

## Episode 3: Extending the Invite

*[Intro Music]*

**[Intro Music]**

**Julie:**

Hello. This is stop. Collaborate and listen. We are Julie.

**Eve:**

and Eve.

**Julie:**

The show is all about relationships, but not in the way that you think. We're talking about partnerships for those of us who are connecting public audiences with science, and science with public audiences. We spend time on this podcast talking about partnerships between public-serving science centers and universities. Today we're talking about reaching out to additional partners, knowing when it might make sense to add a new partner to a project or a relationship. So let's kick it.

**Eve:**

All right. And here is today's letter.

Dear Stop, collaborate and listen,

We have a great partnership with our university, but we can't serve all of their broader impact needs. Sometimes they or the researchers at the University might ask us to do things that we're not qualified to do or that aren't aligned with our mission. Sometimes we know there's another organization that could help them, but we are reluctant to send a researcher away if they've reached out to us.

Signed,

Scared to rock the boat.

**Julie:**

Yeah. This is really tricky. I mean, being someone else's matchmaker comes with all kinds of risks. You know, sometimes these relationships that you're just trying to develop on your own are fragile, or you feel like you're already walking a tightrope. And the last thing you need is someone sort of stomping in and threatening to invade that workspace, that relationship that you're building.

On the other hand, an eager university researcher, they might just bring the type of energy you need for a burgeoning relationship to really take off. So it's definitely a balancing act.

### **[Discussion with Guest]**

**Eve:**

So here to help us try to make sense of some of this is Michelle Kortenaar. Michelle is the Executive Director of the Science Center in Ithaca, New York, and she's worked there since 2010. I've been really lucky to work with Michelle on several different projects over the years. We met actually when we were both involved with Portal to the Public, and I'm always amazed at how much she and her small team managed to take on. You're really involved with everything, including our partnerships for Broader Impact Design Project or BID. Michelle, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Michelle:**

Oh, you're very welcome. I'm glad to be here.

**Eve:**

So you heard the challenge that was presented in the letter. And I understand you've had experiences kind of like that. You started off with maybe a partnership with one university, but you quickly realized you needed to expand beyond just the two-organization partnership. Is that right?

**Michelle:**

That is very much right. And the letter speaks to exactly my hesitation at the beginning when we started working with Cornell. And Cornell is our university partner. They're the 900 pound gorilla in the town of Ithaca. When we started working with them, I was very possessive of every possible partnership that we could have with a PI. And it really felt like if we sent an episode somewhere else, that Cornell would bypass us and send PIs to other people.

And it took me a while to realize that we weren't big enough or it wasn't appropriate for us to have every person at Cornell partner with us. There's another piece the letter writer didn't write, which was a complication. A lot of the other smaller places that PIs could partner with weren't ready to be partners.

**Eve:**

I certainly understand the impulse to want to work with these PIs as they come to the organization. So how did you coach yourself and your team to get to the point where you were able to make those decisions? Who is the right fit for me versus who might I want to send on to another partner?

**Michelle:**

It was really tricky. At the beginning, it really felt like every PI that I sent to somewhere else was a huge loss to us. And as we tried to pretzel ourselves, twist ourselves in such a way as to meet what a PI wanted for us or tried to have the PI want us. You know, it's not dissimilar from dating where you are pretending to be something you're not, so the other person will really like you.

I kind of came to the realization that if they got the funding and then came to do the work, we would end up in a really bad marriage. So this really was, you know, trying to put our mission first at all times.

**Julie:**

I love that dating analogy. Right. If on your first date you fail to ask some really fundamental questions, you could be 16 dates in when you realize this is a huge waste of everyone's time and getting to know each other a little bit. Like you said, what do they want of us and what do we want of them knowing that is has got to make it so much easier than to say, Oh, okay, we're not the right place, but we want to help you find the right place.

**Michelle:**

It is difficult, though, because they come in many PIs, come in thinking they know who we are. They have visited with their children before. They've seen something about who they are and they think they know. And we make assumptions about them, too, you know, about what their interests are and what they're going to be capable of. And often you're doing all of this under a timeline.

Right. The grant is due in three weeks. We're going to have to figure this out quickly. So there's a lot of pressure to say yes. And it really is hard to take a step back and say maybe no or maybe not now.

**Eve:**

Yeah, maybe not now is such a good reminder to just because something's not right in the moment doesn't mean it couldn't be down the road. I love that. So you alluded to this idea of maybe playing matchmaker with other organizations in your area. Can you tell us who are we talking about? Who are these potential other partners? Who are the other players?

**Michelle:**

Well, this is an interesting thing for a small town, and maybe this is true everywhere. There are a lot of people doing outreach kinds of things, whether they see themselves as outreach places or not. So

there's a number of organizations in this town that serve the public that do outreach, that that reach audiences that are sometimes different from our audience.

