**Evaluation Plan: NW Noggin**

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**Executive Summary**

The following report describes the evaluation plan developed for NW Noggin. The plan was designed by Rachel Terry, M.S. and Anne Marie Greenhalgh as part of their Program Evaluation coursework. The plan was developed under the supervision and advisement of Keith Kaufman, Ph.D., as well as extensive collaboration with Bill Griesar, Ph.D. The primary purpose of the plan is to guide the development of a priority system for choosing and recruiting academic priority K-12 classrooms. The priority system will ensure that NW Noggin gives scheduling priority to classrooms that fit the criteria for academic priority and greater preference to those that exhibit additional risk factors which signal greater need. The secondary purpose of the plan is to create systematic procedures that will help NW Noggin adhere to their commitment to improving the its functioning and the quality of its classroom outreach visits. The following sections include a description and background of NW Noggin and its classroom outreach program, a rationale for the evaluation, a description of the program theory that guides the classroom outreach program, and a logic model that outlines each component of the program. The next section outlines the suggested: quantitative and qualitative data to gather to execute the evaluation, steps for how to proceed in executing the evaluation, a description of which parts of the organization might play an integral role in the initial steps of the evaluation as well as the ongoing efforts that will be ideally made part of NW Noggin’s routine functions, and a review of potential ethical concerns of the evaluation plan. Finally, next steps are described to reaffirm the evaluation plan and provide potential ideas and improvements for after the evaluation.

**Background of NW Noggin**

NW Noggin (Northwest Neuroscience Outreach Group: Growing in Networks) is a nonprofit organization comprised of scientists and artists at various education levels that are interested in sharing knowledge and resources to inspire children and adults about science and art. The organization was founded in 2012 by Bill Griesar and Jeff Leakes when they and a small group of graduate and undergraduate students developed a summer course on brain and behavior for students at a middle school in Northeast Portland. NW Noggin’s mission is to build relationships between scientists, artists, educators, and students of all ages to inspire children in academic priority classrooms, as well as the public, about science and art. The organization integrates science and art content to produce outreach programs that are engaging and personally relevant to audiences. The outreach programs aim to inform the community about ongoing scientific research and art and generate interest in these fields, while providing valuable teaching opportunities to undergraduate and graduate students.

NW Noggin is spearheaded by Jeff Leakes, M.F.A., a local artist and adjunct faculty member at Portland State University who serves as the NW Noggin President and Arts Coordinator, and Bill Griesar, Ph.D., a senior instructor at Portland State University who acts as the Neuroscience Coordinator. Jeff co-leads the interdisciplinary effort of merging art & science by creating artistic works and working with local artists to do the same to convey scientific concepts in a creative and engaging manner. Bill contributes his expertise in neuroscience to cultivate programming that integrates ongoing research (which is often presented by undergraduate and graduate scientists) to excite the public about scientific research and to teach about core scientific principles through an interactive learning environment. The organization is largely led by volunteers. Volunteers are involved in every aspect of the organization including scheduling and coordinating of the events, participating in outreach programs in the classroom and community, submitting grants, social media, and more. The volunteers are organized into two tiers: the Resource Council, which is a group of dedicated volunteers with specialized roles regarding the functioning of the program and expanding its reach, and the other tier which is largely made up of undergraduate and graduate volunteers who present their own research and help to facilitate classroom outreach visits. NW Noggin seeks to have “near-peer” scientists, or young scientists who are closer in age to the students in the academic priority classrooms, in the second tier of volunteers so that students can young people participating in science and working towards their dreams. NW Noggin believes this near-peer volunteers group is crucial in encouraging K-12 academic priority to envision their own futures in science. This volunteer group does not receive formal training in presenting their work or facilitating the visits but instead accompanies NW Noggin in their classroom visits to learn by observation until they feel more comfortable to present and/or facilitate the visits.

