willing to talk. [Nov-07 interview, D-1]

The project was also designed to involve the SMRC partners in the exhibits' initial planning and development phases, both to build the partners' capacity to develop more effective exhibitions themselves and to inform the development of exhibitions that would be better suited to small museum facilities and audiences. Partner feedback suggested that these goals were at least partially achieved. As discussed earlier in this report, participants clearly appreciated their first-hand experience with the exhibit development process at OMSI and identified what they had learned about evaluation and exhibition development as one of the most important outcomes of their involvement with this project. They also appreciated the opportunity to offer feedback and discuss the developing components with OMSI staff.

I feel like I can be honest, I feel like I've always been asked for my honesty by OMSI. For example, we discussed our concerns with [an OMSI educator] about the education materials, that they didn't really suit our lab structure for our school program, because we felt they were too close to what a school teacher does in their classroom and that we also try to create a little bit more of an "aha" moment. I felt that was very heard. He really wanted to know about that, said that was good feedback, [and that] maybe in some ways they erred with not putting enough resources into that program. So that's an example, and when anything has come up like that, I've always felt like you're asked for more information or you're taken very seriously. [Nov-07 interview, D-6]

In spite of that, however, the SMRC participants were not entirely convinced that their contributions to the early planning discussions or their feedback as components were being prototyped significantly influenced the exhibitions that emerged from this process.

We get updates, but I'm not really feeling "in the loop." I feel like it is in their hands now and they are keeping us informed but we don't really have too much input now. [Aug-06 survey, S-2]

I did get frustrated early on, because I did feel like there was a certain amount of inertia, that OSMI was headed [in one direction] and that the partners didn't seem to have a whole lot of influence in where that was going to go. I mean some of it is just the pragmatic issue of "well, we know we can build this in the shop so that's the direction that we're going to go." But I didn't feel that we were able to exert much influence on where that went. [April-10 focus group, S-6] *Yeah, I agree 100 percent.* [D-3] *I mean that's just, that may just be the way it is. But I got a little frustrated in the early stages. I mean, I'd say, "well, how about this?" "Well, no we're not going to build that, we're gonna build this."* [S-6]

As mentioned earlier, those who primarily served a very young audience were most likely to feel that the exhibitions did not reflect their priorities and concerns (even if they recognized that their input had improved the exhibitions' appeal to that audience).

We have such a young audience, and the exhibit is aimed at older kids. [Aug-06 survey, S-2]

I do feel like OMSI heard us when they did the costumes and the "jump to it" thing [Animal Motion]. That's our target audience. Our audience loves sounds and mirrors and so I felt like, yes, [OMSI] tried to help us out with that one. I remember asking [other staff from my museum] about this process, I do remember them saying, "you know, I don't know if they're really hearing what we're saying." And I do remember [our staff] saying, "you know, it's just so old for our audience." ...In all fairness to OMSI, that's not necessarily the biggest thing. But we needed more range of age and I do feel that that one component really helped out a lot. [April-10 focus group, S-3]

Others acknowledged the difficulties that OMSI faced in inviting partners to participate in an already complex decision-making process (and sometimes even found it frustrating themselves to debate the merit of specific exhibition elements with their fellow partners):

I remember [one of my staff] kind of saying "they were hearing us, but they weren't really hearing us" kind of thing. And you know, that's management by committee. I mean it's already hard enough to come up with an exhibit and the reality in the shop and all that. Okay. And so the reality of it is that it may not be possible to do it differently, you know? [April-10 focus group, D-7] *Right, yeah, it's like we need five more bozos telling us what to do. [laughs] Cause I understand the constraints of their shop, which is amazing and all that. But I just kept thinking, how about this one over here? No, no, we're not going to do that.* [S-6]

We're getting a great deal from this project and I'm not sure that we're doing enough work for what we get from it. If anything, I'd like to see our role in actually doing more for the project, just so that we're responsible for doing a little bit more. Plus it gives us the experience of actually physically doing it. But again, that becomes a harder deal. I feel the same way here, when I turn to a volunteer that I may only see every third Sunday. You know, when things get out of your control, it can be a scary thing. So I understand why they've delegated things the way that they have. [Nov-07 interview, D-1]

We were talking about the fitness exhibit and the potential names for the fitness exhibit and I really didn't like one of the names and I forget which one of the museums was like, "that's the