**Julie:**

I'm curious, Michelle, how do you learn about PIs? How do you go on that first date? How do you get to understand if their interest and the interests of the Science Center are aligned?

**Michelle:**

Some of what we've done is we've made some documents even for ourselves, making sure we describe ourselves accurately to ourselves. Right. Who is our audience? How many people come through our door? And what do they do when they come through our door? I often give a tour of the museum because it's a really good way of explaining what we're capable of and what things are beyond our capabilities.

So there's a lot of just sort of the preliminary conversations around who we are and really then trying to listen to the pie as well. What are their interests? What is their previous experience? Many of them really want to work with older audiences because that's where they're more comfortable with high school and beyond. And that's not our sweet spot.

And so sometimes we can sort of say, well, but even if that's not, you know, if you aren't so sure about younger audiences, maybe there's something you can do and maybe we can try some things out now before you even write your grant to see whether or not this is something that might fit. So that's another avenue is if you have a little bit of time, it really helps to have a P.I. come in and do some activity with you.

**Julie:**

So sort of like the coffee date before the actual date.

**Michelle:**

You know, I think probably now the analogy is it's more like the texting that you do before you even meet for coffee.

**Julie:**

Aha that just shows how old school I am!

**Eve:**

So I want to talk a little more about the role that you at the Science Center have played in kind of brokering some of these other relationships. I mean, it could have been that you just said to the guys, hey, so glad you came to speak to us. Not the right fit, not the right time. Good luck out there.

Or, you know, here are some other folks you might talk to. But actually, you decided to take a more active role and actually reach out to some of these other organizations yourself. Right?

**Michelle:**

Part of that is reputational for us. I want to be seen as the people in town that connect people. Our mission isn't just about making the science center a great place. Our mission really is cultivating a broad community. And that means supporting other nonprofits. It means working in partnership with other nonprofits in town. It's tricky. It's you know, I think we all have this very possessive feeling about our own work. But if we really put our mission first, our mission isn't about what happens at the Science Center. If this community is a better community, then we still fulfilled our mission.

**Eve:**

Michelle, can you tell us a little more about what role the Science Center actually played? How did you work with these other potential community partners to get them prepared for some broader impacts collaborations and partnerships.

**Michelle:**

In some ways being in a smaller town. I know all the other players. We know all the other players. So the first step was I reached out to everybody and said, We're doing this work. We are doing broader impacts work with PIs at Cornell with a brief description of what that means, and then said, we're willing to do a two day workshop so we can help you think about whether or not you want to do this.

And make you sort of more ready to be a good partner. It was a commitment on our part, and it's not been entirely successful in the long run. But I do think that it was in our best interest to have a place that you could send a PI to, that you sort of have some confidence that, you know, they were going to know how to respond to the PI once they got there.

**Julie:**

On the other side of that, I wonder if you had people at the Science Center that felt like you were just sort of inspiring the competition to use your very successful strategies of partnering with Cornell and what that conversation looked like if it ever happened.

**Michelle:**

Because of my role at the Science Center, I was probably in both those seats at the same time, thinking about the sustainability of the Science Center, which is connected to this. Right. Part of our mission is to help, you know, the public interact with scientists. But there's some funding that comes with this, too. It's complicated, which is why I was the one who dragged my feet the longest.

I think there was a lot of pressure from other people at the Science Center to say, like, why aren't we just doing this? Why aren't we just bringing the children's garden or the nature center or, you know, the local community center along as partners or sending people off to them. And I spent a lot of time fighting that, and it became a less and less defensible position.

It's an advantage when you're fighting yourself, because when you win, it feels like you won.

**Julie:**

You know, you talked about helping organizations be prepared for a PI coming to them. Was there another side of that where you needed to help the PIs be prepared for how to interact with these organizations in their community?

**Michelle:**

It's not even so much that we were helping to coach the PIs. It's that most PIs at Cornell go to the Office of Sponsored Programs. They go somewhere as a first step as they think about their grants and there is somebody there who's saying to them, you should go and reach into the community to do your broader impacts.

And so that person was the person that I had to speak to about who else is available, how to make sure they're ready, how to make sure that everybody has realistic expectations. So last year we experimented. Cornell runs a workshop for PIs writing grants, and they brought in community members. It was, of course, on Zoom because it was the middle of COVID and they had breakout rooms.

Every community group was able to give a little spiel, 30 seconds about who they were, and then peers could choose to go talk to people. I had people come to my breakout room, but I had no idea that there were breakout rooms where there were community partners who are all ready and raring to go and not a single PI chose them.

It's a little like a really bad dating event to keep that analogy going. You have to make sure you're using everybody's time well. It's very demoralizing to feel like you're all ready to do this thing, and then nothing much happens.