The problem that NW Noggin seeks to ameliorate regards the overly formal and unengaging way that science is conventionally taught in the classroom and the material that is presented which excludes ongoing research. The organization asserts that students’ disenchantment with science in part originates from this conventional pedagogy that presents only basic science (rather than including exciting scientific research that is happening now) and largely uses lengthy lectures and textbooks (rather than more interactive pedagogies) so enthusiasm for even basic science is stifled and students are disconnected from the field of research. Therefore, in the spirit of the problem statement, NW Noggin’s classroom visits do not rely on a standardized curriculum that might further disengage students but rather are characterized by flexibility and are tailored to the students’ interests while driving home crucial scientific concepts. The three main components of the program are the student-interest driven scientific discourse that generally includes presentation of current research by near-peer scientists, hands-on anatomy activity and hands-on art activity to solidify scientific concepts and to experiment with art. There is great variation of what will be discussed and what artistic projects because they flow from each particular group of students’ interests and curiosities. This program is designed to engage students through art-science integration as well as to connect kids with scientific research that is happening now and tackling modern problems. The program is also intended to introduce students to the possibility of careers in science and make their own future careers in science seem more tangible by utilizing enthusiastic near-peer scientists (who are conducting this research) to present the work and to answer any questions the students might have about their own path in science.

**Rationale for Evaluation**

The focus of the evaluation is NW Noggin’s classroom outreach program and the primary goal of the evaluation is to create a priority system to guide NW Noggin’s outreach efforts so that the classrooms with the greatest need are given preference in scheduling. According to NW Noggin, academic priority classrooms are typically found in public schools that serve a low-income populations, defined as a more than 50% of the students received free or reduced lunch. Students in these classrooms may report disengagement and struggle to complete the traditional milestones required in public education such as graduating high school. At this time, there are not explicit definitions of academic priority classrooms other than general characteristics summarized above. NW Noggin also does not have a systematic method of prioritizing academic classrooms over other such classrooms although some classrooms may have greater need based on additional risk factors for student disengagement and lack of opportunity to engage with scientific research. At present, the way classrooms are found for outreach is through past recipients of the program requesting another visit or these past recipients engaging in word-of-mouth advertising to other classrooms. These past recipients, generally teachers or administrators, reach out to NW Noggin through email and either the Neuroscience Coordinator or the Resource Council Member for Communications schedules the classroom for the next available date and time. As such, academic priority classrooms in more need may not be prioritized over academic priority classrooms in less need because there is no list of risk factors to rank which classroom might have a greater need. Also, classrooms that might have enjoyed less or no visits from NW Noggin are not prioritized in scheduling over classrooms that have recently enjoyed visits. Likewise, certain classrooms that may fall under the definition of academic priority (that NW Noggin hopes to explicitly articulate using this evaluation plan) may not be aware of the outreach program due to not receiving the word-of-mouth advertising.

The secondary reason for evaluation is to guide NW Noggin in its commitment to improvement and to foster growth of its classroom outreach program so that it can better contend with the high demand of its services. NW Noggin would like to learn how it can improve the quality of its program from the perspective of teachers of visited classrooms and volunteers who present and facilitate these visits. NW Noggin would also like to assess the organizational capacity of its volunteers to determine if volunteers that present and facilitate visits would like to take lead-facilitation roles in the outreach visits so that classroom outreach visits needn’t be confined to the days of the week that Bill has availability. Therefore, the primary goal of the evaluation is to evaluate the characteristics of past classroom visits to guide the development of a more systematic method of recruiting and selecting schools and classrooms to participate in the program in order to serve more classrooms that are in need and to serve those with the greatest need first. A secondary goal of the evaluation is to collect information from volunteers and teachers to assess and improve the content, delivery, and functioning of the program.

