March 2018. Vol. 22, No. 1. – Making The Arts and Research "Click" – Maria Guerriero, Kelly Jarvis, Deborah Vaughn

Greetings and welcome to the latest issue of *CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts & Culture Workers*!

This issue features collaborators from the *Connecting Students to the World of Work* (WoW) grant program implemented by the Oregon Arts Commission (OAC). Collaborators included a member of the OAC staff, a contracted researcher, and a contracted graphic designer. In this article, these three authors share how they determined a key design style to convey a complex message about program assessment data to a variety of audiences. They provide recommendations for establishing relationships and trust among an evaluation communications team as well as responsibility for how data sets are communicated to funders, policy makers, and general audiences.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris
Editor

Making the Arts and Research "Click"

By Maria Guerriero, Kelly Jarvis, and Deborah Vaughn

[The below links will open in a new browser tab or window.]

Introduction and Project Overview

In 2014 and 2015, the Oregon Arts Commission implemented the *Connecting Students to the World of Work* (WoW) grant program to support 11 pilot projects around the State in drawing connections for underserved students to gain professional experience by offering engagement in an artistic career field. In accordance with legislative intent, the Commission needed to track the progress of the grant recipient organizations toward the State's 40-40-20 education goal and thus hired NPC Research to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the grant program. Because the study findings needed to be communicated to a wide range of audiences from different backgrounds, NPC sought the help of Germinate Creative to design and illustrate a graphic depiction of the main study results.

The WoW project set the stage for an interdisciplinary collaboration among a grant funder/program manager, an evaluator, and a graphic designer. This partnership yielded results that none of the constituent professionals would have been able to achieve independently and enriched the perspectives of the three individuals involved.

This article describes three primary phases of the project and the key moments in which team members were able to "click" in a way that led them to success. One component that helped the team connect was engaged conversation. To continue that energy, this article is structured as a dialogue between team members about their experiences in different phases of the project.

*Who are you and what role did you play in the WoW project?*

Deb Vaughn (DV): I am the Arts Learning Coordinator for the Oregon Arts Commission. I developed and managed of the WoW grant program, serving as the liaison between the Arts Commission, the Oregon Department of Education, the grant recipients, and the evaluation team.

Kelly Jarvis (KJ): I am the Director of Community Health Research at NPC Research. I led the evaluation of the WoW grant program. My team and I designed and implemented the study.

Maria Guerriero (MG): I am a graphic designer who owns Germinate Creative, a design studio that creates brand identity, website, and print design for creative and nonprofit clients. I acted as designer and illustrator to this project.
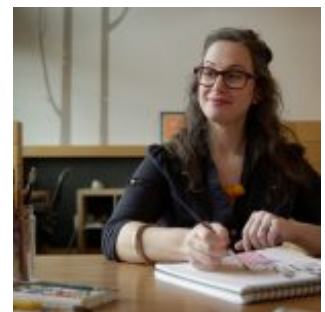
Phase 1: What do we want to learn?

The first critical task of the project was to identify what we wanted to learn through the evaluation. *Connecting Students to the World of Work* was a brand new grant program, and the way in which evaluation was incorporated was a unique model for the Arts Commission. While the legislature had defined long-term impact for the funding, Kelly and Deb were faced with the challenge of identifying short-term results to measure, given the available timeline and

