

Small Museums: Priorities and Opportunities for Growth

Small museums did an admirable job delivering many programs per year despite having fewer resources than larger museums. Almost all offered field trip programs for school-age children. Small museums focused on growth may further invest in summer programs, camp-ins, and afterschool programs.

Increasing investment in school-based outreach programs may allow small museums to reach new audiences who may not be otherwise able to visit the museum.

Small museums were heavy investors in early childhood development and learning, and often established early childhood dedicated spaces or specialized programs, and collaborated with Head Start programs. This focus may jointly reflect small museums' need to concentrate resources on a particular age group and the importance of early childhood as a developmental stage. Museums seeking to grow may capitalize on expertise in this area to develop teacher training resources, which may provide access to a previously untapped audience.

Gift shops and eating facilities are two income-generating offerings that would help a small museum establish a visitor base and improve visitor experience. Most small museums had gift shops, but few had eating facilities; museums looking to grow should investigate opportunities for establishing an eating facility on site.

Shared educational spaces, such as outdoor spaces and performance theaters became slightly more important as museums grew because they provided additional areas for programming and activities.

ACM TRENDS:

#1.2

ACM Trends #1.2

Our first Trends report used longitudinal data from membership surveys to identify critical proxies for children’s museum size. Size likely affects many aspects of how a museum functions and separating museums by size provided a basis for further exploration into these operational details. The identified size characteristics – total operating expenses, visitor attendance, number of paid staff, and building size – allowed us to group museums into three categories (Table 1), with some museums falling in overlap zones.

Table 1. Criteria used to assign size categories.

Size Category	Total Operating Expenses	Building Size (sq ft)	Attendance	Staff
Small	Less than \$435,000	Less than 12,000	Less than 50,000	Less than 13
Medium	\$435,000 – \$1.7 million	12,000 – 37,000	50,000 – 155,000	13 – 34
Large	More than \$1.7 million	More than 37,000	More than 155,000	More than 34

This report builds on the size findings by more deeply characterizing small children’s museums’ programs and facilities. We compared findings for small museums to museums of other sizes to and provided recommendations for small museums looking to grow.

Programming

Visitor programs often play a starring role in children’s museums’ educational missions. Small museums hosted an

average of 7 programs per year. Small/medium museums hosted an average of 8 and medium, medium/large, and large museums hosted an average of 11. Operating on a fraction of the budget and personnel as do large museums, small museums do an admirable job of maintaining robust programming schedules. Similarities between the number of programs for medium and large museums suggests that after a certain point, increases in space, budget, and staffing do not lead to additional programming.

Children’s museums are leaders in developing and implementing diverse opportunities for young people to engage with and learn from museum resources and staff. Our results indicated that children’s museums of all sizes embraced this role. Almost all small museums hosted field trip programs (Figure 1) and this percentage with similar to museums in all other size categories.

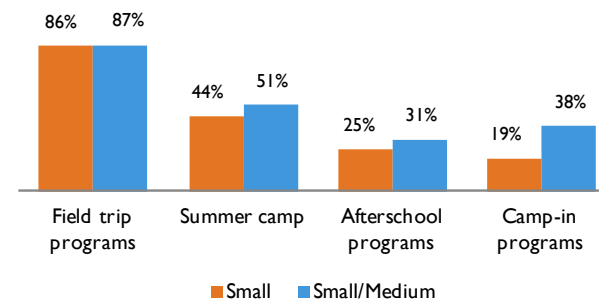


Figure 1. Children’s programs.

About half of small and small/medium museums hosted summer camps (Figure 1), compared 94% of medium museums. Afterschool and camp-in programs were slightly less common for small museums when compared to small/medium and medium museums (afterschool: 63%; camp-in: 75%). The differences in frequencies for summer camp, afterschool, and camp-in programs suggest that there are opportunities for small museums to grow their children’s programming in ways that would allow them to compete with slightly larger museums.

Museums of all sizes prioritized reaching students in their communities; about half of small museums had outreach programs in schools. Small/medium and medium museums were more likely to do this type of outreach, possibly because of increased resources. An additional way for a small museum to continue to increase its community

ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

presence is to invest in programming that takes place outside of the museum walls. This types of programming will allow them to reach new audiences that may not have the opportunity to visit the museum location.

Small museums are committed to early childhood development and learning. Almost three-quarters have a permanent early childhood area in their museum and almost 60% offered programs aimed at children in this development stage (Figure 2). These percentages are similar for small/medium museums, but higher for medium museums with 94% having a designated area and 88% offering programs. This difference suggests increased square footage or number of staff members at medium museums may provide additional opportunities for the early childhood audience. Differences may also reflect an increased ability of medium museums to invest in multiple age groups (e.g., pre-school, school-age, and adolescents), while small museums may commit to serving primarily one age group.