**Program Theory**

The theory of change that is the basis of NW Noggin’s classroom outreach program suggests that students can become engaged with science through a hands-on, student-interest driven, active learning experience, rather than passively learning by listening and reading. This increased engagement and learning is believed to occur by integrating art with science and introducing students to scientific research that is currently being done in the field (Land, 2013). NW Noggin’s theory of change is influenced by STEAM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Artand Mathematics. STEAM is a movement that merges art into STEM subjects in the classroom in an engaging learning format (Sousa & Pilecki, 2013). The integration of art into science is an alternative to the conventional pedagogical tradition, which includes lengthy lectures, rote memorization and textbooks (Land, 2013). Research about STEAM suggests a multitude of motivational and cognitive benefits. These benefits include increased appeal of and motivation to learn more about both subject areas, promotion of creativity, enhancement of social growth, reduction of stress, and boosts in long-term retention of material (Land, 2013; Olsen, et al., 2013; Sousa & Pilecki, 2013). Additionally, STEAM is associated with increased problem-solving skills such as divergent thinking, which is the exploration of multiple solutions instead of assuming there to be one “correct” answer, which has additional benefits that extend beyond the child’s academic career and into other life domains (Land, 2013).

As mentioned above, a crucial part of NW Noggin’s guiding philosophy is connecting academic priority students with scientists to engage them with research and inspire them to consider scientific careers. Specifically, the organization aims to connect students to near-peer scientists who are closer in age to the students, such as undergraduates and graduate scientists who present their own research in an engaging manner. These near-peer scientists will ideally serve as role-models and help these K-12 students envision their own participation in science better than exclusively having more established, older scientists present their work. NW Noggin asserts that this approach does more to spark curiosity in scientific research and make careers in science seem more tangible than the conventional methods of teaching science.

The final component of NW Noggin’s approach is selecting the target audience, which are individuals that may especially benefit from STEAM-inspired programming. NW Noggin targets K-12 students in academic priority classrooms, who tend to be disengaged with science and typically come from low-income populations and experience higher dropout rates. These students may experience a lack of opportunities that other more fortunate populations may receive due, in part, to reasons associated with their families’ low socioeconomic status (SES) and in their similarly low SES schools. Research shows that STEAM results in the same affective, motivational, and cognitive benefits described above for disadvantaged students (Nevanen, Juvonen & Ruismaki, 2000). Therefore, NW Noggin’s STEAM-inspired approach has shown to be efficacious with the targeted population to increase engagement with science.

**Logic Model and Description**

 Figure 1 (see Appendix) provides a logic model which is a graphical representation of the components of NW Noggin’s classroom outreach program and of the evaluation plan. Note that parts of the description of the program and the evaluation plan were condensed to make a readable version of this figure and they will be expanded on the following paragraph.

The inputs are personnel and material resources that NW Noggin devotes to the program. The activities are the dynamic, STEAM-inspired components that the outreach visit consist of. The first component of the activities is the student-driven discourse. NW Noggin solicits general interests from the students before the visit through communication with the teacher. Volunteers find underlying themes of these questions and organize them into important concepts of neuroscience to help guide the discourse. During the classroom visit, volunteers present their own research and guide an engaging discourse with the students using neuroscience concepts. For example, an organizing topic that easily transcends the boundaries of neuroscience and art is the relation between brain structure and function. Next, the second and third components extend and enrich the student-driven discourse: hands-on artistic activity and hands-on anatomy activity. Both components are framed in a way that merges art and neuroscience and utilizes each subject to teach about the other. For example, students are encouraged to build neurons out of pipe cleaner. The concept of neuron structure and function is explored by having students discuss what each piece of the neuron would be best suited to do (i.e., function) based on how the different parts of the neuron look (i.e., structure). Finally, NW Noggin often brings human and animal brains to the classrooms for students to explore the brain structure and function.

The process measures include existing measures of how the program is being received by the students (as reported by the teachers) as well as new measures designed to establish the priority system and improve how NW Noggin delivers services to its target population.

**Process Evaluation Plan**

The primary goal of the evaluation is to evaluate characteristics of past classrooms visits to guide the development of a more systematic method of recruiting and selecting schools and classrooms to participate in the program. A secondary goal of the evaluation is to collect information from volunteers and teachers to assess and improve the content, delivery, and functioning of the program.

