Community Engagement as Input to the Design of the Environmental Center at Frick Park and Beyond

Tamara Dubowitz, Kristy Gonzalez Morganti, Rachel M. Burns, Marla C. Haims

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1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
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Summary

For more than 15 years, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the City of Pittsburgh have been engaged in a public-private partnership aimed at restoring the city’s four largest parks: Frick, Highland, Riverview, and Schenley. Together, these parks comprise approximately 1,800 acres of greenspace. The Parks Conservancy focused its 2011 research on the design and development of the new building of the Environmental Center at Frick Park (ECFP), paying special attention to underserved communities and children within the vicinity of the park who have not historically participated in environmental education programming at the center. The Parks Conservancy contracted with the RAND Corporation to provide structured engagement with neighborhood community groups to allow for public input into the ECFP design, including input concerning the needs of underserved populations and children. RAND conducted community focus groups and brief informal interviews with a total of 81 local residents to gather input on park use and barriers to use.

Overarching Findings

The mere existence of a park is insufficient to attract users. Although large urban parks were originally designed to be refuges that would attract urban populations of all classes and backgrounds and, in particular, to serve low-income groups that would otherwise not have access to open greenspace and fresh air, parks do not automatically serve all members of the local community. Overall, we found relatively low levels of park use and awareness of the ECFP among underserved populations living near Frick Park.

We found that the key barrier to use of the ECFP and to program and event participation among our population of interest (i.e., underserved communities and children within the vicinity of the park) was general lack of awareness of ECFP activities and programs. Other barriers concerned distance, transportation, and parking; alignment of interests; level of comfort; and safety. Other challenges involved personal schedules and availability, lack of child care, and having children who are too young to participate in programs.

Study participants living near Frick Park expressed a strong interest in environmental education, but they want to feel welcome to participate. A majority of the individuals who participated in the study expressed an interest in environmental education and issues. The generally high level of interest in environmental education suggests that, if barriers can be addressed, participation in ECFP activities and involvement at Frick Park could increase.

However, many comments made during the interviews and focus groups indicated that local residents do not feel entirely welcome in Frick Park or at the ECFP, and some comments
suggested that Frick Park and the ECFP may not be appealing or interesting to youth or adults in underserved communities close to Frick Park, such as Homewood. This lack of appeal may be due to a lack of exposure among residents to environmental issues and education or to competing priorities or interests.

Promotional efforts that can effectively compete with media will be necessary to increase attendance at local parks. In today’s world, there are multiple competitors for people’s leisure time, and electronic media activities are dominating this competition. Attracting individuals to parks therefore requires that the programming and experience offered by the parks be superior to alternatives. Given that the advertising budgets for parks pale in comparison with mass media advertising budgets, and considering the inconvenience of distance and travel to parks for many, attracting new users is a significant challenge that any organization with limited resources will find difficult to overcome.

After analyzing responses from local Pittsburgh residents, we concluded that people preferred a “push” mechanism for learning about activities rather than a “pull” mechanism; that is, they wanted to hear about activities more directly and wanted to receive targeted information rather than having to seek out information on their own. Thus, as discussed later in this summary, a variety of outreach strategies will be needed to reach local audiences. We do note, however, that our recommendations and findings are based on a small sample size. Further research with a larger sample would help validate our findings and recommendations.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations, presenting them by issue area.

Awareness

To address the lack of awareness about ECFP programs and activities, we recommend improving and increasing outreach to community members through a variety of means, including the following:

- Provide maps and directions to the ECFP and its programs within Frick Park, particularly in the case of playground areas that attract individuals from all over the city (i.e., the Forbes and Braddock playground, the Blue Slide playground).
- Collaborate with community organizations (e.g., churches, community groups, schools) and community advocates who are already familiar with the ECFP.
- Engage in outreach to schools and other organizations already working with children.
- Use culturally sensitive advertising in print media posted in strategic places frequented by community residents (e.g., churches, bus stops, hair salons, day care facilities, grocery stores).
- Use targeted social media messages to reach youth and other specific community groups.

Alignment with Interests

To ensure that the ECFP provides a range of activities that are aligned with the interests of local residents, we suggest that the Parks Conservancy...
• Invite local community-based organizations to hold special events in Pittsburgh’s large parks.
• Consider employing creative marketing programs that tie the use of park resources with other benefits, including “frequent user” incentives.
• Consider partnering with other organizations working with youth (e.g., Frick Art and Historical Center, the YMCA Lighthouse program, local schools) in order to introduce youth to the ECFP and ECFP activities and, potentially, increase interest in environmental issues, education, and the ECFP.
• Invite local residents to program activities and to special events at the ECFP and other large parks that honor historical figures important to conservation and the outdoors, particularly those of significance to minority communities (e.g., George Washington Carver, Nobel Prize–winning environmentalist Wangari Maathai).

Distance, Transportation, and Parking
To increase participation and engagement among residents with limited access to Frick Park, we recommend the following approaches:

• Provide clear directions to the ECFP and related information (including bus routes, travel times, and parking availability) on posters, flyers, and mailings, and post strategically located signage within and near the park to assist visitors.
• Bring ECFP activities (e.g., nature exploration, cultivation of native plants, events) to community parks and other community locations in underserved communities and schools.
• Provide transportation to key programs and activities (or partner with community organizations to do so) to increase participation among community members who do not have personal transportation and who live too far away to walk to the park.

Scheduling and Child Care
To address residents’ variable work schedules, we recommend the following:

• Hold ECFP and park events at various times (i.e., morning, afternoon, and evening) on weekdays and weekends.
• Integrate and coordinate ECFP programming with schools and churches to reach youths who may be unable to attend if they must rely on parental transportation. If possible, establish drop-off and pick-up locations close to specific underserved communities (e.g., establish a drop-off and pick-up point at Westinghouse Park).

To address problems in coordinating child care in order to attend ECFP activities, we recommend the following:

• Consider offering adult and children’s programs concurrently (e.g., a gardening program for young children and a composting education program for adults).

Safety
Addressing safety concerns could improve the reputation and appeal of the new ECFP. We recommend that the Parks Conservancy
• Emphasize safety in the design and construction of the new ECFP building; specifically, we recommend that the new design be especially sensitive to providing ample exterior lighting.
• Consider offering and advertising guided walks on the trails to help to alleviate fears about the wooded trails and to help individuals be more comfortable in newer settings.

Level of Comfort
To address concerns that Frick Park is exclusive or unwelcoming, especially for African-American visitors, the Parks Conservancy should consider the following:

• engaging youth advocates who can publicize ECFP activities and programs
• hiring residents of underserved areas to staff ECFP activities (e.g., camps)
• using authentic depictions of diverse groups of people in advertising and marketing materials to highlight the diversity of community residents engaged with the ECFP
• bringing ECFP activities and programs to schools and other community organizations to expand the current view of the ECFP
• waiving or subsidizing program fees for individuals or children from low-income households.

Conclusion
Parks, greenspace, and environmental education and programming provide many important benefits for physical, mental, and social health; the natural environment; and social well-being. We found, however, that the presence of greenspace and environmental education alone is not enough. Equal access to and use of greenspace and environmental education are partly an issue of geographic proximity, but they are also influenced by other real and perceived barriers. Facilitating the use of and engagement in Pittsburgh parks (and specifically Frick Park and the ECFP) requires addressing both the real and the perceived social and physical challenges that park supporters, current park users, and potential park users face.