Background

What is COVES?

The Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES) unites science centers in a common effort to better understand our visitors’ experiences within and across institutions.

How did it start?

This project was initially driven by a need within several founding science centers which, in turn, helped us identify a larger field-wide need. Science centers want to answer questions about their visitors, but they also want to know the answers to larger questions, such as, “How do we compare to other museums?” Points of reference exist in other sectors, but few, if any, data points were relevant to the work of cultural institutions such as science museums. Additionally, while several individual institutions are already studying their own visitors’ experiences, the infrastructure to support collaboration across science museums is currently lacking. Conversations with colleagues at other science centers revealed that this need was shared by institutions across our field.

Why are you involved?

The current group of Participating Institutions will be instrumental to the success of the system as we move forward. Currently, we are developing several aspects of the program, such as training materials, the survey instrument, and reporting methods. Participating Institutions can expect to receive several benefits from their involvement in COVES:

*Continued training and support.* In addition to orientation and training sessions on COVES data collection, each institution will be involved in ongoing training for new staff, new project developments, and most importantly, to make sense of the data we collect and the results we report. We call this “Evaluation Capacity Building,” and we hope that it will increase your ability to carry-out audience research, become critical consumers of audience research data, and make decisions based on that data.

*Personalized and aggregate reporting.* Your science center will receive a customized report based on the data that you help collect from your institution. In addition to your institution’s data, you will also receive a “COVES-wide” report that includes information about visitors from all science centers currently participating in COVES. The data will be anonymous (meaning we won’t ever identify your organization for being “better” or “worse” than another), and will reflect findings from all current Participating Institutions.
The opportunity to help inform the system. This includes participating in the decision-making governance structure of COVES, suggesting research questions for the collaboration to pursue, offering feedback on our reporting structure, and more. After all, you should have a say in what we’re asking of our visitors!

How is COVES organized?

Currently, COVES is organized into several overlapping working groups. Extensive research, field-wide survey feedback, and a forum with museum professionals from 11 science centers and 5 national organizations taught us that our group would need to have shared ownership and trust. Our system will have clearly identified processes and systems for sharing data and findings, be comprised of decision-makers not just from one institution or one type of institution but many institutions representing all types, and will be designed to benefit all.

Currently, our system is comprised of four groups:
1. The Governing Body is responsible for overall project direction and oversight. The Governing Body is composed of eight people from seven different organizations of varying size and location.

2. The Measurement Consultants are three people, external to the project, with expertise in research and measurement who can guide and advise the core project team.

3. The Project Staff are responsible for carrying out the central work of the collaboration and keeping the project moving forward. This includes the Administrative Team, who will administer, coordinate, and grow the collaboration at an institutional and project level, and the Research Team, who will conduct the research and evaluation work.

4. Institutional Review Board (IRB): The IRB will ensure that all studies are conducted ethically, protecting the rights of human subjects. The IRB will annually review instruments and data collection, data analysis, and data sharing protocols and methods to ensure these protections are in place.

Our aim is that COVES will develop into a system that supports any/all interested science centers and that it will evolve as we grow. This means that we hope to soon have more Participating Institutions, will continue to expand our research questions, and welcome feedback along the way.

Where can I go for more information, not provided here?

For project updates and other general information on COVES, visit www.understandingvisitors.org. To contact project staff or ask other questions about our work, please email info@understandingvisitors.org.
Data Collection Key Points
Tips, Tricks, & Responses

Let’s face it: data collection can make people feel apprehensive, whether you’re the data collector or the visitor. So, we’re here to try to make it as easy as possible! Based on data collector feedback, we have compiled a list of data collection best practices and descriptions of items in the COVES survey that cause visitors to express concern or confusion. We hope this guide will help you feel more prepared to facilitate the COVES survey data collection with your visitors.

Approaching Visitors
Data collectors are the face and voice of COVES. You are the last person the visitor speaks to before leaving your science center or museum, and we believe you will impact the visitor in a positive way!