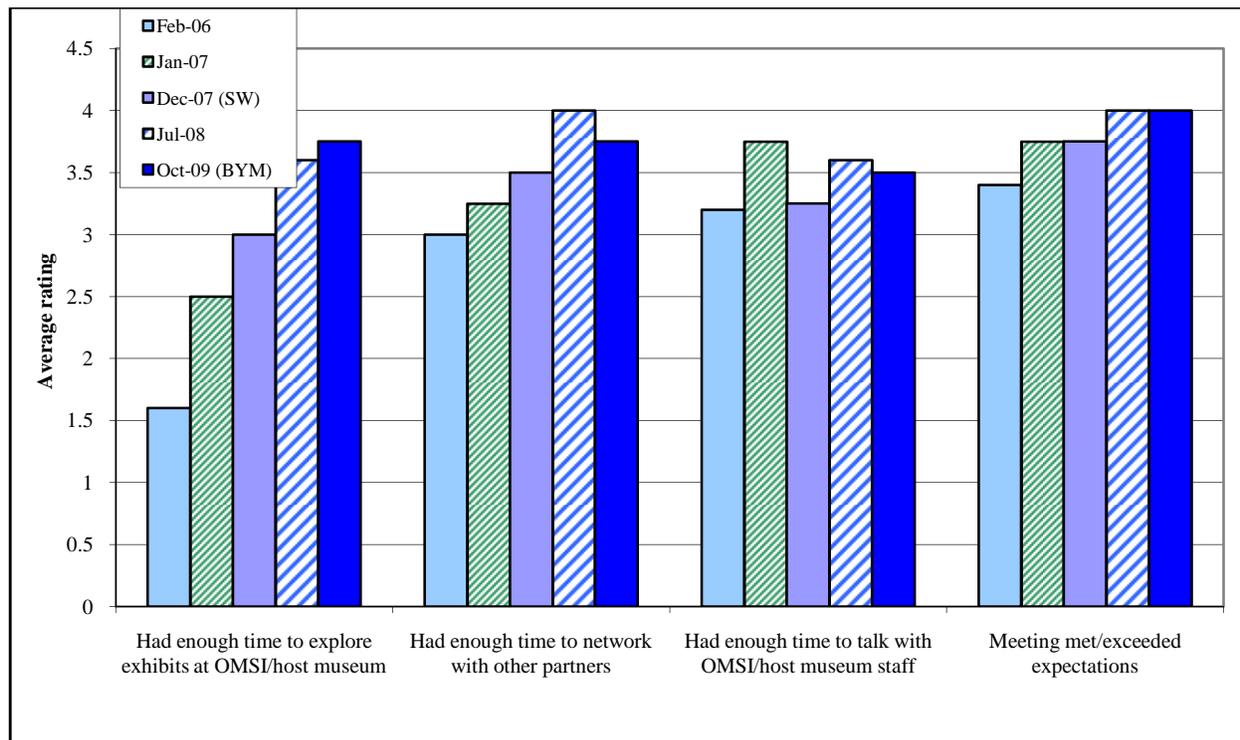
one that I really liked,” and I even had examples or reasoning why I didn’t like it and one of the other [partners] was like, that was the one that she loved the most. I hope they don’t pick that name. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

Partner feedback about the project meetings

Six of the partner/project team meetings were hosted by OMSI; the remaining five took place at the SMRC sites. Surveys distributed at those meetings prompted SMRC participants to rate the extent to which these sessions gave participants opportunities to explore the host sites (both OMSI and the partner museums), talk with additional staff at the meeting sites, network with their SMRC colleagues, and participate in discussions of the exhibitions and ancillary materials as those were still under development. Many participants also took advantage of the more unstructured interviews and the end-of-project focus group to offer additional feedback about the meetings’ contributions to their overall experience in the project.

With the exceptions of the initial partner/project team meeting at OMSI in February 2006, the participating partners uniformly agreed that the meetings afforded them ample opportunities to express their own reactions and ideas. Their assessment of other meeting features tended to exhibit more variability over time (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Partner staff assessment of project meetings (meeting evaluation surveys)⁶



⁶ Partners rated their level of agreement with these statements at the close of each project meeting (“1” = no; “4” = yes). Meeting evaluation surveys were completed at eight of the eleven project meetings; data from five of those are displayed in Figure 1.

For example, only one of the six partner staff attending the February 2006 meeting at OMSI agreed that they had enough time to explore OMSI's exhibit areas. As the meeting agendas were adjusted to allow more of that exploration (and as participants made repeated visits to OMSI), partners' level of agreement with this statement steadily increased.

