

COMMUNITY DIALOGUES IN SUPPORT OF SCIENCE ACROSS AMERICA



A supplement to the Community Dialogue Guide





Science Across America

As America celebrates its 250-year anniversary, HHMI Tangled Bank Studios and STAR Net have launched a new campaign to support libraries in highlighting the history of scientific achievement in our country, and the local connections to science in our communities. SCIENCE ACROSS AMERICA, the newest campaign from Spark of Science@ My Library, invites libraries to showcase local scientific advances and scientists, engage your communities with focused Community Dialogues, and host educational and inspirational activities that shine a light on the past, present, and future of science in our lives.

Community Dialogues

Originally developed with support from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and NASA, Community Dialogues are informal community-led conversation that provide the opportunity for library staff and community members and leaders to discuss common, community-based challenges or aspirations. Public libraries are vital community centers offering resources, activities, and other learning opportunities for their patrons. To best serve their communities, libraries are looking outward to discover how community members think and feel about important topics and making connections with local organizations and partners that can help address these issues to achieve their common goal. Community Dialogues are one of many ways in which libraries are fully engaging with and learning from the communities that they serve.



Figure 1. *Community Dialogue* participants at the Joeten-Kiyu Public Library in Saipan.

“Open dialogues empower us to brainstorm collectively, identify where to begin, gather meaningful feedback, and work collaboratively toward meaningful, long-term solutions that benefit our entire community. While Community Dialogues are an important place to start, it is the action we take moving forward where the real work and true impact — takes shape. Our dialogue planted the seeds, our collaborations will nurture them, and the actions we take moving forward will root its impact.”

- Sina Ha'ani Palacios, Joeten-Kiyu Public Library



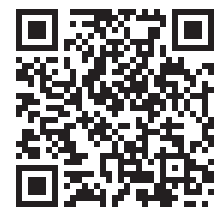
Why Engage in Community Dialogue

The full Community Dialogue guide can be found using the QR code to the right, or by navigating to this URL: <https://www.starnetlibraries.org/deia/community-dialogues/>. A teen-led version is also available at the same link, as well as additional background information.

Community Dialogues borrow methodology from the Harwood Method (Harwood, 2017; ALA, 2018) and other informal community conversations, and fully endorses the utilization of these other methods if they work best for your community. Our focus with Community Dialogues, based on library staff suggestions and feedback, was to create a framework that allowed for quick preparation, an easy-to-follow template, and strategies for creating actionable conversations. Participating libraries have told us that Community Dialogues have helped them to:

- Expand their understanding of patrons' feelings about their local library and its programs, including programming related to STEM
- Obtain meaningful feedback from the community on who visits the library and why
- Have a conversation about how the library can better serve ethnically, economically, and geographically underserved and underrepresented audiences
- Better connect with local organizations and potential future partners that have shared interests with the library and community

These events are about more than leaving the room with a list of to-dos and answers to all the questions. Rather, they are about discussing topics and issues in an inclusive and uninhibited environment, with community representatives and stakeholders.



"One of the challenges of working in libraries is that due to developments in technology, among other things, our targets are always shifting, and this is a great way to make sure we are on track to meet our patron's needs."

-April Griffith, Carnegie Public Library



Getting Started: How to Prepare for your Dialogue

Depending on your comfort level facilitating the conversation (remember, it's ok to have an outside facilitator as well!) we recommend between 10 and 20 participants, though successful Dialogues have been conducted with numbers outside this range. Participants can include library staff, local educators, museum professionals, local government, social service providers, local STEM clubs, afterschool providers, and your library "regulars". Anyone could be the right participant, depending on your goals. Personalized invitations tend to work better than flyers or non-targeted advertisements. Reach out directly to the people you want to attend. If you're not sure who would be the right fit, explain the process to your invitees, and ask them to bring a +1 that they think can contribute to the conversation.

Reaching out 2-3 months ahead of the planned event is sufficient time to allow participants to rearrange their schedules. Depending on your participant list, you should consider the time of year, time of day, childcare requirements, and religious/cultural observations that may interfere with the chosen time. If one of your goals is reaching new audiences, consider hosting your Dialogue at a neutral venue that is welcoming to that particular group. Dialogues typically last 90 minutes to 2 hours, though many libraries have found success with longer events by incorporating hands-on programs and other activities (such as a library showcase) into their conversation.

From Libraries Transforming Communities: A Step-by-step Guide for "Turning Outward" to your community

Ground Rules:

1. **Have a "kitchen table" conversation.** Everyone participates; not one dominates.
2. **There are no "right answers."** Draw on our own experiences, views and beliefs. You do not need to be an expert.
3. **Keep an open mind.** Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.
4. **Help keep the discussion on track.** Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.
5. **It is okay to disagree, but don't be disagreeable.** Respond to others how you want to be responded to.
6. **Have fun!**



Community Dialogue Goals

The goal(s) for your Dialogue should be apparent in your participants, your questions, and your action items. This goal should be something you share with participants, re-direct conversation to, and incorporate in your future plans. It's often helpful to think of a Big Idea or Guiding Question before finalizing your goals. Examples of Guiding Questions are "Why does science matter in our community?" and "What are our communities local science strengths, and how is our community contributing to science across America?" Your Guiding Question or Big Idea should be relevant for your community and your library, and you needn't focus on one of these suggestions. A few example goals are listed below:

