

Community Engagement: Children's Museums as Community Facilitators

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Children's museums are increasingly important community assets. They offer exceptional opportunities for families to learn, play, come together, and grow. Regardless of museum size and locale, data show that all children's museums excel in onsite and outreach programs and facilitate community growth in new ways, providing value that can extend far beyond onsite exhibits and programs. We explored 2016 ACM Membership Survey data to uncover how children's museums are engaging with their communities and to highlight opportunities to deepen impact and broaden engagement.

For decades, children's museums have developed a rich range of onsite programming to draw visitors, promote learning, and ensure that children, schools, and families feel welcome in the space. This report describes some of the innovative types of onsite programs offered in 2016. It further looks at some of the types of outreach programs that children's museums took into their communities, extending their reach and expertise.

Finally, this report explores how some children's museums are taking on leadership roles in community efforts to help residents and businesses thrive, moving beyond programming to becoming vital community partners. Rather than situating children's museums and outreach programs as destinations, this work repositions children's museums as leaders and collaborators, actively involved in the safety, growth, and wellbeing of the local community.

In this report, we use size and locale categories established in Trends Report #1.7 to understand patterns in children's museums' community engagement. To make the data clearer, we clumped some categories. We compared Large museums to Small and Medium museums. Similarly, we compared City museums to Rural, Town, and Suburban museums, referring to the latter three as those Outside of Cities.

ACM TRENDS:

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Programming at the Museum

Children's museums have long been recognized for their creative onsite programming designed to promote learning and welcome the community into their space. The museum's ability to draw visitors has significant economic impact as well. Along with promoting the viability of the informal learning and culture sector, children's museums contribute to the financial stability of both the museum and the local community, creating jobs and increasing traffic to nearby businesses.

An excellent example of economic impact emerged in a study conducted by Mark Rosentraub that found that The Children's Museum of Indianapolis injected \$138.7 million into the region's economy in 2014 as a result of popular programming. That year the museum hosted a large special exhibit, "Take Me There: China" that included terra cotta warriors and brought significant national-level revenue to the museum and its environs (Children's Museum Indianapolis, 2015).

Other sources of learning and financial impact can be found in the number of children's museums that host field trips, afterschool programming, and summer camps, popular formats for extending the learning experience. Almost all 2016 ACM Membership Survey respondents from Large museums (91%) and a great majority of Small and Medium museums (81%) hosted field trips in 2016. Summer camp offerings were the second most frequent community hosting activity, with 72 of 113 total survey respondents participating. Though summer camps were

common offerings among City museums (71%) and Large museums (91%), half of respondents Outside of Cities and more than half of Small and Medium museums also hosted such camps in 2016. Wonderfeet Kids' Museum, a small museum in rural Vermont, and Kaleideum, a medium-sized museum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, are examples of smaller children's museums that reported well-attended summer camps for children aged 3 to 12.

Overnight "camp-ins" and after-school programs are other neighborly efforts that draw children to the site and encourage them to interact, build community, and learn together in spaces designed to promote imagination. Although these engagement strategies were less common than field trips and summer camps, they are significant. Of the 113 survey respondents, 31 reported hosting after-school programs and 36 reported hosting overnight camp-ins. Urban respondents offered both types of programming at higher rates than respondents Outside of Cities. Likewise, Large museums reported higher rates of participation in afterschool programs and overnight camp-ins than Small and Medium museums.

Children's museums are also experimenting with different types of learning experiences in their own spaces, taking advantage of exhibits and spaces designed to encourage children to experiment and learn. We will be exploring the emerging roles of onsite preschools and makerspaces in a future trends report.

Outreach Programming

Children's museums also go beyond their walls to connect with community members who may not come to them.

Some institutions, like the Children's Museum of Manhattan, intentionally design all exhibits, programs, and curricula so that "they can be replicated, broadly shared, and used by other organizations and individuals in the service of children and families." For example, to expand reach to audiences unable to visit the museum in person, the museum's art educators bring supplies to engage children and their families in nearby hospitals. Similarly, the museum sets up Health and Learning Hubs in public housing and homeless and domestic violence shelters to bring exhibits and a health curriculum to low-income and struggling families.

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.

Collaboration is an increasingly important strategy. Among 2016 ACM Member Survey respondents, partnering with another institution was the most frequent form of outreach reported; over half worked with schools, and more than two-thirds collaborated with libraries. While rates of collaboration with libraries were comparable for City and Outside of Cities respondents (72% and 63%, respectively), City museums reach out to schools at a higher rate (61%) than those Outside of Cities (45%).

Mobile outreach vehicles were used by only 27 respondents. Over three-quarters of the museums that engaged in this type of outreach are in cities; of those, just over half fit the category of Large museums.

Community Facilitating & Revitalization

Children’s museums have begun to approach community needs differently. Traditionally, museums focused on the primacy of their collections, exhibits, and associated programming, approaching their work by asking, “How can we help others learn from us?” Flipping this script, some museums are approaching their work by asking, instead, what stakeholders from the local community hope to achieve, and what conditions might help residents thrive. The work then becomes a process of figuring out how the museum can facilitate the revitalization process and leverage its own unique strengths to support these aspirations.