Partners clearly valued opportunities to network with their colleagues, and the meetings increasingly met that need. Note that much of the conversation and networking among partners took place outside of the formal sessions themselves—at the hotel, during meals, or as the partners were traveling together.

Having us at the same hotel is a great help. [Jan-07 meeting evaluation, D-5]

Meal times were really the only time to do one-on-one networking. [Dec-07 meeting evaluation, S-6]

I felt like some of the most valuable time was during the car rides. As that time “sandwiched” our SMRC discussions, I felt like those informal periods were important as well. [Oct-09 meeting evaluation, S-3]

There was ample time to talk on the long, long drive. [Oct-09 meeting evaluation, D-3]

Overall, partners agreed that the project meetings met their expectations. That was especially the case for the partner/project team meeting at the Bootheel Youth Museum in October 2009 (the last meeting when surveys were completed).

This was the most productive meeting I have yet attended. Seeing Bootheel (small yet huge), catching up with others, and learning more about the museum world (which helped me to understand a bit more of what our Executive Director deals with—grant proposals especially) all gave me a varied appreciation of our similarities and differences. [Oct-09 meeting evaluation, S-3]

Very productive meeting. One of the best so far. A lot of time to network, discuss future partnerships and provide input on SMRC exhibits. [Oct-09 meeting evaluation, D-5]

We seemed like a real team, followed the agenda, listened to everyone, very good relationships among everyone. [Oct-09 meeting evaluation, D-7]

Partners' comments during interviews corroborated their meeting evaluation ratings. Interviewees described how the meetings supported their involvement with the project and made it possible for them to build more satisfying relationships with their SMRC colleagues.

I've enjoyed the meetings and particularly the [August 2007] one. I think that the first one I went to, in January, I was a little more nervous, more just trying to meet people and trying to just take notes. [In August], I came back from Portland and I'm like, okay, I know what's...I got an idea of what everybody looks like and the information, education stuff...we can prepare. So I think that I got a little bit more out of this last meeting, but I've enjoyed it and I think it's worth it. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

I mean, we had to duke it out about who got to go to the meetings. You know, 'cause we both got a lot of stuff out of it and they were different things. But...next to getting basically, all told, three sets of exhibits to come to our place for virtually no cost, just going to the meetings with everybody else was the best thing to come out of it. [April-10 focus group, S-6]

The site visits were obviously important learning experiences for partner staff, offering them opportunities to get to know each other better, share expertise, and put their own institutional challenges into better perspective.

You know, like being able to ask, “what does your board do, how much staff do you have, what is the reality for you with regards to your summer camps,” for example. And then the other one is just the exposure to the other museums, being able to see what you guys do and how you do it. Everything from how you wire your electrical to how you cover up your office space. I mean, I was taking pictures of your office space! [laughter] I mean stuff like that, it’s the reality. [April-10 focus group, S-3]

I think that the thing that I’ve gotten the most out of isn’t...I mean it has been helpful to talk with the OMSI staff, but the fact that OMSI was able to connect me to these guys [other partners]. ‘Cause I mean, I remember I was panicked when it was my turn to host. And I’m thinking, my building’s a dump, it’s not meant for what we use it for, I hate this place [laughter], we don’t have any storage, you know, but going around to see everyone else’s place, [seeing] how they do everything—they have the same problems I do, you know? [April-10 focus group, D-3]

[It’s great] just to see how other members of the collaborative are doing things. I mean, a lot of us are probably working in isolation. You know, we’re down here with just a couple of people trying to brainstorm ways to come up with ideas. And it’s neat to get together with other folks who have a little different take on it, different capabilities, and see how they solve some of the problems. And that’s been a great part of the collaborative for me. And it’s one thing to be at a regional or a national meeting, that’s all well and good. But to be on the ground there and see, well, you guys have this incredible machine shop. And okay, that gives you some capabilities and we don’t have that, but are there other ways that we can approach things and stuff. But it’s just a great, a great opportunity, I think. [April-10 focus group, S-6]

As they got to know each other better, partners did occasionally communicate with each other in between the formal meetings.

