

Museum Accomplishments and Needs

In this paper, we explored children’s museums’ accomplishments, needs, and future plans as described by over 100 ACM member institutions. We found critical differences across museums of varying sizes. Small museums were often most proud of new funding opportunities or expansions and renovations, while large museums were excited about new exhibits that they were displaying. Small museums described a great need for more space and increased local awareness and support while medium-sized museums frequently mentioned their struggle to stay fresh and maintain relevance. Museums of all sizes expressed a need for additional financial support.

Understanding accomplishments will allow staff at other museums to compare themselves to museums of similar sizes and turn others’ achievements into goals for their institutions. Additionally, characterizing needs of museums of various sizes can allow funders and professional organizations, such as ACM, to prioritize resources to help museums overcome these obstacles. This deep insight into museum accomplishments, needs, and expectations for the future emphasized the ability of the children’s museum field to not only persist, but to thrive amid social and financial challenges. These characteristics will ensure the continuation of these critical cultural and educational institutions into the future.

ACM TRENDS:

#1.5

ACM Trends #1.5

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 investigating the perceived accomplishments, needs, and future plans for children’s museums of various sizes. Identifying trends in these areas will allow ACM to better understand the unique experience of each size group, and help them to reach their goals.

Accomplishments

Many museums identified their biggest accomplishment in

2010 as their *development of exhibits*, which included opening new permanent exhibits, hosting temporary exhibits, and redesigning or revitalizing existing exhibits. The importance of exhibit development as an accomplishment increased with museum size; only 8% of small museums compared to 28% of large museums listed exhibition changes as one of their biggest accomplishments of the year (Figure 1).

Similarly, many museums listed other types of structural infrastructure changes as their biggest accomplishments, usually highlighting a *building renovation or expansion*. Some constructed new classrooms while others bought adjacent property for further development. This accomplishment was reflected across most museum size categories (Figure 1), suggesting similar priorities regardless of size.

Three of the other most commonly mentioned accomplishments focused on museum finances. Museums were proud of *balancing the budget, adapting to a new economic climate, and obtaining new sources of funding*. One-quarter of small/medium and large museums identified a balanced budget as one of their biggest accomplishments that year. This accomplishment had an inconsistent relationship with museum size (Figure 1), which may indicate that budgeting was more dependent on an individual museum’s financial priorities than on size.

Data were collected in 2010, shortly after a national financial crisis, when many museums had to seek alternative sources of funding. This challenging economic climate may have contributed to some museums stating that their biggest accomplishment was weathering those changes (Figure 1), which included: staying open, maintaining the current staff size, and making adaptations to help them withstand the crisis.

Small museums were particularly proud of *securing new funding* (Figure 1), several noting that the funding came from new sources that they had not worked with in the past. Several others specified that this new funding was for capital renovation projects, programs, or hiring new staff. A few larger museums mentioned new funding sources, but this accomplishment seemed to be more of a highlight for smaller museums.

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.

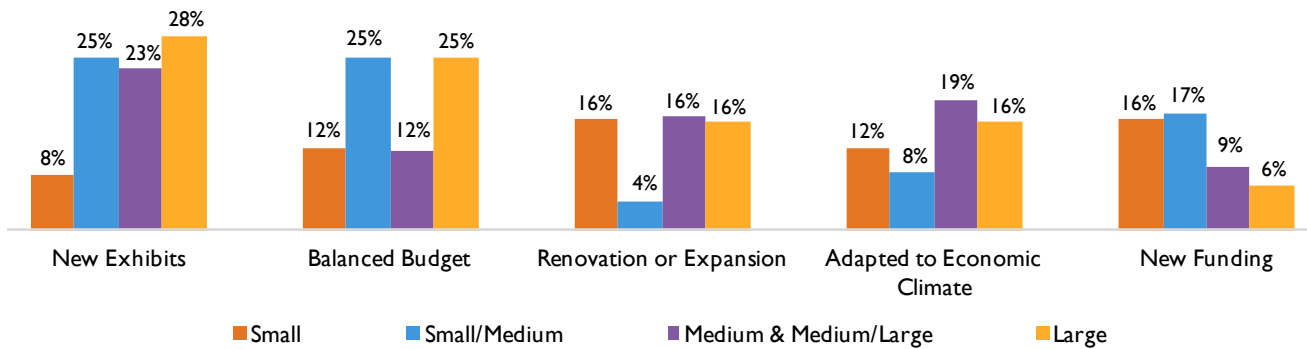


Figure 1. Biggest accomplishments, separated by museum size.

Needs

Children’s museums strongly expressed their need for increased *financial support*, with many museums listing this as their biggest need (Figure 2). Financial support was the most commonly listed need for museums of all sizes, however, specific reasons for needing additional funding varied by museum size. Small museums were most likely to indicate that they needed funding to move or expand their current space, while large museums’ financial needs were slightly more diverse and included general operating funds, program growth, building maintenance, and staffing.

Also reflecting the specific funding needs described above, many small museums expressed their need for *more space* (Figure 2), some describing that a larger space would allow them to engage a larger audience. This need was mentioned infrequently by larger museums.