- Learn more about the science and scientists in our community, and how they can partner with the library
- Better understand the science identity of our community
- Uncover what scientific areas/achievements patrons and the community are most excited about
- Discover local issues that are being addressed, or could be addressed, through local science
- Better understand the needs and concerns of our community, through a science lense
- Be part of building the future of science in our community
- Identify gaps in science learning in our community, so that the library and its partners can address them
- Understand how community members are currently accessing science data, and how the library and its partners can be part of that information pipeline
- Planning library activities over the next year in support of the Science Across America and/or summer learning themes

"When participants responded to the question, "When you think of the library, what's the first thing that comes to mind?" it was meaningful to hear the Joeten-Kiyu Public Library was described not just as a building with books, but as a hub a place where families--- children, teens, our man'amko (elders)-- can explore ideas, access technology, connect with mentors, and feel supported. This reaffirmed that the library's role extends beyond literacy; it is a platform for innovation and lifelong learning in the CNMI."

"The conversation about "What science is already happening on island?" highlighted that STEM is already embedded in our daily lives. From marine conservation and environmental stewardship to traditional navigation, canoe building, and agricultural practices, science is alive in our indigenous culture and environment. As a librarian, this reinforces the importance of ensuring that our collections, programs, and partnerships reflect and uplift the knowledge systems already present in the Northern Mariana Islands."

- Beth DeMapan



What questions should guide your Dialogue?

We've provided some sample questions below that can help guide your Community Dialogues. These are merely suggestions, as we believe you are best suited to identifying and constructing the relevant questions and topic areas for your community. These sample questions were developed in partnership with library staff from advisor libraries, and can provide a starting point for your own conversations.

- What is the goal or purpose of science? (good icebreaker question to start the Dialogue)
- How does science make you feel? Helpful? Helpless? (icebreaker)
- What's the most interesting science experience you've had? (icebreaker)
- What science (or engineering, etc.) is our community known for?
- Who does science in our community? Include people who wouldn't consider themselves "scientists".
- Does the library already have partnerships with any of these groups?
- How would the library best reach out to these groups?
- What do people in the community think of when they hear the word "science"?
- Where are you getting your information about science? Why do you (or do you not) trust this source?
- What science activities have you participated in? Where were these activities?

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One pilot library held two dialogues on the same day with two different groups:

"It made sense to us to hold two Community Dialogues, one in the afternoon and one in the evening on the same day. The afternoon event was held for local educators, homeschool parents, 4H groups, etc. People working directly with the kids who would benefit from our efforts. The evening group was held for elected officials, members of local groups such as Optimists, PTO, school administrators, clergy, other area librarians, etc. People who are still connected with the community's needs, but do so on a more administrative level. Both dialogues featured good discussion and I think it was a good way to focus the conversation for each group."

*– Kathy Condon-Boettcher,
Director, Festus Public Library,
Festus, MO*



- What science activities would you like to see in your community?
- What excites you about science?
- What scares you about science?
- What science issues make you feel helpless? What are your perspectives on the challenges science faces?
- What science causes or organizations do you support? What have you donated to in the past?
- What science do you think is worth spending money on?
- What challenges exist in the community to accessing science knowledge or experiences?
- What are the alternatives to science?
- What does the next 5/10/x years of science look like? What will it achieve? How can our community be involved?

Next Steps

We all know there is nothing worse than spending your time providing feedback and being ignored. An experiential goal of every Dialogue should be “participants feel leaving heard, energized, and poised for next steps.” We recommend a dedicated note-taker for the event. Past Dialogues have seen success using giant sticky notes on the wall or a easel, where participants can see the big ideas being written down and make sure the note taker is capturing everyone’s opinions and perspectives. These notes become the template for what you do after the Dialogue.

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“Participants took off running-I was barely able to get questions in, but it was all good because by themselves they covered most of the questions”

– Charles Diede, Fontana Library



As you conclude your Dialogue, don't just end when your last question has been answered. Ask for participants to summarize and highlight the most engaging aspects of the conversation. This will help you determine what to focus on as your Action Items. Action Items should be just that, actionable! While participants may leave with lofty ideas and goals for humanity, your next steps need to focus on things the library and the community can work together to actualize.

Be sure to collate these Action Items as soon after the Dialogue as possible (again, even better to assemble them with participants at the conversation close). Follow-up with participants by sending these items, and identifying any timely actions individuals and organizations can take. For example, "Sally at the Rec Center volunteered to post flyers highlighting our STEAM Fair. Jude will send Sally the flyers by EOB Friday the 14th.

Does your conversation require another Dialogue? With additional questions, or with new participants? Does a need arise for a smaller focus group of one specific audience? Ask yourself (and your participants) who isn't present for your Dialogue and think intentionally about how they can be involved in your work moving forward. Is it an invitation to the next conversation, an offer to host a program at a trusted venue, or something as simple as a flyer explaining library services?

You've gotten the momentum started to build new partnerships, strengthen existing connections, and better help patrons see themselves in the work happening at their local library. You're ready to host your own Dialogue, and don't forget to check out the full guide for more details!

"Community Dialogue attendees have shown strong support for library STEM programs and would like to meet again. We have plans to meet again next year, which allows for enough time to implement new strategies and reflect upon impacts."

- Dianna Leighton, Fort Fairfield Public Library