I talked to [staff at another partner museum]. It was from meeting her in February and she’s relatively new in the position and she had called me to pick my brain about our museum and I called her most recently and she said that she was going to call me—we both had things that we wanted to talk about, questions for each other, and so it was just a sharing of ideas and she was curious about some of our things, like our budget and staffing. And I was seeing if she was interested in leasing one of our exhibits. [Nov-07 interview, D-6]

Yes, [we’ve been in touch] with Science Works. Mostly, you know like when...we did program stuff, exchanging ideas about programs and that kind of stuff, in science. And talking about how they need to do, they wanted to do more for younger kids like we do. That kind of stuff. [Nov-07 interview, D-2]

Probably the person that I’ve talked with most, or contacted most over the entire time period has been [a staff member] at ScienceWorks. And mainly because in their whole mission and style, they’re the closest thing to our center. [What motivated you to be in touch?] Some questions about how they do some of their operations at their museum. And I know that they’ve been in contact, based on us getting to know them a little bit more, we’ve been—I know our Director has been in contact with them numerous times, so it’s been a great thing for us. [Nov-07 interview, S-6]

Since meetings at the partner sites were scheduled to coincide with installations of either *Every Body Eats* or *Let's Get Active*, the partner staff could also preview those exhibitions and anticipate how they might be able to accommodate and interpret those exhibitions at their own sites.

For us, it was beneficial for the fact that I got to see the exhibits at somebody's location. I wasn't one of the starting locations—I feel bad for whoever started both exhibits. I saw Every Body Eats [at ScienceWorks] and somebody in your department got me a sketch-up and something else on how they figured out how to get [the exhibits] in my building, too,... which really helped. I would have been clueless without it. ...Actually seeing somebody else's location, how they put stuff together, being able to see which [components] needed electrical right away and stuff like that. [April-10 focus group, S-1]

Well, here's an example that helped me with [my local] health department. KidZone had Let's Get Active at the health center. So...I wanted to actually reproduce one of [their] panels.... And [I thought] it would have been nice to be able to put it at [the health department] office, which then would drive their visitors to our science center. With partners like that, that's really beneficial. For me to be there and to see that Let's Get Active was there at the health center [in Truckee] gave me the idea, oh okay, well this is something that we could do with a partnership with a health center. So for us, it made a huge difference. I mean, we got what we got, this great partnership with the health department. Would that have happened without seeing Let's Get Active [in Truckee]? Maybe, maybe not. But probably not. [April-10 focus group, D-5]

And then for Let's Get Active, we actually got some of our best stuff from you guys [KidZone]. ...I took some of the exercises they had at the rehab center where they had the exhibit set up. Yeah, they had like stations and they had some stuff...I copied some of that stuff and took it back and we used that. It came out very nice. [April-10 focus group, D-3]

The videoconference meetings envisioned in the project's original plan never actually materialized. In retrospect, the partner staff pointed out that the face-to-face meetings and site visits offered much more than could be accomplished via videoconferencing.

Having the chance to interact, talk to people, see how it was being done. Yeah, we tended to get off topic a little bit every once in a while [at the meetings] and not always keeping to the schedule. But there were a lot of things. Getting to see their facility and their storage. Getting to see Ashland, which is much larger than what I have. Getting to see your...you know, all the different facilities. To me, I enjoyed the meetings a lot and I got a lot out of the meetings. I think—had they been videoconferences—I would have hated this. I don't think this would have been very much fun at all. [April-10 focus group, D-3]

When we actually sat down with a meeting with an agenda, that time could have been condensed. That we didn't need, say, from 9 to 5 to accomplish what we accomplished. It was the conversations in the car, it was seeing the facilities, it was the dinners, it was all that surrounded the "meeting" that was just as valuable. [April-10 focus group, S-3] *Well, it's funny. That's the part, the meeting itself is probably the part that you could almost do [by] videoconference. But it's everything else that goes with it is where you need to be onsite and you get a whole lot of other things out of it.* [April-10 focus group, S-6]

At one point we had someone on staff who was real tech-y... "ooh, I'm excited! You don't have to travel because we could put you on this [Polycom® videoconferencing equipment]..." and I'm just thinking, what? [April-10 focus group, D-5] And you're like, throw that in the garbage! [D-7] Because it's the valuable networking, just stuff that just sort of bubbles up, just talking in the car. I mean, just the drive up here, five different conversations, going on at the same time. [D-5]

Factors limiting successful collaboration

In their survey and interview responses, the SMRC partners identified a variety of factors and circumstances that can make it more difficult for projects like this one to achieve their full potential. For example, even though their involvement with a collaborative often brings many benefits, participants' responsibilities can challenge the limited resources of many small museums.