*Step 1:* The first step in this process evaluation is to comprehensively review the classrooms that have been visited over the past academic year (9-month period). The Neuroscience Coordinator identified two Resource Council members, Kayla Townsley and Erin McConnell, who may be interested in leading the effort for this project. Other volunteers may be recruited if the resource council members would like additional help. Information that may be gathered include name of school, school district, diversity index, name of classroom and teacher, whether or not the classroom was academic priority, how many times NW Noggin has visited the classroom, and whether or not there is other data available about the visit. The data should be collected and compiled into an excel sheet, which will be continuously maintained and updated as the program moves forward. A report should be produced to review in the next step.

*Step 2:* The next step will identify factors that contribute to academic priority classrooms and created a priority system that allows NW Noggin to systematically choose schools and classrooms. The Neuroscience Coordinator should lead a focus group that includes program founders, resource council members, and experts in the education system and in STEAM to discuss the intention of the mission and goals of the organization. The focus group should produce a document with criteria that identifies an academic priority classroom and ranked additional risk factors that demonstrate greater need. Criteria to define academic criteria classrooms may include public schools, more than 50% receive free or reduced lunch, a certain score on a diversity index, and lack of enrichment opportunities. Criteria to define additional risk factors, which would allow NW Noggin to give scheduling preference to one classroom over another that both meet the baseline academic priority definition, may include items like the school has recently dropped courses on the humanities and arts, the school doesn’t have clubs or extracurricular activities relating to art and science, and the school has not received a visit from NW Noggin yet. Once the group has identified baseline criteria to identify academic priority classrooms as well as additional ranked risk factors and has used those two sets of factors to create a priority system, the group should boil these factors down into a standard intake form to give to classrooms in the future. This may emailed to the teacher when a visit is requested. This will help NW Noggin determine what preference the classroom should be given based on its status as an academic priority classroom and then based on its additional risk factors.

Suggestions for focus group questions:

1. Do you feel like NW Noggin adequately serves students in academic priority classrooms?
2. What criteria are most important to identifying academic priority classrooms?
3. What additional risk factors would signal greater need for NW Noggin’s classroom outreach program beyond the criteria identified in the last question?

*Step 3:* The third step will assess organizational capacity by distributing an email survey to volunteers (see Appendix, “Outreach Program - Volunteer Capacity Scale”). NW Noggin has not methodically measured the capacity and interest of volunteers to date to learn what roles they might like to take. The survey includes both quantitative and qualitative items to evaluate organizational capacity in relation to volunteers. Additionally, the survey asks if the responder has any suggestions for improvement of the program, and asks if the responder would be willing to lead a classroom visit without the Neuroscience Coordinator present. The last question in regards to the Neuroscience Coordinator’s interest in allowing volunteers to lead classroom visits so that NW Noggin can reach a larger audience and not be limited by his scheduling availability.

*Step 4:* The final step will assess the quality of the program and gauge future interest by adding qualitative questions to the existing teacher feedback form that is sent via email (see Appendix, “Teacher Feedback Form”). The existing survey contains questions mostly pertaining to demographic information and information about how well they feel that their students received the programming. The inclusion of more open-ended, qualitative questions will allow teachers to respond with more rich information and feedback. The addition of qualitative questions may warrant a pilot study to assess how the long the survey takes, and to ensure that the questions are not tiresome to participants. Volunteers who helped to facilitate the classroom visits may act as the participants for the pilot study because they might be able to provide similarly rich detail like the teachers would and would therefore would provide better approximations of how burdensome these additional questions would be to teachers. If the additional questions are added into the existing survey for teachers, the evaluation team suggests emailing teachers a link of the survey and requesting a response within a few weeks’ time so that the material is still fresh on the teachers’ minds and the teacher is not burdened with filling it out the day of the visit.

Suggestions for qualitative questions:

1. What did you like about NW Noggin’s visit?
2. What improvements would you suggest?
3. What would you like to see more of next time?