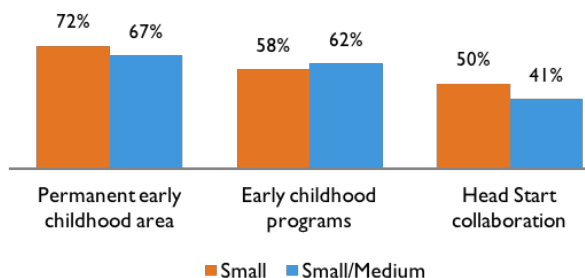


Figure 2. Early childhood offerings.

Half of small museums participated in a Head Start collaboration (Figure 2), which is a similar or larger percentage than museums of other sizes. Head Start promotes school readiness for children under the age of five from low-income families. This level of activity emphasizes small museums' commitment to both young children and working with underserved populations.

Some children's museums invested in programming for audiences other than children. About one-third of small children's museums offered curriculum materials for teachers or teacher workshops and 18% offered adult programming (Figure 3). Medium museums were much more likely to offer these resources (curriculum

materials: 63%; teacher workshops: 81%). Providing teacher training resources may be a natural direction for small museums to grow.

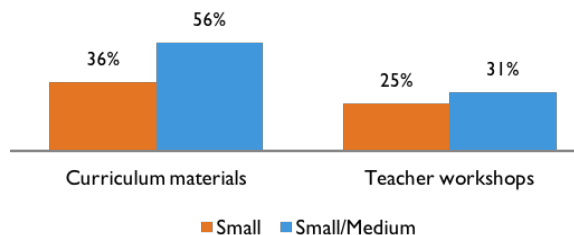


Figure 3. Educational materials.

Facilities

Most small museums offered a gift shop (Figure 4). The high percentage and the similarity to the percentages of small/medium and medium museums (75%) with gift shops suggests that this facility is a top priority for any museum. Merchandise sold at a gift shop may help remind visitors of their trip and may even prompt repeat visits and increase visitor loyalty. Additionally, merchandise likely represents an important source of revenue for museums. The high frequency of gift shops across size categories suggest that museums of all sizes can support a gift shop. Those that do not have one may consider how it could increase visitor interest and income

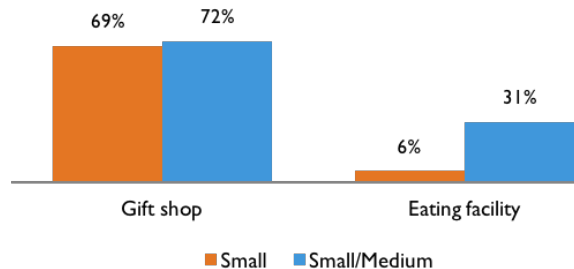


Figure 4. General facilities.

Eating facilities, such as cafeterias or cafes, were not common in small museums (Figure 4), while about one-third of small/medium and medium museums had eating facilities. These venues provide visitors with an opportunity for rest and refreshment, which may make visits more enjoyable, as well as providing an additional source of income. The large difference in the frequency of eating facilities between small and small/medium museums

suggests that providing a cafeteria was an important priority for museums that reached a certain size. Small museums seeking to grow may consider if providing an eating facility could aid that expansion. Others, however, may direct visitors to nearby eating locations, such as mall food courts, and not need to provide their own facilities.

Outdoor areas and performance theaters are shared spaces that can be used for programs or activities aimed at connecting visitors with nature or other cultural experiences. Some small museums had outdoor areas for learning purposes, such as an outdoor exhibit or a garden (Figure 5). The percentages of small/medium and medium museums with these outdoor spaces were only slightly higher than the small museums, suggesting similar priorities. These similarities may also indicate that small and medium museums face space limitations and may not be able to establish outdoor facilities.

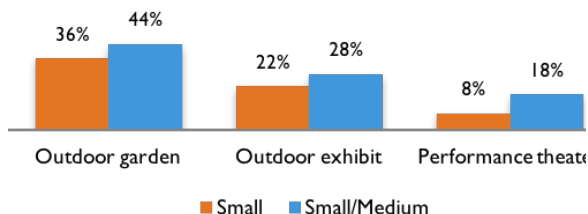


Figure 5. Educational facilities.

In contrast, very few small or small/medium museums had a performance theater (Figure 5), while 56% of medium museums had this type of facility. This difference may reflect the increased need for shared space for programs or activities as the number of visitors rose.

About This Research

In 2016, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) and Knology, partnered to advance understanding about the roles children’s museums play in their communities and beyond. Knology identified critical questions that aligned with ACM research goals and reviewed responses to over 100 surveys deployed to ACM members since 2004. This process allowed us to identify data for exploring what children’s museums have accomplished to date and what they can accomplish in the future.

Small museums, the focus of this report, comprised 21% of ACM’s member base in 2010, the most recent and robust dataset. When combined with the additional 23% of museums which had characteristics of small and medium sized museums, this group represents a critical voice in the children’s museum landscape. We based all comparisons on a sample of 36 small museums and 39 small/medium museums. There were fewer museums that met all the characteristics for medium size (n = 16). While we presented some of the percentages for medium museums for comparison, we note that the small sample size limits strong conclusions and advocate for the collection of more data to further explore these differences.

Started in 1962, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. With more than 400 members in 48 states and 20 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.

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