You know, it does take some time, maybe there's a greater recognition on our part that with these collaborations, we need to be very strategic in how we get involved with them and look for adequate compensation for time. That's something that's not a criticism of OMSI, it's just a greater awareness on my part on the cost of some of the partnerships that I've joined. [Nov-07 interview, D-6] ... Meetings have not always felt very efficient. Face-to-face meetings are great but the travel and staff time is a strain on our museum. [Aug-07 survey, D-6]

I remember hearing somebody, I don't remember who it was, at one of the meetings, talking about just the fact that you get this exhibit but then suddenly you have to have people and rent forklifts and you have to do marketing and maybe reprinting of things. And there was some conversation about just the expense of all that and that if one was going to do multiple exhibits like this... I mean generally you want to change your exhibits out anyway, so you have to create a budget to handle those kinds of things. But, it does cost money to bring in new stuff. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

Given how highly participants valued the interchanges at face-to-face meetings, it is not surprising that those who missed a number of meetings found it difficult to remain informed or feel that they were really a part of the collaborative.

I have not been able to attend any of the meetings, so I really have no idea what's going on, I don't really know what any of the exhibits look like, besides the photographs that I've seen and you can only get a certain amount from that, and reading the signage and that kind of thing. ... I guess my biggest concern is that I haven't been there for two different sessions—are they going to boot us out? I think that's the biggest worry that I have. [Nov-07 interview, D-1]

Finally, even though it is likely that the diversity of small museums involved with this project contributed to its overall success, that situation concerned a few of the SMRC partners (especially those who considered themselves the “outliers”).

Unfortunately the partnership started before I was director, so I don't know if they really communicated with each other—the previous director and OMSI—about what the exhibits were going to be like. You know, I suppose if OMSI and our previous director knew more about really what the content was going to be in these exhibits, then they probably wouldn't have picked us as a partner. I think that we're like a totally different museum. [Nov-07 interview, D-2]

For us, I think it's a little bit harder, because we're so far away [from everyone else], that it makes it harder to really form a partnership that's going to be beneficial to everybody. [Nov-07 interview, D-1]

My only concern is how well this will work with our particular demographic, with our visitor profile compared with [the other partners], because with this collection of museums we have kind of a wide range of needs, some much more towards kids, some are just generally...they're trying to meet different needs. So it's going to be interesting, I'm going to be interested to see how that works with our particular group. [Nov-07 interview, S-6]

Partner visions for the future

Despite their concerns about specific features of this particular project, the SMRC partners were uniformly enthusiastic about continuing the partnership at some level (either immediately or at some point in the future).

If they extend this, sort of do another sort of group—you know, small-museum type thing—I hope that we’re involved. It’s been...the city likes this. The city’s been supportive of it and I think that we should be involved. So I hope that if, at the end of this program, that if they’re looking for an extension or more museums to do it, I hope that we can be involved. [Nov-07 interview, D-3]

I feel like there should...you know, now that there’s this level of experience and collaboration, that we really should just do another project. ...I mean, just come up with a new topic and just do it again. It’s a proven concept, so now pick a more challenging topic and go for it. I mean, why recreate the wheel? I know [OMSI] wants to do bigger exhibits and things, but the fact that they’ve taken [Every Body Eats and Let’s Get Active] and actually scaled them down to the table tops means that they’re looking at doing things a little differently, too. So I think there’s another approach besides just big exhibits. [April-10 focus group, D-7] *There’s still a market for the small exhibit, that’s the first thing, and I wish they would.* [S-1]

If we were twice as big and we were serving older kids, we’d be perfect because we could complement with our own [pre-school age] exhibit, with the OMSI exhibit. So I’m hoping that, even though it’s not working out now, I hope that they consider us in five years, hopefully if we have a new museum. That’s what I hope. [Nov-07 interview, D-2]

The April 2010 focus group participants acknowledged that the smaller exhibitions that serve their own needs may not be ones that produce sufficient income for the originating museum (like OMSI) or reach the large audiences that a funder may demand. Nevertheless, they argued that such projects bring significant benefits to the small museums involved in such a collaborative effort and that the audiences served by small museums are very important ones.

I think [OMSI’s] business model’s changing and they have certain needs that they’re trying to fulfill in a few years from now...I mean, if you look on their traveling exhibit pricelist, these [small exhibits] are some of the cheapest things. ...The big exhibits are the ones that they get to charge \$100,000 for three months. Their new SEPA one will be a much larger exhibit, more along the lines of CSI, really high end and high level. And I guess if you purely look at it in numbers, once it goes to New York, Miami, Minneapolis, I mean you’re going to hit millions pretty easily. But I’m just looking at just us.... We have people from all over our region coming to [our community] for this. And I think that the improvement overall of five other smaller museums to a slightly higher level, it’s tremendous! So I feel like the overall effect for Washington, for that dollar, is so much better in this model than just building another huge exhibit that goes to the big cities. [April-10 focus group, D-7] *And especially considering that we’re basically all working with underserved populations. You know, I mean, there’s going to be lots of opportunities for the people who live in New York City.* [S-6] *You improve those city kids lives this much, where as it’s exponential in a rural environment. And it’s exponential for a small museum to have a partnership like this versus them just sharing it amongst the big groups. I don’t know, that’s my perspective.* [D-7]

The partners did offer suggestions for how future collaborations might be improved.

