Understanding Museums' Collaboration Goals

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Children's museums are part of an ecosystem of community services designed to enrich children's lives through the provision of informal learning experiences. That ecosystem functions best when the various institutions comprising it are working together, sharing their resources and capabilities to more effectively connect with and serve their audiences.

We saw evidence of this during the height of the pandemic. As reported in Trends Report #4.8, #4.10, and #4.11, children's museums adapted to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 by forging partnerships with new collaborators and expanding existing collaborations. The public health crisis inspired children's museums to join forces with an incredibly diverse array of community organizations, including formal educational institutions and health and social service providers. These collaborations led not only to new programs, but also to broader conceptions of community service and fresh insights into how children's museums can deliver on their mission.

This edition of the ACM Trends series provides an update on our pandemic-era research. As of Spring 2023, 95% of children's museums have re-opened their doors, and to understand how this transition is impacting their collaborative work, we administered a survey focused explicitly on this topic. Fifty-nine ACM members completed this survey. Their responses indicate that the resumption of in-person activities has not diminished children's museums' eagerness for collaborating with partners across a wide range of service vectors. Moreover, just as was true at COVID-19's peak, programs focused on health and wellbeing remain a core part of their collaborative efforts.

The survey also offered insights into the goals children's museums are pursuing through collaboration. Though varying considerably, museums' collaborative goals are connected to three broadly shared aims: (1) healing; (2) learning; (3) community. In what follows, we discuss how these findings can help children's museums understand, approach, and evaluate collaborative work. Our hope is that sharing this information will not only stimulate dialogue around collaboration and partnership, but also help children's museum leaders plan new collaborative programs and begin the process of building relationships with new partners.

ACM TRENDS

#6.3

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To understand how children's museums are collaborating with other organizations, we asked members to report on up to 10 collaborations in a Spring 2023 survey. This survey is part of a suite of nine surveys that ACM and Knology designed in 2019, and that also cover operations, facilities, and fundraising.

For each collaboration, respondents named the organization they worked with and the goals they hoped to achieve. They could choose as many of the following goals (which reflected conversations with ACM members and the results of previous surveys) as were applicable for each collaboration:

- reaching **new** audiences;
- reaching traditionally **underserved** audiences;
- developing **virtual** programming;
- developing **in-person** exhibits / programs;
- tackling community or **social** issues;
- enhancing formal / informal **education**;
- building research evaluation **capacity**;
- increasing community **health** / wellbeing;
- addressing **trauma**tic / tragic events; and
- other

The 59 museums that responded to the survey provided information about 512 different collaborations. The most commonly identified goal was "reaching new audiences" (344), followed by "enhancing formal / informal education" (325), "developing in-person exhibits" (308), and "reaching traditionally underserved audiences" (303). Perhaps not surprisingly, most collaborations targeted

multiple goals simultaneously; the average collaboration was linked to between 3 and 4 goals.

After seeing how common these co-occurrences were, we wondered if there were any underlying themes tying them together. To determine this, we performed a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) — a statistical technique commonly used on large, multidimensional data sets. To make a data set more intelligible, PCA reduces the number of variables within it, and then creates new variables (called "principal components") that help determine underlying patterns in the data. In psychology, PCAs are used to determine what individuals are implying when they share their thoughts on a given subject. In very similar ways, this technique can be used to deduce unspoken patterns in survey responses.

Results indicated that museums' responses were grouped together in specific, predictable ways. In other words, when discussing their collaborations, museums had a tendency to link certain goals with others. Three particular patterns emerged from the data. First, those who chose "increasing community health / wellbeing" as a goal also tended to choose "addressing traumatic / tragic events" and "tackling community or social issues." We titled this first component "**Healing**." Second, those who selected "enhancing formal / informal education" were also likely to select "developing virtual programming" and "developing in-person exhibits / programs." We called this component "**Learning**." Lastly, those who listed "reaching new audiences" as a goal often also chose "reaching traditionally underserved audiences." This component was titled "**Community**."

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates this finding with a specific kind of data visual known as a "heatmap." As visual aids, heatmaps are generally easier to interpret than numerical tables, which can be hard to read, and which often direct attention toward small and insignificant quantitative differences. Heatmaps use graded color scales to visualize salient trends within a dataset. The stronger the association with the underlying component, the darker it appears.
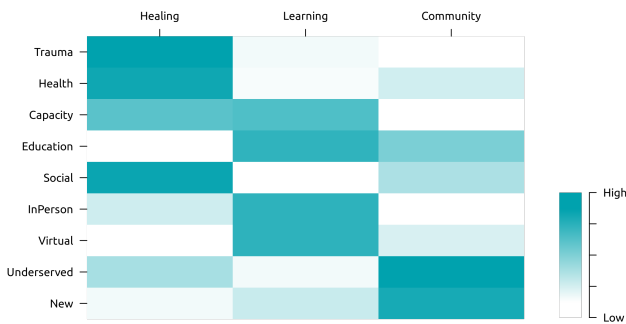
Figure 1. Respondents' Collaborative Goals

Looking at Figure 1, we can see that the most darkly shaded boxes fall into three separate clusters: one focused on "Healing," a second revolving around "Learning," and a third rooted in "Community."

