ACM TRENDS

#6.4

Collaborating with Libraries: What Children's Museums Need to Know

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Libraries and museums have a shared mission as sites of informal learning. Both are well situated to meet increasing demand for learning that is "lifelong, life-wide and life-deep" (National Research Council, 2009). They have become natural allies, supporting each other through free member access to a partner's offerings, assistance in designing play spaces or reading rooms, or collaborative story time programs. By joining forces, museums and libraries increase access to community resources and deepen existing social support networks (Norton et al., 2021).

Both museums and libraries are in the process of expanding the ways they serve their communities, going beyond informal learning to become sites for convening, health and wellness, and other community needs. As their roles change, there are new opportunities for museum-library partnerships.

To help children's museums leverage their existing library partnerships (or form new ones) in support of newly emerging goals, this Trends Report offers a library-centered perspective on what makes partnerships effective. What are libraries looking for in a prospective community partner? What do they value in their collaborative relationships? And what are new ways children's museums can work with libraries to support broader community goals?

To address these questions, we explore findings from two recent IMLS-funded field-wide surveys: (1) the Spring 2023 ACM Member Collaborations Survey (whose results we discussed in ACM Trends Report 6.3); (2) a 2022 survey conducted by Knology and the American Library Association's Public Programs Office (ALA PPO) as part of an IMLS-funded project called "National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment" (NILPPA.org). Both surveys included questions about collaborative programming, and their results offer insights into how libraries and children's museums can expand and strengthen their partnerships in support of shared institutional and community goals.

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In the ACM Member Collaboration Survey, we asked respondents to share information on up to 10 recent collaborations. Fifty-nine children's museums completed this survey, and among these, 32 (54.2%) reported at least one library collaboration. In total, respondents reported 42 collaborations with libraries, many of which are long-standing relationships. When asked who initiated them, 18 museums selected that they had been working with the library "for too long to remember."

In addition to naming the organization(s) they worked with, museums were also asked to provide information about the goals of those collaborations. Analysis of the overall dataset from the survey indicated that children's museums' collaborative efforts are connected to three overarching aims: (1) healing; (2) learning; (3) community.

In Figure 1 (on Page 3), we use a heatmap to visualize the relationship between museum respondents' collaborative goals and the organizations they work with. By looking at the row labeled "Library," we can see that children's museums typically join with libraries in support of community building and learning goals – including "reaching new audiences" and "enhancing formal/informal education." Further questions about this second goal revealed that museums see work with libraries as a path toward improving school readiness, supporting grade-level reading, bridging gaps in school achievement, and – more recently – reducing pandemic learning loss.

Some examples of how museums and libraries pursue these overlapping goals – learning and community – come from interviews Knology conducted with two museum

leaders: Rachel Demma, Vice President of Learning, Visitor Experience & Community Engagement at **Port Discovery Children's Museum**, and Atiba Edwards, President and CEO of the **Brooklyn Children's Museum.**

Demma argued that engaging with community partners serves to "raise all boats." Through a collaboration with Maryland libraries called "Tickets to Discovery," they targeted literacy skills and museum affordability together. Librarians prepared a 10-book reading list, and kids who completed the list received free family museum entry. On the day the program kicked off, families lined up to check out the reading list books at libraries across the state, and the program served 2500 children in its first year. Community-oriented collaborations like these increase accessibility to museum spaces while creating engaging pathways to learning.

Community engagement can also mean joining forces to reach new audiences. The Brooklyn Children's Museum recently invited the Brooklyn Public Library to open a library branch within its building. By offering what Edwards called a "two-part adventure," the museum attracts more caregivers with the vastly expanded activities and different styles of learning. Kids and caregivers can enjoy interactive play and exhibits in the morning and quietly flip through books in the afternoon. The collaboration also allows new audiences to discover the space: community members making use of the library and engaging with the museum for the first time, educators excited by linked exhibits and reading activities, and children visiting the museum and finding fun ways to build reading skills.