Online networking tools could be used more effectively to support the collaborative's operation. Although the OMSI project team initially implemented a website for partner and project team use, "*it was not well designed, it was hard to use, and it had very little on it.*" [April-10 focus group, D-7] A variety of online applications now exist that could obviously facilitate communication among the collaborative members. This suggestion was offered very early in the project; much more sophisticated tools are now available.

It would be nice if there were some, I don't know, a network sort of set up or promoted...almost like a bulletin board? Or a listserv where everyone's concerns can be seen and their ideas and we're all learning from each other. I really do think this is a hot idea, this idea of connecting a lot of small museums together, because, boy, because we all have very similar problems. [Feb-06 interview, D-6]

A more effective website could also provide easily accessible project documentation, as the April 2010 focus group participants discussed in this exchange:

I think having [a report] in form mode, where somebody's come up with some specific question-and-answer kind of things.... You know, what was the public impression of the exhibit, what was your exhibit maintenance people's impression of it? Just some real specifics. [April-10 focus group, D-7] *I think it's a terrific idea, I mean, even we were talking about the wheels—how did the crate get wheels, how did we go to the collapsible crates, how did we decide that that was going to work? ...Just little things on each [decision], just some comments, and then anybody new could walk in and just say, "oh." So there's not that thing of scratching your head and saying, "why? why did we do this?"* [D-5] *Well, the Google web pages would be perfect, cause then every partner could log on, see notes from the OMSI team. As they developed the exhibits, we could have watched the process notes [they exchanged], and then we could post our own reports there and then so all partners' reports would have been there at any time, for anybody to read. So totally, that would be a great way to do it, instead of having to e-mail around and have that stuff get dispersed into archives or whatever. That's a great idea—to have a home base for [the project] for six years.* [D-7] *Yeah, I was going to say a Google site or even a closed Facebook group, you know, do it very simply.* [S-6]

Such a website could also make it possible for partners to easily share feedback about their experiences with the traveling exhibitions and any original marketing materials or interpretive aids that they developed at their own sites.

Also like if you [one of the partner sites] were to give your evaluation right away, and then OMSI could read it or [the other partners] could read it right after you just had the exhibit, so we would know, oh I have to be aware of this measurement, or these are the promo materials [you used]. 'Cause like I remember Bootheel shared their promo materials one time and I thought, oh my God, we didn't even think of the promo materials or the added activities or like the fact that you guys even came up with added activities. [April-10 focus group, S-3]

I mean, you could even give a mid-term report? Like, how did we market it and what worked and what didn't. But you can't wait to the end. You have to get it to everyone in advance. The next person has to see it, you know, a month or two away so that they know. Because by the time you get [the exhibit] from someone else, it would be too late to start marketing it. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

One partner suggested that videoconferences could have been scheduled to offer additional partner staff training or make it possible for partners to preview the supplementary educational programs. Although this director envisioned using the Polycom[®] equipment originally supplied to each site, such support could be provided more easily and inexpensively via a project website.

I'm the person who does the education right now, here at the museum, so it'll be my responsibility to take whatever they put together and then rehab it to my ability. I hate to do a workshop when I don't know the answers to the questions that I get. But the last time I was [at OMSI], we had talked about maybe doing some of the educational stuff, development stuff for the programs, they were considering, doing a little thing on Polycom[®] to teach our educators, or me in this case, how to present the workshops and go over it with us. ... You know, that's something that we could invite teachers to as well, and make it an even bigger thing and we could broadcast it on our big screen TV. You know, we've got one of those projection systems and that would make it kind of neat for teachers around here to experience something from across the country.
[Nov-07, BYM, Director]

Other participants requested additional support for their marketing efforts and table-top visitor activities that would complement the larger exhibit components.