The heatmap also reveals how distinct these three main groupings are. For example, responses grouped under the first column ("Healing") almost never include "enhancing formal / informal education" or "developing virtual programming" – both of which are featured almost exclusively within the second column ("Learning"). This exclusivity in responses is a point we will return to later, as it speaks to additional avenues of collaboration children's museums may wish to take advantage of.

Survey respondents also named the organizations they were collaborating with. After receiving this data, we categorized collaborators by type. Figure 2 below displays the 10 coded collaborator types, ranked by frequency.
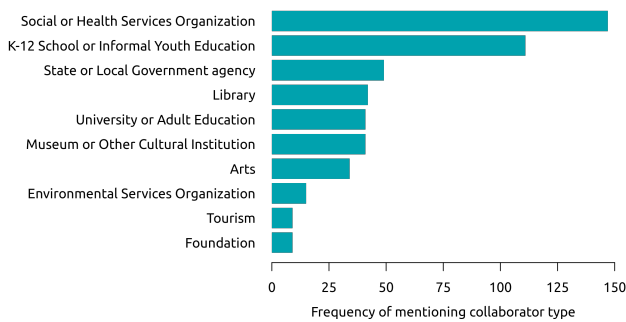

Figure 2. Collaborator Types by Frequency of Collaboration

As we can see, museums are primarily collaborating with community organizations providing social / health services (e.g., health systems, children's hospitals, and family resource centers), and formal and informal education (e.g., local school districts, Girls Inc., FIRST®).

To understand the relationship between respondents' collaboration goals and the community organizations they're working with, we created a second heatmap. Looking at Figure 3 below, we can see that there is a close alignment between collaborator type and collaboration goals. As one might expect, those collaborations aimed at "Healing" primarily involve work with social or health services organizations. Attempts to promote "Learning" most often entail collaborations with foundations, universities, and schools, whereas those geared toward "Community" rely on partnerships with libraries, other cultural institutions, schools, and government agencies.
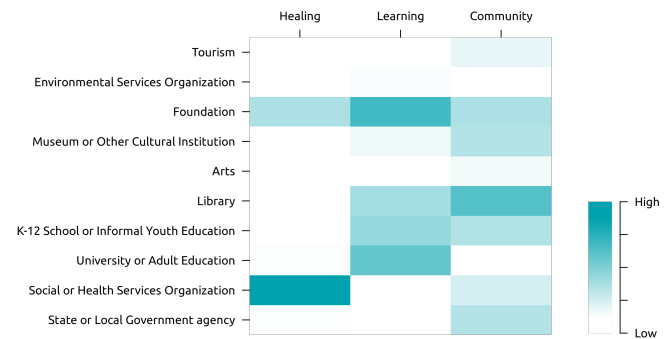

Figure 3. Collaborator Types by Healing, Learning, and Community

Interestingly, this heatmap contains far more "white space" than Figure 1, which suggests that the organizations working with children's museums have very specialized collaboration goals. Also interesting is the fact that the "Community" column contains the greatest variety of collaborators. This underscores how valuable partnerships are for community building.

The Takeaway

Many of the collaboration trends we observed at the height of the pandemic have persisted to the present. Most notably, health and wellbeing remain core aspects of children's museums' collaborative efforts. Moving into health-centered collaborative spaces has brought new programming opportunities and new audiences, while also helping children's museums speak broadly to community needs.

By looking at how "Healing" relates to some of the other goals listed above (see Figure 1), children's museums can discover additional opportunities for expanding on these kinds of programs, along with new approaches to talking about partnerships with funders and potential collaborators. As an example of this, consider one particular way of connecting "Healing" with "Learning." While respondents pursuing the first of these goals expressed a desire to address community health issues connected with traumatic or tragic events, very few selected "developing virtual programming" or "education" as a parallel goal (see white spaces in Figure 1). As internet technologies are increasingly being used to foster conversations around individual, family, and community wellbeing, the absence of an overlap here points to a potentially productive space for collaboration between children's museums and other community organizations.

A second set of additional opportunities pertains to the kinds of organizations children's museums are working with. Here too the data points to promising collaborative possibilities. Consider those museums interested in collaborative projects focused on "Healing." Though it is not at all surprising that respondents designing exhibits or programs connected to this goal would prioritize collaborations with health service providers, it bears noting that libraries, schools, informal youth education organizations, and art-based institutions are all also active within STEM and health-related spaces.

The survey data also suggests that when thinking about collaborative work, children's museums would be best served by clearly establishing the goals they wish to achieve before looking for community partners. Learning frameworks (Foutz et al., 2016) have been used by children's museums to determine how programming and exhibits can meet the goals of their mission and vision. By incorporating collaborations into these frameworks, or by

creating other tools that similarly help them identify their collaboration goals, museums will be in a much better position when it comes to collaboration – particularly if they are aiming to achieve multiple goals simultaneously. Indeed, by thinking about how their various goals can be linked together, children's museums can expand their list of potential collaborators, and hopefully fill in some of the empty areas seen in Figure 3. Ideally, these goal-setting discussions will also be part of children's museums' strategic planning efforts, the results of which can be used to inform higher-level conversations about an institution's mission, values, and long-term aims.

About This Research

Data for this report was collected through a Spring 2023 ACM member survey on collaborations. The dataset contains information from 59 member institutions. Previous pandemic-era survey data on collaborations conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic supported instrument development. This research was supported by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

References

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