the variation in grantee project structure. After an initial planning meeting, Kelly and Deb knew there was still work to be done to connect the dots between the broad impacts defined by the grant program and specialized work being done at individual project sites.
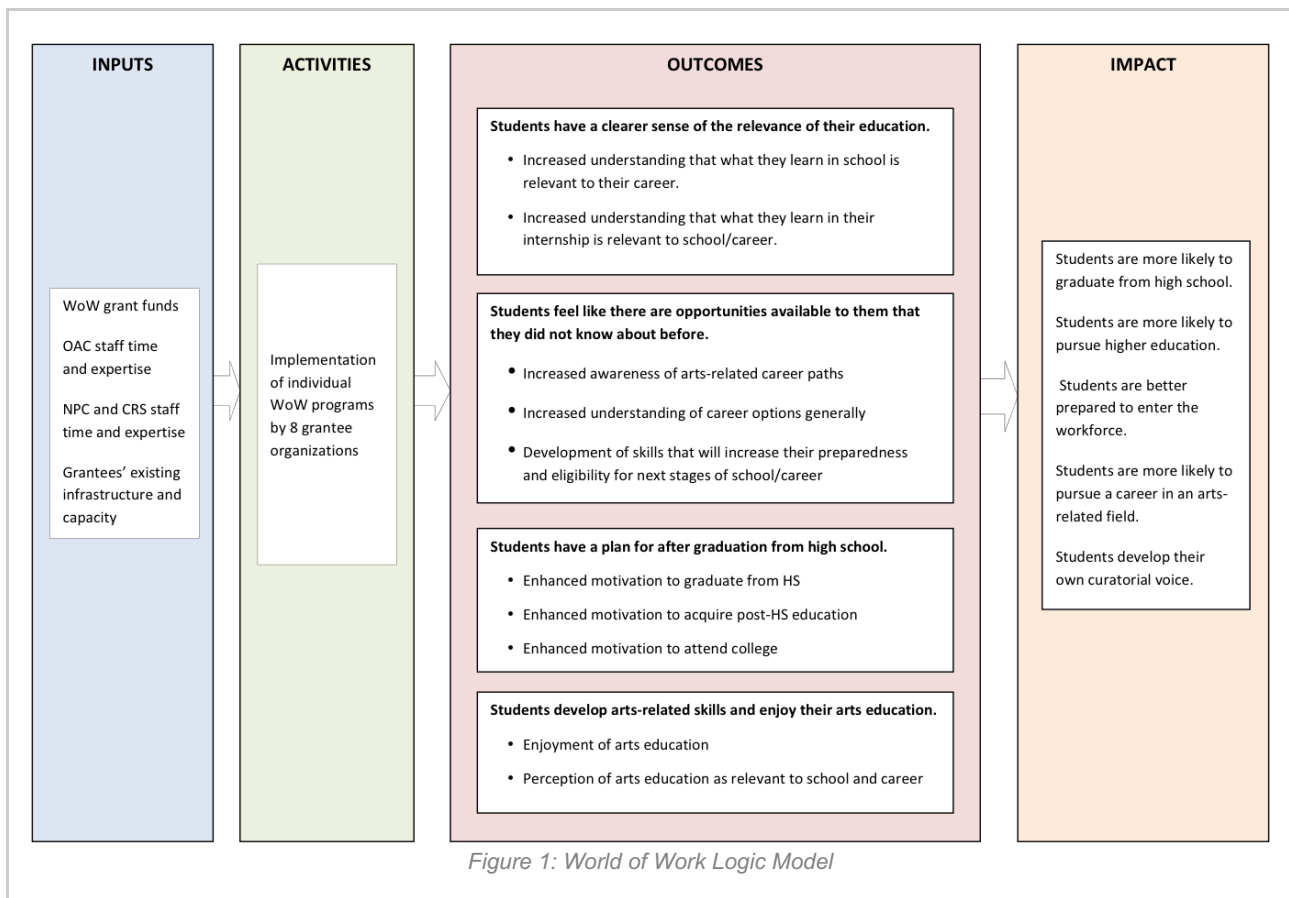
Both Kelly and Deb remember the phone conversation where this phase of the evaluation came together. Up to that point, there had been a good amount of discussion about the individual projects and their innovative approaches to working with youth, as well as enthusiasm about the power of leveraging creativity and science as equal partners. This conversation was when the pieces finally fell into place.

When We Clicked:

KJ: I called Deb and asked her general questions about the grant program, knowing that if she started loosely talking about the initiative, she would be a fountain of great information. In that phone conversation, Deb articulated the Arts Commission's goals for the overall grant program, which were applicable to all of the individual projects regardless of their context or approach. I knew that description was gold when I heard it! I wrote down her language and then massaged it a little to fit into a logic model in a way that would lend well to a cross-site measurement plan.

DV: I remember how validating it was to hear our conversation synthesized so clearly. I am a verbal learner, so having Kelly ask me questions and then listen to my responses within the framework of the logic model she was developing was an ideal way to help clarify my ideas. I could tell she had an idea of where the evaluation might go, but she entered into the conversation open to allowing my vision to inform the direction. The finished logic model (Figure 1) became an important tool that I used to explain the program to others because it got right to the heart of what *World of Work* was all about.