Such a process might involve new and unfamiliar initiatives, like working on food access, voter representation issues, or hosting community safety conversations that involve families, school boards, law enforcement, transit leaders, and others.

Children’s museums can also act as “community anchors” by assuming an active role in bringing stakeholders together to share information and explore potential collaborations to revitalize and unify neighborhoods. According to Seifert, Lewis, and Garson (2015), this approach involves “museums and libraries developing long-term and complex relationships with community members – focused on resolving local issues and making a measurable impact on communities.”

As an example of such an endeavor, Colleton Museum and Farmers Market in Walterboro, SC took over an abandoned supermarket, recognizing that they might be better positioned than smaller organizations to tackle large-scale physical markers of decline in the local landscape. In this case, the museum repurposed an unused eyesore as a business and community gathering place (Matthew, 2016).

Similarly, with The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh in a leadership role, the Charm Bracelet Project effectively centralized community activity that had been scattered across different neighborhoods in the area. Through

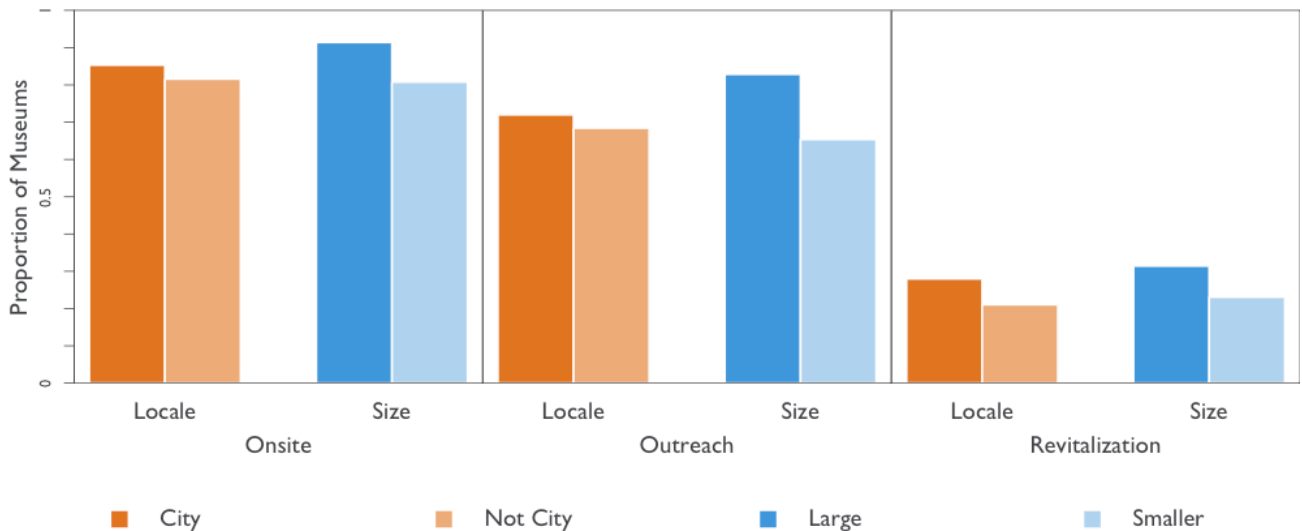


Figure 1. Comparison of community engagement activities by museum size and locale.

multidisciplinary work in four areas of focus (public projects and programs, education and youth programming, environmental sustainability and green practices, and mobility) several new partnerships and projects have emerged since the museum became a community anchor in 2006. The stakeholder group has grown to include over 20 cultural, recreational, and educational organizations committed to collaborating on creative projects related to community life. One output has been the welcome reinvigoration of city-owned park.

Though children's museums are well positioned to emerge as community leaders in revitalization efforts, the data show an opportunity gap. Only 26% of respondents to the 2016 ACM Membership Survey were engaged in outward-facing comprehensive community development work, described as "museums partnering with organizations in land use, transportation, education, housing, infrastructure, workforce development, and/or public safety strategies to improve and sustainably transform quality of life."

Urban centers are often sites of revitalization and renewal, yet children's museums in cities and outside of cities reported comparable rates of participation: 28% of respondents in cities and 21% of respondents outside of cities engaged in community revitalization strategies in 2016. The participation rates of Large and Small and Medium museums were also comparable: 31% of Large museums and 23% of Small and Medium museums reported being part of community revitalization projects.

The Takeaway

Contrasts between City museums and those Outside of Cities and between Large and Small and Medium museums seem intuitive: City museums are situated in more densely populated communities than museums Outside of Cities,

and Large museums may have more resources and program capacity than Small and Medium museums. Indeed, we might expect substantive differences in the outreach activities of these various types of museums. The data show, however, that this is not the case when it comes to community engagement.

Neither locale nor museum size were predictors of community engagement strategies. This finding should be encouraging to all children's museums, as effective community engagement efforts are within reach of all institutions. Every museum that participated in the 2016 ACM Membership Survey is making efforts to incorporate some form of community engagement, and all have opportunities to pursue community engagement in fresh and creative directions.

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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.

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