You know, for as little as those portable vinyl [banner] stands cost, \$200 to \$300 printed, you could do two of them and you could either put them in your facility, or if you know of a place to put them to advertise [the exhibit]. For example, you could put one at the Y for Let's Get Active. [April-10 focus group, D-5] Or at a library, a school. [S-6] And boom—it's done. It sits there and then you roll it up and ship it to the next [site]. You know, would we spend \$350 to get one made for three months? Probably not. [D-5] But if that \$350 was spread among all of us, no big deal. [S-6]

Table-top activities add to an exhibit for us. You know, you put an exhibit on the floor, but then you have a few six-foot tables with volunteers manning them and kids make and take it, or something like that, in connection with an exhibit—that's huge. I mean, we create our own, but if it's all part of the original design, I think that it would be probably more effective. [April-10 focus group, D-7]

Finally, partner staff hoped that future grant proposals might include additional funds to support two enhancements—meeting participation for at least two staff from each partner site (when that's feasible for individual partners) and the production of construction drawings for individual exhibition components (so that partner sites could fabricate copies for use at their own sites once the traveling exhibition has departed).

There were some times when I would think, gosh, [my colleague] could really benefit from being [at a meeting], too. ... Seeing from different viewpoints was really important—from the executive-director standpoint, versus the exhibit person's and vice versa. So that would probably be the only thing I would say is to build in enough money for at least two of the staff to be able to travel. I mean, if they could. [April-10 focus group, D-5] We would have loved to have sent multiple people, but I don't even if I could afford it. I mean, not afford it, but have the staff out of the building. [D-7]

And [another partner] talked about the two exhibits that you basically got information about from OSMI and you did your own versions. I think that's, at least from my standpoint as an exhibits guy, that would be another resource, [a way] to have it again. Something with some funding that goes to OMSI [so we can get] information on some of their exhibits that we'd be allowed to fabricate in-house. ... That is a possible way to continue the collaboration, too. [April-10 focus group, S-6]

Discussion and recommendations

But for me, it was more than the exhibits, it was everybody else. Going to the other museums, learning stuff, getting ideas. It did bring us into Nano, traveling to a lot of museums, doing that, too. But like we've got partnerships with [other museums]. They just use us for their grants, that's all we get. "Do you want to be a part of this?" And that's the last we hear about it. And then we hear that they got this huge grant. You see our name on it, but nothing else. So at least with OMSI, there's a lot of substance with OMSI. I can call them anytime. [April-10 focus group, S-1]

As this comment suggests (and the evaluation's overall findings confirm), this collaboration did achieve key outcomes originally defined by the OMSI project team.

- **The partner museum staff will express satisfaction with the collaborative process and the resulting exhibitions.**

The collaborative's design and timeline gave the SMRC partners many opportunities to participate in discussions of project components, network and develop meaningful relationships with colleagues, and to see first-hand how a variety of museums tackle the challenges common to all. The project's periodic face-to-face meetings clearly contributed significantly to the partners' overall satisfaction with the collaboration (and to its successful completion). As many of the partner staff observed, however, it was the informal opportunities for learning and networking that were most highly valued by meeting attendees (rather than the more formal meeting discussions themselves).

The SMRC partners were also very enthusiastic about the overall quality of the two traveling exhibitions that emerged from their collaboration with OMSI. The majority reported that these exhibitions were both well received by and appropriate for their audiences. Even so, many did express concern about the amount of text displayed on components (and two partners reported that audiences at their sites seemed to be more engaged by *Every Body Eats* interactives than by the *Let's Get Active* components).

Since the collaborative was organized at least in part to familiarize the OMSI development team with the interests and needs of the small-museum community, it is probably not surprising that the SMRC partners were occasionally frustrated by their participation in that learning process. This was most apparent in the partners' discussion of the practical challenges they faced when preparing for and installing the exhibitions at their sites (e.g., getting the large crated components into their facilities, moving heavy components without the aid of a forklift, storing crates during the venue). The partners did acknowledge that OMSI staff was very responsive to their concerns, and the feedback that they offered should improve the experiences of exhibit staff at those museums who host these exhibitions during their national tour.

- **Participating staff will describe how their participation in this project has increased their museum's capacity to better understand their audiences, develop effective exhibitions and programs, and network with other small museums.**

The partners frequently related specific institutional benefits associated with their museums' participation in this project. Even though they were sometimes challenged (or frustrated) by their

participation in the front-end evaluation activities and the give-and-take of the exhibit development process, they generally agreed that these experiences furthered their museums' capacity to develop more effective and engaging audience experiences. In some cases, this project also prompted partner museums to initiate new partnerships with community organizations that are likely to be useful into the future.