Connecting Students to the World of Work Grant Program Logic Model

Figure 1: World of Work Logic Model

The figure contains the following content:

INPUTS

WoW grant funds

OAC staff time and expertise

NPC and CRS staff time and expertise

Grantees' existing infrastructure and capacity

ACTIVITIES

Implementation of individual WoW programs by 8 grantee organizations

OUTCOMES

Students have a clearer sense of the relevance of their education.
- Increased understanding that what they learn in school is relevant to their career.
- Increased understanding that what they learn in their internship is relevant to school/career.

Students feel like there are opportunities available to them that they did not know about before.
- Increased awareness of arts-related career paths
- Increased understanding of career options generally
- Development of skills that will increase their preparedness and eligibility for next stages of school/career

Students have a plan for after graduation from high school.
- Enhanced motivation to graduate from HS
- Enhanced motivation to acquire post-HS education
- Enhanced motivation to attend college

Students develop arts-related skills and enjoy their arts education.
- Enjoyment of arts education
- Perception of arts education as relevant to school and career

IMPACT

Students are more likely to graduate from high school.

Students are more likely to pursue higher education.

Students are better prepared to enter the workforce.

Students are more likely to pursue a career in an arts-related field.

Students develop their own curatorial voice.

Phase 2: How can we communicate what we learned?

Once the evaluation was complete, it was time to turn the most important evaluation findings into an easy-to-understand and beautifully designed report. WoW was a pilot investment of funds, and it was important to document the findings in order for it to help structure other programs in the future. The fact that the findings were evaluated by a research company was unique in itself since this has not been done before at the Arts Commission, which made communication of the results even more valuable. The grant recipients had a high stake in the findings as well, since their programming was the basis for the evaluation.

Maria defined the three most important outputs for the design of the report:

- describe the WoW,
- show the analytics of the program data, and
- produce a report that was both easy to understand and visually engaging.

While Deb did not have a clear idea of the form or style of the final report, she did have ideas around what content and tone needed to be in the report:

- images needed to illustrate students at work as well as represent the diversity of project sites and participants;
- quotes from the students should be included to capture their input into the evaluation;
- visualization should be used to present data; and,
- telling the story through visuals should outweigh reliance on narrative text.

When We Clicked:

MG: There was this great moment in the process when Deb and I first discussed the report. Deb didn't have a clear idea of how the report should look. To get to a visual concept, she explained the design of this report as a spectrum. The spectrum connected a reserved/corporate/traditional style on one end to a playful/youthful/right-brained style on the other. We agreed that the sweet spot of this design would be right in the middle: professional and easy to read, but also creative, with a hand-made feel. Both Deb and I are verbal learners —though I'm a visual designer—so it really helped to have this key understanding of what the tone needed to be.

DV: When I first saw Maria's design portfolio for other projects, I immediately connected with the energy of her work, which was communicated through the color and design choices she made. So when she asked me for my ideas of how the report should look, I trusted that she could help realize a final product that met the needs of the Commission. During that conversation, Maria was open to building upon examples I shared from other designers. Prior reports released by the Arts Commission helped define a color palate and communication style. Meanwhile, the energy and youth-focus of a publication from another organization provided guidance on the feel of our report.

MG: From there I created two mood boards (Figures 2 & 3) for Deb to review that suggested ideas for fonts, colors, illustration style, and other graphic treatments. The two concepts were: Illustrative, Bright, and Editorial, and Layered and Handmade. We ultimately ended up with a combination of the two: Illustrative, Bright, and Handmade.

DV: When Maria presented the two mood boards, it was clear she understood the ideas I shared. I identified the elements from each mood board that got closest to the sweet spot on the spectrum we had defined for the publication, and from there Maria combined those elements to arrive at the final design. Her ability to blend perspectives, receive input, and reiterate her understanding of our discussions gave me confidence that the final product would meet the communication needs of the Commission. This part of the process felt like a jazz improvisation: one of us would lay down a theme and the next person would pick it up, modify it, and then hand it back to the other.