**Organizational Capacity and Challenges for Evaluation**

 NW Noggin is a tremendously successful organization that provides students with a novel opportunity to engage with science in a collaborative and engaging manner. The program founders and volunteers are integral to the program’s day-to-day functioning as well as activities aimed at expansion of its reach. Volunteers participate in every aspect of the program and have several responsibilities that would mostly likely be fulfilled by paid staff members in other organizations, and do so with eagerness and excitement. The evaluation proposes that volunteers systematically review the records about classroom visits that have occurred over the last academic year. The project should result in an excel sheet that can be continuously updated with the intake forms of visited classrooms and the surveys about each visit, as well as an initial report for the focus group to use. The evaluation team recognizes that the project will take a significant amount of time and effort and may not be as fun or engaging as participating in classroom visits. However, the evaluation will allow the program founders and volunteers to improve on the current process and expend less energy in the future.

**Potential Ethical Concerns and Solutions**

 The purpose of this section is to consider how the activities involved in executing the evaluation plan might raise ethical concerns, as well as brainstorm possible solutions to these concerns. The evaluation proposes that a focus group will discuss and weigh evidence from the literature and the report of past classroom visits to define academic priority classrooms and identify criteria that may be prioritized from most important to least important. As a result, there are schools and classrooms that will not be labelled as an academic priority classroom and may not receive the services as promptly as academic priority classrooms. An ethical concern is that students within schools and classrooms that are given less priority would likely still benefit from the services. Furthermore, these students may have a greater need based on individual-level criteria than students from the academic priority schools with a great number of risk factors. The priority system will most likely address school-level criteria, such as dropout rates or a low-income population, and may not consider individual-level criteria because that information is more difficult to collect. Individual-level criteria that may positively influence student outcomes include a rich home life and extracurricular activities. Therefore, it is possible that students in classrooms that are identified as academic priority may not have the most need for the service whereas students in classrooms that are not academic priority may actually have a greater need for the service.

 To address this potential ethical concern, NW Noggin should strive to consistently collect and understand data from the community, and be prepared to revise the priority system if high-need students are being underserved. Additionally, the organization should continue to serve lower priority schools (those that still meet the academic priority criteria but have less additona risk factors than other such schools) whenever possible.

**Next Steps**

 In this section, the evaluation team outlines their vision for how NW Noggin could use the evaluation plan to make decisions and how those decisions may impact the stakeholders. The evaluation team hopes that the evaluation plan will inspire the program founders and staff to further improve the functioning of the organization and maximize the impact for the students who may need the services most.

*Record of Schools Visited*: The proposed excel sheet will allow Resource Council members to keep track of classrooms that have received the service, demographic information about the school and classroom, information regarding academic priority status, and teacher feedback forms that assess quality and suggestions for improvement. The record will be instrumental in following the progress that NW Noggin is making to serve academic priority classroom. The excel sheet will help the organization identify which schools are being served more often than others and help determine the effectiveness of the priority system in scheduling visits. The evaluation team intends for the excel sheet to guide decision-making when classrooms request a visit, as well as a record-keeping system. Ideally, the excel sheet should be reviewed thoroughly by program founders and the Resource Council on a regular basis. The review may occur at appropriately defined intervals, such as when NW Noggin is outlining its strategy for the upcoming academic year. Finally, the document may be employed to help the organization apply or maintain grants in the future.

*Priority System*: The priority system will help NW Noggin focus their effort towards the classroom outreach program. The results will include a document that includes a definition of academic priority, criteria that can be prioritized from most important to least important, and a procedure to schedule classrooms in the future. The document should be easily accessible for the program founders and Resource Council to consult when scheduling classroom visits. The document may also need to updated in the future as NW Noggin discovers additional risk factors that were excluded or finds that once in practice, the ranking system would benefit from being reordered.

*Intake form*: The intake form is a crucial part of determining where the school fits in the priority system. The form should be emailed to a school administrator or teacher upon their request for the visit, or should be included in an application online. This proposed procedure will allow the Neuroscience Coordinator or Resource Council member to determine whether or not the classroom is academic priority, what additional risk factors it exhibits that demonstrate greater need and how it compares to other classrooms that have not been scheduled yet. This process may result in the organization choosing to delay a visit in order to focus on academic priority classrooms that demonstrate greater need.