**Julie:**

It's interesting. I participated in an event just like that at University of Arizona, where community partners came in to a sort of mutual event, where peers were learning about how to do better, broader impacts, how to design and build partnerships. And I have a feeling they had a similar response, sort of like a failed speed dating. On the other hand, it does seem like it takes a long time to build up the sort of

trust between an individual investigator or a research team and a community organization before they're ready to actually write it down on paper what they're going to do, how they're going to do it, and how much is it going to cost and how are we going to share the resources? I wonder if you could speak to some of the steps before that, writing a grant where your partnership on the grant that need to happen to work, especially with smaller organizations like are in Ithaca.

**Michelle:**

I will say I love when people don't get their first grant and then we talk about a year from now you're going to put in another grant and now we have a long runway. Now they have a much better understanding of what's actually involved in the ask that we're actually going to start building this partnership before we write a grant together.

I think it's fascinating because PIs, I've heard this all the time. You write a grant for research that you've already done. Right. You have done preliminary work. You know that this is going to work. You're not - you're not writing a grant for research that you don't know that it's going to work because you got a lot of experience. And yet PIs write their broader impacts part about work they've never done and they think that this is going to all just hold together. And so you're absolutely right. It's around building these relationships over time in small ways in coming to visit, in coming to see what we do, in coming to do some programming with us.

**Eve:**

Michelle, you alluded to the fact that working with other organizations in your community, I think you said it had had sort of mixed results. It wasn't necessarily a resounding success. But can you share with us maybe an example of one successful collaboration that came from that? And tell us a little bit more about where it's been a challenge.

**Michelle:**

It has been more successful for us when there's a clearer delineation between what the Science Center does and what the other organization does. So we have actually brokered partnerships where we are working with a community organization and a PI and all three of us are working together. So it's not that we've just handed the PI off to somebody else.

We've continued to broker the relationship, but where we have very distinct work from the community partner. So, you know, with a community center that serves an underserved group, we are building partnerships with them and programming with them and bringing PIs into that partnership where it's been more challenging is where we just send the PI off, sort of, why don't you go over to those people over there and we're stepping out because it turns out that it takes a lot to be ready. And both, I've had higher assumptions about what PIs were ready for and what community partners were ready for.

**Julie:**

So what does that look like? So you're part of an organization Science Center, who had this sort of official partnership with Cornell just to build this kind of partnership and pathways for investigators to connect from the university with the Science Center and the site center programs. And I'm wondering what does readiness look like for the smaller organizations that didn't have this sort of more formalized partnership that you developed with Cornell?

**Michelle:**

So there's sort of two levels of that readiness, right? One is literally just the paperwork readiness, right. You need to be able to put together paperwork that you need for a grant and for a subcontract and for, you know, for all the official pieces. And that's actually something that's cumbersome and difficult to do. There's another whole piece to this, and that is how much are you willing to support a PI as opposed to just taking over the broader impacts.

Right? A really good broader impact project has API still running the broader impacts and you helping to navigate that, you helping to bring in an audience. You're helping to make them better at it, but not taking over. A PI should not I hope be contracting with a science center to just do broader impact. And so the community partner has to understand that they need to actually support the API as part of this process.

**Julie:**

Yeah, that's a really important perspective too on, you know, the degree of engagement that the PI has and that matters.

**Eve:**

Michelle I'm curious, as a result of some of your work helping other Ithaca area organizations enter into these broader impacts activities, do you see evidence that that has strengthened your relationship with some of these other organizations? Is Science Center now a closer collaborator or closer partner with other local organizations because of your work in broader impacts?

**Michelle:**

Fascinating question, because I think one of the things that I struggle with is it's hard to break apart all of the things we do. So broader impacts is one of the things we do, but we also think a lot about community-centric fundraising, and that's about sort of making sure that you are lifting up other voices and lifting up other partners and allowing them to, you know, benefit from some of your fundraising as well.

So these things all complement one another and feed one another and improve one another. If we were just working with community partners on broader impacts, I think it would feel thin, it would feel a bit hollow. But because it's part of an entire strategy around working in this community to do a better job, it improves the entire thing.

**Eve:**

Yeah, I love that. So this is just another example of the way that throughout the community of, you know, nonprofits in your area, you're looking to kind of share the wealth, looking to share the opportunities.

**Michelle:**

Yes. And I think that's a really hard shift, right? I think it's a shift from this idea that in order for our institution to be successful, others have to be less successful to we will all be more successful if we thrive together.

**Julie:**

I wonder if you could speak a little bit about the sort of ecosystem of partnerships that are going on. So, you know, with or without broader impacts, what kind of value is this ecosystem offering to the community?

**Michelle:**

One of the things I think is very interesting is that we have to recognize not just our own expertise, but our own areas that we don't have expertise. You know, there's lots of other ways of slicing up the - both the audience and the content. And we have an overlap in both, and so do many others. And so part of the conversation is how do we help each other?