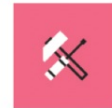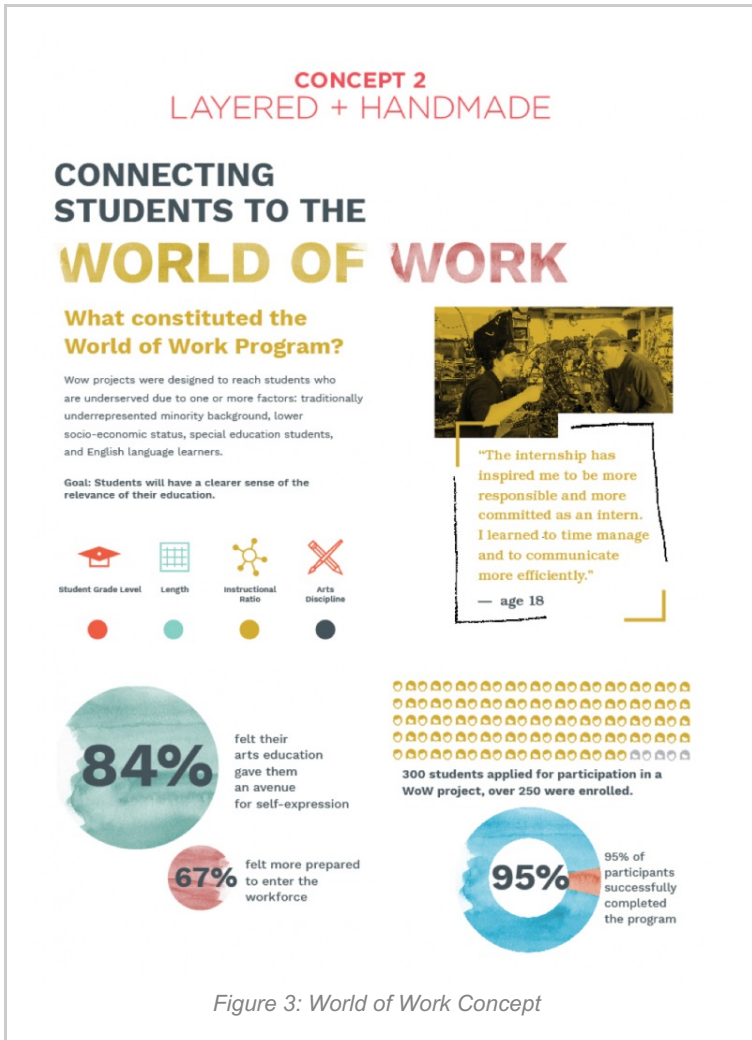Figure 2: World of Work Concept 1

Figure 3: World of Work Concept

Phase 3: How can the art reflect the science/research?