Smaller museums also express the desire to not only have the physical space to develop more opportunities, but also

to increase outreach into communities to build local interest and involvement (Figure 2). They proposed that increased media exposure and community engagement would help them to develop a strong membership base and increase visitorship. Larger museums did not have similar awareness needs.

Some medium sized museums stressed their need to *stay fresh and relevant* by updating or changing their exhibits (Figure 2). This need may be most common among mid-sized museums, many of which have been around for longer than small museums, but lack large museums’ funding to change their exhibit spaces.

Emerging Trends

Museums had many ideas for where the children’s museum field is heading (Figure 3). About one-fifth of museums emphasized the importance of children’s museums increasing their reach by accessing new and more diverse audiences, some suggesting methods for

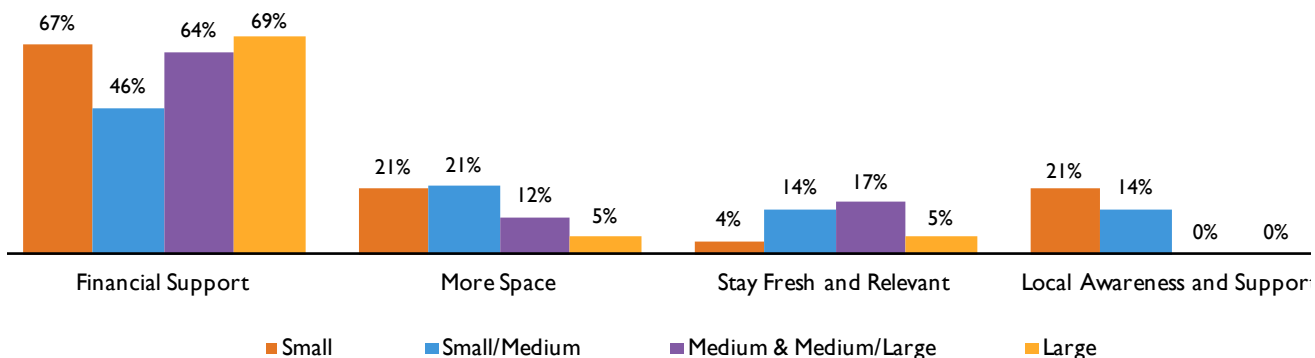


Figure 2. Biggest needs, separated by museum size.

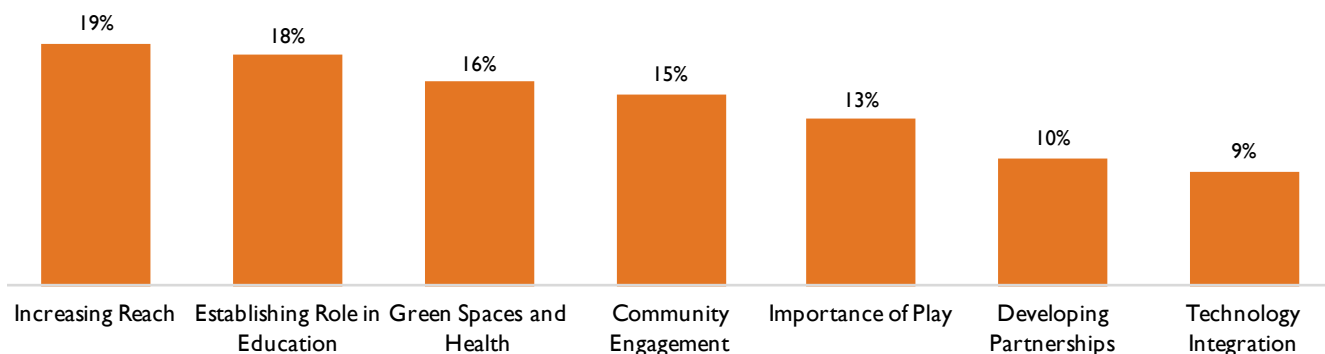


Figure 3. Emerging trends in children’s museums

doing this, such as developing accessible online resources or ensuring that their content remained culturally relevant in communities undergoing demographic changes. Others expected to see children’s museums establish a bigger role in education, such as ensuring that young children are school ready, while others saw children’s museums expanding into environmental education and health topics. Yet others expected to see stronger community ties through outreach efforts or expanded local partnerships. Other common topics included the importance of play and increased integration of technology into the museum space.

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.

Our dataset included relatively few medium museums, so we grouped medium and medium/large museums to more accurately compare these museums to other size categories. Medium/large museums had some size

characteristics that were aligned with medium museums and others that were aligned with large museums, however, 68% of the medium/large museums had more in common with medium museums than with large museums, further justifying our decision to group the two categories.

We analyzed three open-ended questions in the 2010 Membership Survey which asked for museums to reflect on their biggest accomplishments, greatest needs, and the most important emerging trend for the children’s museum field. A Knology researcher analyzed the responses, extracted themes, and coded responses. We based all percentages on the sample of museums that responded to these questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample sizes

	Accomplishments	Needs	Trends
Small	25	25	18
Small/Medium	24	28	21
Medium & Medium/Large	43	42	36
Large	32	38	27
Total (N)	124	133	102

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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Knology Publication #NPO.145.284.05

Recommended Citation:

LaMarca, N. and Roberts, S-J. (2017). ACM Trends #1.5: Museum accomplishments and needs. New York: Knology.