Public Engagement with Science: developing a theory of change

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Public Engagement with Science
Public engagement with science describes intentional, meaningful interactions that provide opportunities for mutual learning between scientists and members of the public. Outcomes of public engagement with science include mutual learning (scientist and public), civic engagement skills and empowerment, increased awareness of the cultural relevance of science, and recognition of the importance of multiple perspectives and domains of knowledge (Stigloge et al., 2014). Mutual learning refers not just to the acquisition of knowledge, but also to increased familiarity with a breadth of perspectives, frames, and worldviews.

This is how AAAS conceives of, and coaches others to perform, public engagement with science. Yet public engagement with science is not a singular thing; there are a diversity of public engagement models and strategies. However, each tends to define engagement as an iterative, back-and-forth process between various publics, experts, and decision-makers. Without being able to draw boundaries around the idea of public engagement with science, it is hard to test assumptions, identify best practices, or firmly identify one’s role in the system that produces this work.

Logic Model
The AAAS Center for Public Engagement with Science proposes the draft logic model of public engagement with science (Figure 1), as the start of an iterative conversation about the nature of public engagement and, importantly, how best to understand the most effective practices. The model draws from and will inform programs that support scientists’ public engagement efforts, will help identify needed partnerships or collaborations with public-facing or –serving organizations, and will serve as a guide in the development of an evaluation for public engagement.

Methods
The AAAS Center for Public Engagement with Science and Technology (“the Center”) convened 26 public engagement researchers, evaluators, and practitioners, as well as scientists who engage the public, to obtain input on a theory of change.

The output of this meeting was shared with additional public engagement stakeholders, at the AAAS Annual Meeting, and in individual conversations and discussions on Trellis. The current logic model captures these ideas, and will be refined with additional research and input.

Next Steps
Please share your reactions and suggestions to the logic model! In particular, the model should reflect the reality of public engagement practice. Evaluation instruments based on the model will be piloted in 2016 and 2017.

To provide input or participate in the pilot evaluation, please contact Jeanne.

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References (see www.aaas.org/pes/other-resources):