Once the collaboration had determined the style—the "how"—of the graphic design piece, the focus shifted to the "what"—that is, the information to be conveyed. The evaluation results entailed some fairly complex statistical tests, and we recognized that communicating statistical findings for non-scientific audiences can be tricky. There are several factors we considered in this phase, which reflect the interest of each of the three collaborators: audience engagement (Deb, the program advocate); comprehensive understanding by a broad and diverse readership (Maria, the design professional); and, accurate communication of the scientific findings (Kelly, the researcher).
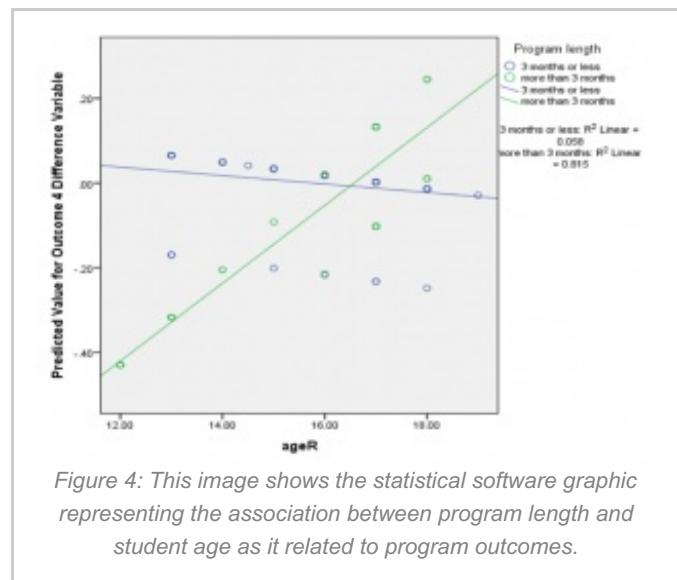
The Arts Commission, policymakers, and program providers would look to the WoW evaluation data to inform future programming decisions, and it was important to ensure that the information guided them appropriately. When representing complex statistical analyses, it can be a challenge to balance accuracy with accessibility. On one hand, explaining the nuance of the analyses can overcomplicate the interpretation, and on the other, boiling down analytic findings to simple statements can omit important details. Our goal was to create a piece that effectively used artistry to engage people and to clearly communicate factual information.
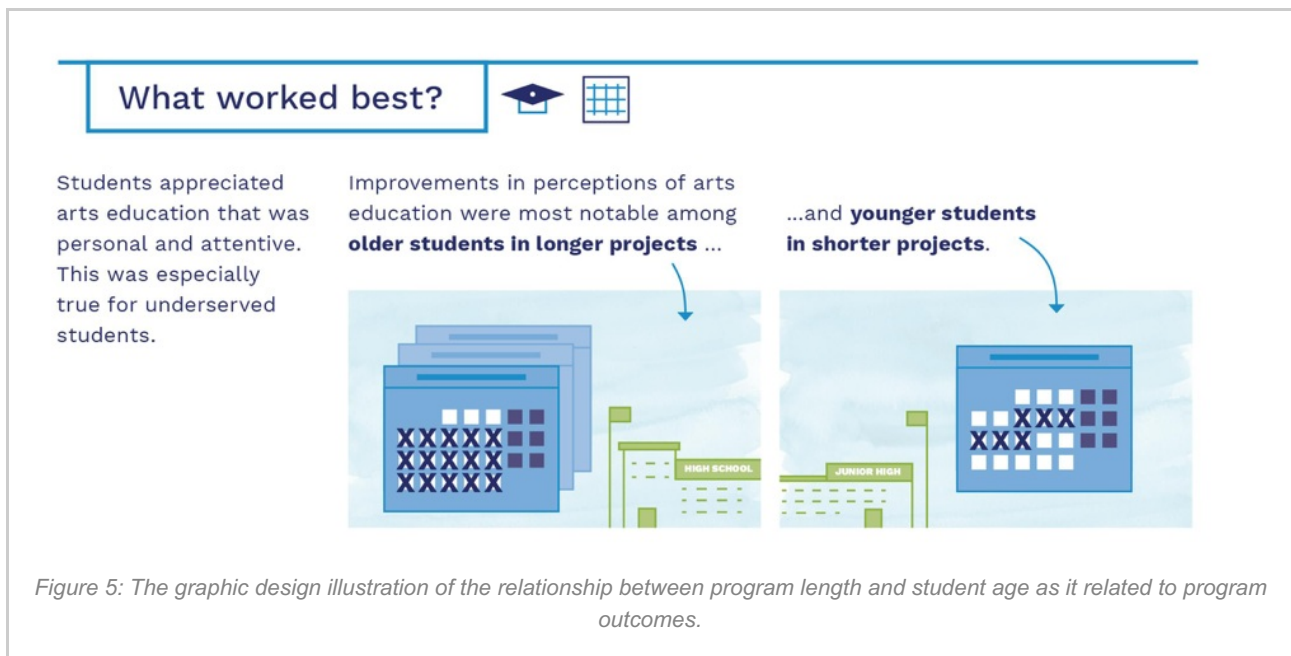
Kelly and Maria undertook an iterative collaborative process that involved communicating clearly and clarifying jargon, asking questions and listening to understand, distilling concepts down to their fundamental attributes, and moving closer to the middle of their two professional fields.

When We Clicked:

KJ: Maria and I went back and forth several times with ideas and clarifying points. I would explain the study results, she would listen and take notes, and then she would illustrate something; I would look at it and send her notes. I gave her mini-statistics lessons so that she understood the findings and what we needed to communicate. I also showed her the graphic plots (Figure 4) produced by the statistical software (which are not user-friendly!). We went through this process several times, and each iteration got closer to right. With each iteration, I moved a little farther off of my scientific perch and loosened my grip on the interpretational nuances that scientists can get attached to. My explanations got simpler and more straightforward. I let go of the details that were clouding the image and focused more on the main message, and her illustrations correspondingly evolved. Our collaboration pushed me to clarify and simplify the story told by the data in ways that I would not have done in isolation.

MG: I have to say the first time I saw an interaction chart (Figure 4), I got scared! It looked unlike anything I had seen before. Quite honestly, with all of the data points, it looked ugly. Luckily, Kelly and I were able to communicate clearly to work through this new learning for me. This process was the definition of collaboration. Kelly and I had to take the complex information of the study results and draw them up as easy-to-understand graphics. Kelly helped simplify and explain the complex, graphs, charts, and interactions of data that I needed to distill and illustrate.

Figure 4: This image shows the statistical software graphic representing the association between program length and student age as it related to program outcomes.

Figure 5: The graphic design illustration of the relationship between program length and student age as it related to program outcomes.

