

Science Museums Engage the Public in Dialogue and Deliberation about Societal Implications of Nanotechnology

Over the past three years, science museums in the Nanoscale Informal Science Education Network (NISE Net) have developed and tested a new way to engage the public in dialogue and deliberation about societal and environmental implications of nanotechnology. These NISE Net Forums provide opportunities for two-way communication, with both experts and the public sharing relevant knowledge and their perspectives on important societal issues related to science and technology. Such discussion generates a better informed citizenry and potential mechanisms to support the incorporation of public values into the scientific research agenda.

Summative evaluation conducted by Multimedia Research in 2008 found that the “forum model is successful in positively influencing attendees’ definition of nanotechnology; their awareness, assessment, and understanding of both the benefits and risks of nanotechnology; their awareness of viewpoints different from their own; and their confidence in participating in public discourse about nanotechnology.” In addition to their educational benefits, forum programs also respond to a growing sense within the social science and science policy communities that there is a need to engage the public in two-way conversations about emerging technologies and public policy. The forums also have had an impact on the participating scientists and engineers, reminding them of how their work can impact people’s lives.



Image Credit: Museum of Science, Boston

The NISE Net Forum Team has conducted more than 50 forums at sites across the country, involving more than 1,000 members of the public through in-depth discussions about aspects of nanotechnology related to health and personal care, privacy and security, alternative energy, consumer products, and public policy. To disseminate this model, NISE Net has developed workshops, professional development activities, and an online “catalog” for free electronic distribution of program materials.

NISE Net is led by the Museum of Science in Boston, in collaboration with the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul and the Exploratorium in San Francisco. The principal investigator is Larry Bell and co-principal investigators are Carol Lynn Alpert, Paul Martin, Tom Rockwell, and Rob Semper. Institutions involved in developing forum programs in addition to the three lead institutions are the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science and the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

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Contributing Agencies: NSF