**Julie:**

So, Michelle, I'm curious if there are situations when investigators from the university come and you could see that what they're interested in is a good match for another organization, but you don't necessarily want their demeanor and approach to partnership to be part of, or connected to your relationship that you have. So in other words, are there pieces that come and are just not good enough listeners or potential partners for you to pass them on? And how do you deal with that situation?

**Michelle:**

There's a huge advantage in having good relationships with the other nonprofits in town because I will say sometimes I telegraph that I never make an introduction without first asking if I can make an introduction. So I never - when I'm going to make an introduction, I never say I'm just going to make an introduction. I always say, let me check with them if they would like an introduction, and then I can telegraph some of the I think this might be a good fit, but they may take a lot of work or they may not really understand what you're doing, but I'd love to make an introduction are you alright with that? And it sort of sets up both places for some success and it allows them to have some understanding that I'm not just blindly sending them the people I don't want.

**Julie:**

I like that. I like that. I would do that with a friend too, right? This person wants to talk to you about something you're interested in. Is it okay if I give them your number?

**Eve:**

I can imagine that as you're starting to think about making some additional introductions or, you know, sharing PIs, passing PIs along or making these other introductions, it could be a little scary because it feels like it could weaken your relationship with Cornell. Is that something that you were worried about and is that something that you've actually seen play out or has it strengthened your relationship with Cornell in any way?

**Michelle:**

There are there are other places in town that are doing good work. And even if I'm not the matchmaker, it's a it's going to be okay. I shouldn't feel slighted by that. I think that there's enough to go around.

**Julie:**

Michelle, you know, you talked about your connection with other organizations, your relationship with Cornell, and doing this work of the sort of civic work, if all the NGOs in the Ithaca area are successful it's good for the community and Science Center wanting to be part of that. I'm curious if you could speak to your sort of vision of this web of connections that you've started to build with broader impacts being just one of the connecting pieces of that?

**Michelle:**

I think one of the things that often happens is there's an awful lot of overlap and it's hard to sort out where you are complementary and where you're stepping all over each other's toes when two organizations go to work together. But we are way better when we work together. And it turns out that other organizations have expertise that we don't have, and it enriches our work when we work together.

**Julie:**

So it seems like this idea of bringing together PIs with other community partners, right? Using sort of your relationship with the university and your relationship with the community partners to be a broker and a conduit of other relationships that are all mutually beneficial. It comes with a lot of challenges. I heard a lot of challenges, a feeling of risk and vulnerability.

But I also heard that with some humility and some sense that all boats can rise together, that it's worthwhile. Is that how you would characterize it overall? What makes this worthwhile?

**Michelle:**

I think that's exactly what makes it worthwhile, that all of us are doing our work because we think our work is important, not because of an allegiance to our individual institution, but because we think the fundamental work is important. And this is how to get that work done of engaging the public in science education.

**Julie:**

And I would say on the scientist side, the researchers who come to you, that's their same motivation, right? So there's something to share in terms of your value system. Just starting off the conversation is that we all do the work that we think is important. So Michelle, if you were to give a workshop to people who've never met you before and don't know anything about the organization that you work for or the organizations that you partner with, and you were talking to folks about being good partners with universities. So small NGOs and universities. What is the top advice you would give them for approaching a partnership like that?

**Michelle:**

I think the top advice is that you're not actually partnering with an entire university. You're partnering with one PI, one researcher, one class, one small department. And so you have to sort of do it on a scale that's manageable.

**Julie:**

That advice also seems a lot less intimidating than the idea of this giant organization that you're trying to kind of find an inroad to. Just thinking about it as a one on one relationship, as a place to start, feels a lot more approachable to me.

**Michelle:**

Absolutely.

**Eve:**

Michelle, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. Before we let you go, any last words you want to share about your work in this realm?

**Michelle:**

Yeah, I think first, build relationships and secondly, you have to have the confidence that the pie will get bigger. It's not that we're all trying to compete for around a watering hole that is shrinking. We are in an ecosystem that is rich and big and there's plenty of work for all of us.

**Eve:**

Yeah, absolutely. Something really important for us to all keep in mind. We don't need to live our whole professional lives in this scarcity mindset. There is opportunity for all of us. Absolutely. Thank you, Michelle, so much.

*[Outro Music]*

**[End Credits]**

**Eve:**

Thanks for listening to Stop, Collaborate and Listen with your hosts. Eve Klein from the Institute for Learning Innovation and

**Julie:**

Julie Risien from the Oregon State University's STEM Research Center.

**Eve:**

There are so many partners who supported this work. For a full list, please see our podcast description. Specifically, we want to thank Liz Neely from Liminal and Julia Furlan for their guidance and consultation.

**Julie:**

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