Conclusions

We were able to develop a very effective interdisciplinary collaboration, the results of which were more sophisticated and complete than any of us could have achieved individually. Our efforts brought arts education and statistical science together to strongly support social and educational services for underserved youth. And we each felt professionally enriched by working together.

In hindsight, we recognize some important themes that contributed to the effectiveness of our collaboration. By articulating these themes, others can incorporate them into their own collaborative work and find similar success. These elements include:

Willingness to learn from others.

All three of us came to our collaboration with open minds regarding what we could learn from each other. We were willing to admit what we didn't know. And we respected each other's expertise and perspectives. We understood from the beginning that all of us would bring something unique to the mix that would make our final product better.

Asking a lot of questions and really listening to the answers.

Because our backgrounds are very different, and our final product hinged on us finding a coherence among them, we had to develop a working understanding of each person's field, jargon, procedures, and project-related needs. How did we accomplish this? We asked each other a lot of questions, often about assumptions that each of us made when working within our own fields. We asked for definition of terms ("what does that mean?"), explanations of procedures ("do you need Y before you need X?"), and clarifications of perspectives ("why is XYZ important to your process?").

Importantly, we used inquisitive discussion as a means to garner shared understanding. We asked each other questions about our respective areas and then listened through the filter of

our own professional fields to pull out the information needed for our next steps. A clear example of this is the experience described in Phase 1, when Kelly asked Deb about the goals for the WoW project and then listened for the pieces that she knew would lend themselves to measurable outcomes.

Allowing the communication and production processes to be iterative.

Our communication was cyclical, which allowed us to consistently narrow the gap between our respective disciplines, and removed the pressure from knowing everything after the first meeting. Each subsequent conversation drew us closer to a shared understanding of our direction. We established a work plan that incorporated multiple feedback loops and opportunities for collaborative review and discussion at each phase of production—and that explicitly devoted time for these iterations. This allowed us to repeatedly refine our product and ensure we were on the same page as we honed our direction. It also gave room for creative ideas and additions throughout the process.

Focusing on the collective goal more than individual areas.

Throughout the collaborative process, each of us remained focused on our collective goal and prioritized that above any of our individual preferences. There was no territoriality and no strongholds on any information or particular approach. If a decision bore upon one of our fields, we would offer our professional opinion on what would work best. In nearly every case, that opinion was respected by the others and a decision was easy. Each of our efforts was made in the spirit of contribution to, and investment in, our final product, which collectively evolved through our working together.

To see the fruits of our collaboration, review the brief visual report designed by Maria and the full evaluation report compiled by Kelly and the team at NPC Research.

[Back to Top]

Authors

Deborah Vaughn, CNPE, MFA, Arts Learning & Poetry Out Loud, Program Coordinator, Oregon Arts Commission. Deb has over 15 years of experience as an arts education leader, with a focus on workforce development pathways and accessibility for all students. Deb manages grant programs and the *Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Contest* on behalf of the State of Oregon. Born and raised in Oregon, Deb holds a Nonprofit Program Evaluation Certificate from Portland State University, a MFA in Theatre for Youth from Arizona State University, and a BA in theatre from University of Portland. Deb can be reached at Oregon Arts Commission, 775 Summer St. NE, Suite 200, Salem, OR 97301. www.oregonartscommission.org. Email: deborah.vaughn@oregon.gov.

Kelly Jarvis, PhD, Director of Community Health Research, NPC Research. Kelly aspires to bridge the gap between science and service by making evaluation research meaningful and accessible to social service systems and organizations. She assists clients in developing an

empirical basis for their program and policy initiatives and in collecting data to inform program improvement and adaptation. She often works with interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaborations formed to address any of a wide range of social issues, such as domestic violence, substance use, homelessness, youth development, and education. Kelly can be reached at NPC Research, 5100 SW Macadam Ave., Suite 575, Portland, OR 97239. www.npcresearch.com. Email: jarvis@npcresearch.com

Maria Guerriero, Owner, Designer at Germinate Creative. Maria is a graphic designer of over 15 years and business owner of Germinate Creative. Her business combines design with strategy for creative independents, businesses, and social causes that needed help defining their look and feel. She helps clients build long-lasting identities that live up to their own creative talents, so they can feel confident about showing off what they love to do, too. Learn more at www.germinatecreative.com. Email: maria@germinatecreative.com

[Back to Top]