



NSF funds new Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — A new Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE) has been established in Washington, D.C., with the support of a five-year award from the National Science Foundation (NSF).

The Center will serve as a focal point for communication and knowledge-building among a wide range of organizations involved with informal science education, including film and broadcast media, science centers and museums, zoos and aquariums, botanical gardens and nature centers, youth and community-based programs, after-school programs, and digital media and gaming.

NSF, a U.S. federal agency created in 1950 with the primary mission of promoting "the progress of science," has since its inception recognized and supported programs that advance public understanding of science and stimulate interest in the study of science. More than a thousand informal science education projects and programs have received NSF support. Among them are television series like *NOVA* and *Cyberchase*, giant-screen films like *Sea Monsters: A Prehistoric Adventure*, radio programs and web sites like *Pulse of the Planet* and *Kinetic City*, citizen science programs like Cornell University's *Project FeederWatch*, a multitude of traveling exhibitions and museum-based programs, and science programs for youth and community groups offered by organizations like 4-H and Girl Scouts.

A significant percentage of Americans not only indicate interest in science news and support for basic research, but also continue to pursue lifelong science learning in their leisure time. The National Science Board's 2006 *Science and Engineering Indicators* reported that 58 percent of adults surveyed had visited zoos and aquariums and 30 percent had visited science centers and museums in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Positive experiences with science in such informal settings also may influence whether students go on to pursue careers in science. In a study reported in the May 26, 2006 issue of *Science*, Robert H. Tai of the University of Virginia found that eighth-graders who indicated an interest in a science career were nearly twice as likely as others to go on to earn science-related degrees. Such interest often is inspired and developed through informal experiences with science.

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The new Center will support NSF's efforts to increase the impact of its investments and to encourage significant innovations and collaborations in informal science education by studying outcomes of NSF-funded projects and reporting on relevant research, in particular research on learning. Through a mix of strategies, CAISE will work to connect those working in the informal science education field, facilitate the flow of knowledge between academic researchers and practitioners, and distill knowledge from NSF's portfolio of funded projects and from educational research.

Activities will include

- community web site with highlights of NSF-funded informal science education (ISE) projects, Center publications, and other resources for the ISE field
- conferences and online workshops for principal investigators of NSF-funded ISE projects
- fellowships and mentoring programs to widen participation in NSF-funded ISE work
- practitioner seminars that study and report on issues running across multiple NSF-funded projects
- sessions and gatherings at conferences of related groups to facilitate flow of knowledge and experience among ISE community members, as well as with relevant audiences outside the field.

CAISE is housed in Washington, D.C., at the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), an organization of 440 science centers and museums located in over 40 countries and dedicated to furthering the public understanding of science among increasingly diverse audiences. Founded in 1973, ASTC was a 2006 recipient of the National Science Board's Public Service Award.

The NSF award that supports the Center's work was made by the Informal Science Education program in the Division of Research on Learning in Formal and Informal Settings.

Partner organizations with ASTC are the Oregon State University Program in Free-Choice Learning, John Falk, co-PI; University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out-of-School Environments (UPCLOSE), Kevin Crowley, co-PI; and Visitor Studies Association, Alan Friedman, co-PI. Wendy Pollock is the ASTC PI. Ellen McCallie, formerly an educator at the Missouri Botanical Garden and a presenter on BBC television's *Rough Science* series, and now a Ph.D. candidate in the Center for Informal Learning and Schools program at Kings College London, will serve as director. John Baek, a recent graduate of George Mason University with a Ph.D. in instructional technology and design research, is manager.

The Center is connected with many other individuals and organizations across this broad and diverse field through a steering committee, forum, and inquiry groups. The web site, inSci.org, will open soon.

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