Another institutional benefit was less expected—partners found that this formal affiliation with OMSI conveyed a certain cachet in their communities and added credibility to their individual fundraising efforts.

- **Participating staff will also identify ways in which their involvement with the collaborative has been professionally rewarding.**

Individual staff benefits closely paralleled those they reported for their institutions. Interviewees described a variety of personally relevant outcomes (e.g., seeing how other small museums operate on a very practical level, understanding their own audiences better, learning how to do their own jobs more effectively, and getting experience in the management of an effective collaboration). Participants' exchanges during the April 2010 focus group discussions also testified to the close personal relationships that developed among the SMRC colleagues and the OMSI project team.

Both the participants themselves and the study findings do suggest a number of recommendations for the OMSI project team. These address both the needs of small museums (as exemplified by the variety of sites participating in this collaborative) and ways in which future collaborations might be strengthened.

The SMRC museums' experiences in this project highlighted the challenges faced by the small-museum community that OMSI hopes to serve more effectively. The SMRC partners depend on a relatively small number of full-time staff to manage all areas of their operation—the number of full-time staff employed by these museums ranged from two (KidZone Museum) to four (ScienceWorks). Like many other small museums and science centers, they occupy spaces never designed for that purpose and these often lack the facilities and equipment of mid- or large-size museums. As OMSI exhibit staff continues to develop exhibitions for this community, they are encouraged to continue experimenting with crate and component designs that take these limitations into account and actively solicit feedback about the success of those efforts from those small museums included in the nationwide tours.

Partner feedback also suggests that the wider small-museum audience may be especially interested in exhibitions that include a higher proportion of components that encourage open-ended “play” and support repeated visitation. At least two SMRC directors pointed out that even the 800 square foot exhibitions produced by this collaborative occupied all (or at least a significant portion) of their available exhibition space, a circumstance that may discourage the relatively high level of repeat visitation that they depend on for their livelihood.

The project's five-year timeline supported the development of strong relationships among the partner staff that were most directly involved with this project and increased their appreciation of

the benefits offered by effective partnerships. At least one SMRC director was inspired to pursue similarly focused collaborations with closer regional partners:

Well, I think that one of the things that we've learned is that having a lot of partners really helps. It not only helps you win grants, but overall, especially in the data collection, it's hard to try and survey 200 people in your facility and get a really good mix. So it's nice being able to divide that up between institutions. ...I wish that we could find a way of replicating this program with a larger museum somewhere closer. The ___ Science Center is a four-hour drive from us and ___ Children's Museum is a three-hour drive from us, so it would be nice to see what kind of collaboration that we might be able to do.

Study findings also highlighted two specific enhancements that could promote more effective collaboration in future partnerships.

Effective project documentation is critically important, especially when participating staff may come and go over the course of a multi-year project. SMRC partners identified a variety of project documents that would have been useful, including brief summaries of meeting discussions and decisions, timely evaluation reports, and OMSI exhibit records (annotated to include prototyping outcomes and the rationale underlying changes). Partner staff also recommended that OMSI staff devise a simple, structured report format that partners could use to share their exhibit installation experiences and recommendations, marketing suggestions, maintenance concerns, and interpretation ideas. Note that even if much of the information that the partners requested was compiled by the OMSI project team, it was not easily accessible to those at the partner museums.

A broadly focused, project-dedicated website could be used to both share such a project archive and support partner communication and networking. Although the partners largely discounted the value of videoconferencing as a substitute for face-to-face meetings, a well-designed project website could also offer brief, “YouTube-style” videos for training or documentation purposes (e.g., an evaluator demonstrating how to conduct visitor surveys and interviews, an OMSI educator leading an exhibition-related activity with a visiting school group, or virtual tours of exhibit installations at participating partner sites).

Finally, the themes addressed by *Every Body Eats* and *Let's Get Active* had great appeal to these small museums and the audiences that they serve. As this staff member noted,

The best thing [about this project] is that the people in our community get to see something that they would never get a chance to see in our region at all. ... We're really hoping that it will have an impact on the lives and the nutritional health and the overall view of the way that people see food here. We're in...the Fry Belt. If you can find a way to deep-fat fry it, you'll do it. [Feb-06 interview, D-1]

Partner staff recommended future collaborative ventures like this one include additional funding to cover OMSI's production of working drawings for select exhibit components (either in full scale or as in table-top versions, if those are available). Providing those plans at no cost to partner sites would make it easier for the small museums to add especially popular or effective components to their own exhibit mix, extending the influence of the project and its benefits for their visitors beyond the duration of the grant itself.