*Organizational Capacity of Volunteers*: The survey to assess organizational capacity and interest in current volunteers is intended to understand and improve functioning of the organization. The results of the survey will also identify untapped personal resources within the volunteers. The evaluation team intended for the Resource Council members in charge of assessment to regularly administer this survey at appropriate intervals (e.g., once a quarter) and to revise the survey as necessary.

*Teacher Feedback Forms*: The addition of qualitative items to assess quality and room for improvement to the teacher feedback form while allow NW Noggin to gather more meaningful information about the classroom visits. The evaluation team intends for the survey to be sent out via email at the end of each classroom visit to ensure that teachers clearly remember the visit and provide relevant feedback. These feedback forms may also be used to help the organization apply for grants in the future.

**Acknowledgements**

The evaluation team would like to express their sincere gratitude to NW Noggin and to Dr. Griesar for his hard work in collaboration with the team to create this proposed evaluation plan. The team hopes that the evaluation plan serves Dr. Griesar and his exciting program well so it can maximize its impact and can continue to grow.

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**Appendix**

**Figure 1*.* Logic Model.**

**Outreach Program - Volunteer Capacity Scale (Suggested Measure)**

Read the following statements and indicate the extent that you agree or disagree with each statement using the 1-5 scale below.

1 - Strongly Disagree 2 - Disagree 3 - Neutral 4 - Agree 5 - Strongly Agree

1. I feel overwhelmed with the workload required for classroom visits.
2. I would like to take on more responsibilities regarding the classroom visits.
3. I would be willing to take a leadership role during the classroom visits.

Read the following statements and write in your answer below.

1. How do you think the classroom visits can be improved?
2. Are you interested in leading a classroom visit without Bill?

**Teacher Feedback Form (Existing Measure)**

1. What is the name of your school, organization, or group (if applicable)?
2. What was your role at the recent NW Noggin event (e.g. Teacher, Parent, Volunteer, Camp Counselor, etc.)?
3. What age range was the target audience for the most recent NW Noggin event that you attended? (Choose the response that best fits, and choose multiple options if applicable.)

Response options include:

Pre K (0)

5 to 9 years (1)

10 to 13 years (2)

14 to 18 years (3)

18 to 25 years (4)

25 to 65 years (5)

65 years and up (6)

1. Approximately how many attendees were at this event (in a single space at a single time, not including Noggin volunteers)? If you were present at multiple sessions, please specify, and estimate the attendance for each session.
2. Overall, how informative was the recent NW Noggin experience for the target audience? Move the slider below to choose your response.

Response options include:

Not At All (0)

Slightly (1)

Somewhat (2)

Very (3)

Extremely (4)

1. What information presented did you like the most and why? (Feel free to be either general or specific in your response.)
2. What would you change, add, or remove regarding the information presented and why? (Again, feel free to be either general or specific in your response.)
3. Overall, how age/audience appropriate was the recent NW Noggin experience? (Please think not only about age, but other considerations that may have been specific to this particular target audience, including but not limited to minority status, disability status, religious affiliations, etc.).

Response options include:

Not At all (0)

Slightly (1)

Somewhat (2)

Very (3)

Extremely (4)

1. What did NW Noggin either do or not do regarding creating an age and/or audience appropriate experience?
2. What do you feel could have made the experience more age and/or audience appropriate, if applicable?
3. Overall, how engaging was the recent NW Noggin experience for the target audience?

Response options include:

Slightly (0)

Somewhat (1)

Very (2)

Extremely (3)

1. What were some of the most engaging parts of the experience, in your opinion, and why?
2. What were some of the least engaging parts of the experience, in your opinion, and why?
3. What would you recommend changing, adding, removing, or doing more of in order to make the experience more engaging overall?
4. Did your experience with NW Noggin change in any way your viewpoint on teaching science to young people?

Response options include:

No, Not At All (0)

Just A Little (1)

Somewhat (2)

Yes, A Great Deal (3)

1. Please explain.
2. How likely would you be to recommend NW Noggin to another organization or group?

Response options include:

Not At all (0)

Slightly (1)

Somewhat (2)

Very (3)

Extremely (4)

1. Please use the following space to provide any additional comments or feedback.