The data collection process can be broken into three steps.¹ Each step is important for making participants feel comfortable, valued, and respected as they share their thoughts and time with you, and for ensuring you are collecting high-quality data for the analysis process.

1. **Connection: Sampling → Introduction → Getting informed consent**
   COVES utilizes a random sampling method. Once you have randomly selected your survey participant, be polite, positive, and concise in your introduction. We recommend something like the following:

   “Hi, my name is _________ and I work here at _________. We’re conducting a survey to learn more about the visitor experience. Would you be willing to answer a few questions about your visit?”

   Feel free to try out a few different scripts and stick to what works for you.

   Once the visitor agrees to participate, you will need to obtain verbal informed consent. You can say something like the following:

   “Before we start, I need to let you know that you’ll be answering some questions about your museum experience. The survey should take less than five minutes. Your answers will be kept completely confidential, and your participation is voluntary, so you can stop at any time or choose not to answer any questions. Does that sound okay?”

2. **Collection: Refusal → Record**
   OR Prep → Conduct → Check

¹ These steps are drawn from the NISE Network’s TBI process.
If a visitor *consents to taking the survey*, make sure the visitor is comfortable using the iPad, and give them a bit of space. Make it known that you are available should they have questions, but give them a little privacy as they fill in their responses.

If a visitor *declines to participate*, don't worry about it! It happens. People may give you a reason for declining (“I don’t want to receive a lot of emails’”), some of which you can clarify (“We won’t be asking for your email address on this survey ’”). However, never push or pressure a visitor to participate. Simply record their refusal and reason for refusing, and thank them for their time.

3. **Close: Thanks ➔ Questions ➔ Record ➔ Prepare**

Finally, thank the visitor for their time. Smile and be positive, and offer to answer any questions they may have.

Before you begin sampling the next visitor, make sure the data from the previous visitor are ready to submit. Check the iPad to ensure the visitor submitted the survey. If the visitor had to leave in the middle of the survey, record them in a separate category than the refusals.

Then, take a deep breath, look up, and begin the sampling protocol again. Make sure you are personally ready before starting again.

A few things to remember:

- Because you represent the museum on the floor, you should be striving to provide a good customer experience for visitors. Don’t pressure visitors who decline to take the survey. A good rule of thumb is if approaching the visitor would create a negative impression of the museum, it’s not worth it. After all, we are asking about the visitor experience!
- Also, remember that you don’t have to put yourself in situations that feel unsafe or uncomfortable. It’s not likely, but if a visitor makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable, end the data collection, move to a safe space, and go back out once the visitor has left. Your comfort and safety are paramount!
- As always, practice makes perfect. The more you get out there and collect data, the more comfortable you’ll feel.
Frequently Asked Questions from Visitors

As we’ve received feedback about things that visitors find confusing or difficult about the survey, we have compiled some of the most common questions here. You can use this as a preparatory “cheat sheet” to anticipate what visitors might ask you about COVES. Again, this is not an exhaustive list; if a visitor stumps you with a question, please record it and let us know.

Q: Why do you have “Another category” under gender? (Q17)
A: With this question, COVES seeks to be inclusive without overwhelming visitors with too many answer options. While male and female are the two “normalized” genders, these categories do not include some people, such as those who have intersex conditions or consider their gender identity to be “non-binary”.

Q: Why don’t you have _____ as an option under ethnic identity? (Q20)
A: For this survey, we have chosen to follow the 2010 census categories. Visitors can select as many categories as apply to them.

Q: Why are you asking if I identify as LGBTQ+? (Q21)
A: COVES has chosen to ask about sexuality (and culture and community) as well as gender identity because it is a major demographic element for many museum visitors, and the identification is becoming increasingly important for communities and cultural groups. By asking this question, COVES seeks to be all-inclusive and welcoming.

Q: Why do you ask for my household income? (Q23)
A: The set of ranges corresponds with the 2010 census question about household income, which will allow museums to compare visitors’ income with local or statewide income ratings. This information can help museums set price points for admission, special programs and events, etc.

