Introduction

For more than two decades, researchers at the Eppley Institute have collaborated with partners to help them collect crucial insights from on-site visitors and users. Our partners have used public input to inform the management of cultural and historic resources, multi-use trails, park spaces, and several other settings.

This Eppley Institute profile:
1. Describes several techniques available to both systematically and informally collect input
2. Profiles recent visitor and user feedback projects

DID YOU KNOW?

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 # OF LEVELS AT WHICH THE EPPLEY INSTITUTE HAS LED USER INPUT PROJECTS *(LOCAL, COUNTY, STATE, FEDERAL & INTERNATIONAL)*

 # OF LANGUAGES IN WHICH THE EPPLEY INSTITUTE HAS COLLECTED INPUT (ENGLISH, SPANISH, FRENCH, ITALIAN & DUTCH)

"Why is feedback important?"

Collecting input, such as through a survey or other data collection method, is important to visitor use and program management (Interagency Visitor Use Management Council, 2016; NPRA, n.d.). Feedback can be used in many contexts, from garnering input that informs a master plan to soliciting opinions about a site, plan, project, or program. While collecting input is important to better meet the needs and expectations of the public, it can also fulfill legislative requirements or catalyze funding (e.g., via grant eligibility, State of Indiana, 2022).

"How often should input be collected?"

Data collection frequency should consider available resources, project context, and concurrent plans (i.e., to align with a strategic plan). In some cases, collecting input is a one-time event in response to a specific inquiry; in others, feedback is ongoing (Tatian, 2016). In addition, regularly scheduled feedback (longitudinal studies) can facilitate comparisons over time (Elliott et al., 2017).

"How can we collect visitor feedback?"

There are many ways of collecting feedback, each with their own advantages and challenges. In-person intercept and remote data collection —described below—are two common approaches.

In-person intercept data collection

In-person intercept approaches use staff, volunteers, or consultants to interview or administer surveys to visitors who are entering, at, or exiting a site. This method is resource intensive but can yield high response rates; in turn, this often results in a more representative sample (De Leeuw, 2005). In-person intercepts can be administered orally (i.e., survey questions being posed by a member of the research team) or electronically (such as providing the visitor an iPad) (NPS, 2020).

Eppley staff collect visitor feedback in-person at a historic site in the Netherlands.

Remote (QR-code) data collection

The advent of QR-code technology has resulted in many teams deploying this strategy due to its relative low cost and ease of implementation (Arthur et al., 2022). It requires minimal or no on-site staffing. The number of responses can vary but can be substantial at high-traffic sites. While responses may be influenced by non-response bias and other factors (e.g., QR code respondents sometimes skew younger and more educated), the Eppley team has noticed limited differences between data collected via QR code vs. in-person in some cases (Anderson et al., 2023; Graefe, et. al., 2011).
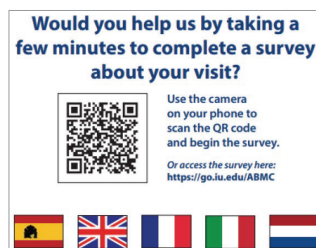
EPPLEY INSTITUTE RESEARCH METHODS PROFILE
Collecting Meaningful Feedback from On-site Users & Visitors

Project Profiles

American Battle Monuments Commission Visitor Use & Satisfaction Study (2023)

Project Overview: ABMC was interested in complementing its visitor count data with more comprehensive information regarding visitor use, satisfaction, and motivation.

Public Input Approach: The Eppley Institute helped ABMC design a multi-mode data collection strategy, which featured (1) an intercept survey administered in-person and (2) an online version, recruited via email, flyer, and on site poster (with QR code). More than 3,000 visitors participated.

Would you help us by taking a few minutes to complete a survey about your visit?

Use the camera on your phone to scan the QR code and begin the survey.

Or access the survey here: https://go.iu.edu/ABMC

DID YOU KNOW?

COLLECTING PUBLIC INPUT, WHEN CONDUCTED BY OR ON BEHALF OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, GENERALLY NEEDS REVIEW BY THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET.

Indiana Trails Study (2021 & 2017)
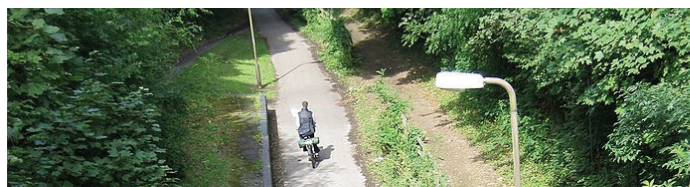
A cyclist rides along a multi-use trail.

Public Input Approach: The 2001 study featured a user survey through use of in-person intercept and mailed survey instruments, as well as other methods (such as infrared trail counters and interviews). During the 2017 follow up, the intercept user survey was repeated and also featured a control group of non-trail users. This study used volunteers to conduct the in-person intercept work.

Project Overview: The Indiana Trails Study was developed to better understand trail use and its benefits, due to interest in and increase of trails in the state (2001). The study was repeated in 2017 to facilitate longitudinal analysis.

DID YOU KNOW?

SURVEY LENGTH AND FORMAT CONTRIBUTE TO RESPONSE RATES. ADJUSTING OR ABBREVIATING THE SURVEY CAN REDUCE BARRIERS TO INPUT (DILLMAN ET AL., 2014).

Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area Evaluation (2023)

DID YOU KNOW?

METHODS CAN BE CUSTOMIZED OR COMBINED. FACTORS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE COST, TIME, RESPONSE RATE, AND EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION (GUO ET AL., 2016).

Project Overview: As part of a retrospective case study of the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area, the Eppley Institute collected input via in-person community input conversations in addition to other data collected.

Public Input Approach: Input was collected at several sites and events across the ALNHA. Following a protocol guided by the National Park Service (2016), the evaluator selected several items from a list of potential prompts and took structured notes via iPad and online survey software. This resulted in a semi-structured, qualitative approach, allowing for flexibility based on content, context, and timing.

Conclusion & Applications

Thoughtful collection, analysis, and application of user input can illuminate usage patterns, needs, preferences, and concerns, and in turn, better serve communities and shareholders. Reach out to the Eppley Institute to learn more about how the collection of public input can further your program goals and quality of service.

Reference list available upon request.

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