Q: Why do you need to know about disabilities in our group? (Q24)
A: Universal design, accessibility, and inclusion are high priorities among COVES institutions. Knowing about visitors’ disabilities helps inform this work.
Data Collection Guidelines – Onsite Electronic Survey

Last updated: April 7th, 2017 by Alex Lussenhop (MOS)

Project Name: COVES – Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies

Evaluation Questions: The COVES Governing Body and Research Team aim to study the visitor experience at a range of science centers by collecting survey data. The survey will provide data to inform the following broad categories of questions:

- Who visits our institutions
- Why they visit
- What they experience while they are here
- How they react to those experiences

Data Collection Goals and Timeline:

- The data collection will be ongoing, beginning July 1st, 2016.
- The COVES Research Team will provide guidance about how many surveys need to be collected during the year.
- The data will support a process of continual improvement at each science center as well as for the project itself. Your feedback is also very important!

Sampling and Eligibility:

Unit of Measure: Each visitor group is eligible to complete one survey

Sampling Location: At or near the museum exit(s)

Age Range: An adult (18+) must answer the survey questions

Group Type: Family groups, adult only groups, and adults visiting alone. School or camp groups and Museum staff, interns, volunteers, and contractors are NOT eligible

Equipment/Supplies Needed:

- 1-3 iPads/tablets/laptop computers

Planning:

- Designate data collectors to collect data during a range of times: mornings and afternoons, weekends and weekdays, and vacation weeks/holidays as well as non-holidays.
- Data collectors should collect data at the museum exit. If there are multiple exits, data collectors should plan shifts at each exit in numbers proportional to that exit’s use.
- All designated data collectors need to have completed human subjects training, and the Museum of Science must have a copy of their completion certificates.
- We recommend allotting about 2 hours for each data collection shift.
- Before data collection, read and familiarize yourself with the survey so you can answer any questions about it.
Sampling Information:
- To ensure a random sample, the data collector should select and approach every other eligible group. One way to keep track of which group to approach is to draw an imaginary line on the floor and approach every other eligible group or adult who crosses the line. It is very important to follow this protocol.
- If someone in the group consents, the data collector should verify that the group is actually done with their visit and not planning to come back in.
- Each group should fill out only one survey, no matter how many people are in the group. Any adult in the group can do this.
- While the adult is completing the survey, step aside so they have privacy, but keep them in your view so you will know if they have questions.
- When the adult is finished, thank them and their group.
- Once the adult in the group begins the survey, prepare the survey on your other tablet (if you are using more than one), sample the next group, and repeat the process until you have collected the required number of complete surveys or reached the end of your data collection session.

Sample Introductory Script:
Hi, my name is [name] from [institution]. We are conducting a survey about general visitor experiences. Would you be willing to fill out the survey? Your answers will be anonymous, you can stop whenever you need to, and you can choose not to answer a question if you want. Your answers will help us improve the visitor experience for all. It should take you about 5 minutes. We have the survey loaded on these tablets for you.

[If yes] Thank you!
[If no] Have a great day!

Refusal/Termination Information:
- Thank visitors even if they choose not to participate.
- If a group stops in the middle of the survey for any reason, thank them for their time. Close the browser tab so that the incomplete survey does not submit.

Data Management:
Using the SurveyGizmo link provided by the Research Team, track the number of visitors who agree to participate (“Yes”), those who decline to participate (“No”), and also those who initially agree, begin the survey, but return the survey to you before they have finished (close the browser window containing the unfinished survey, then select “Previous visitor did not complete form”). If you know the reason(s) visitors declined or had to end their survey, enter this in the space provided on the form. Also feel free to include any general notes from your data collection session. While this process will allow us to track the response rate at your institution and the average length of time the survey takes your visitors, it will not track your total time spent collecting data. Data Collection Managers should keep a log of this for planning purposes and send it to the Research Team at the end of each month.