In contrast to the synergy of learning and community goals, Figure 1 (Page 3) shows that relatively few respondents reported library-specific collaborations related to community health and wellbeing, even though ACM members are addressing these topics with other community organizations. This highlights an important opportunity for new forms of collaboration between museums and libraries in support of a broader range of community goals beyond or in conjunction with learning.
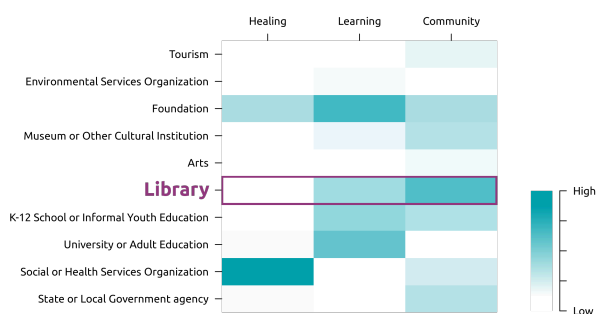
Figure 1. ACM Member collaborations with Libraries, by Goal

While data from the ACM Member Collaborations Survey and our conversations with museum leaders illustrate the reasons museums collaborate with other organizations, data from the IMLS-funded NILPPA project offers insights into the goals libraries have for their partnerships. An ongoing study of library programming has found nine different areas where library programs strive to make meaningful differences in people's lives. Three of these impact areas (healthy communities, knowledgeable communities, and connected communities) overlap with the three overarching goals children's museums strive for in their collaborations: healing, learning, and community building. This further emphasizes how sharing skills and expertise across libraries and museums can expand programming that meets community needs.

How do libraries view their partnerships?

A 2022 survey administered by Knology and ALA PPO provides insights on how libraries view successful programmatic partnerships. Findings from the analysis of the responses of 364 libraries showed that libraries found their partnerships to be most effective when there was strategic alignment between partners, effective teamwork, clear communication and expectations, strong interpersonal relationships, and attention to operational concerns. This first criterion—strategic alignment—is essential when beginning a new partnership. The example partnerships described in this survey indicate how libraries worked to align their partnerships with their strategic goals.

How do libraries view *healing* partnerships?

In recent years, libraries have devoted increased attention to community health and wellbeing – a topic that is

becoming a focal point of their collaborations. Of the 364 survey responses, 111 discussed a partnership with a health or wellness organization. Some of these focused on health education (for example, diabetes prevention and management or mental health). Others aimed at improving health practices, as in a partnership between a library and a local grocery store that allowed community members to enroll in a class on nutrition and cooking. And in some cases, NILPPA respondents collaborated with local governments and medical organizations to provide direct access to healthcare services – as with a library that partnered with the American Heart Association and the local health department to provide access to blood pressure cuffs.

How do libraries view *learning* partnerships?

Libraries found that museum partnerships in particular allowed them to broaden their scope beyond literacy to include other learning objectives such as helping patrons *"learn new skills."* Discussing a partnership with a local art museum, one library worker summarized a typical Art, Books, Community Club meeting as *"the librarian reads stories, and the museum provides a craft afterward."* One NILPPA respondent discussed how a partnership with two museums resulted in *"an annual series of programs on fine arts that are well-attended and promote all three organizations."* This creates additional avenues for learning and community engagement.

Another respondent shared a collaboration that enabled them to hold writing workshops for neurodivergent adults. To start, the library hosted a partner who trained instructors in methods for teaching writing classes to this group of patrons. These instructors then offered these classes to local group homes. Participants who completed the classes later served as junior instructors during subsequent sessions. *"The partnership worked well because [our partner] had local ties,"* along with *"expertise library staff did not."* As a result, they *"were able to create a place for neurodiverse adults to share their thoughts with the community through writing and public readings."*

How do libraries view *community* partnerships?

Libraries view partnerships as a pathway toward community engagement and generating positive outcomes

for the communities they serve. They value partnerships that help them better understand and meet local needs, particularly for underserved communities. One NILPPA respondent discussed how their library partnered with a local mosque to support the community's Somali residents more effectively. At the start of this partnership, a representative from the mosque led a training session for library staff to acquire a deeper understanding of Islam. Later, the library offered a story time program in Somali, along with a new homework tutoring program.

The Takeaway

Collaborations between libraries and children's museums are often highly rewarding – for both the institutions and the community. Library-museum partnerships enable these institutions to reach new audiences, support community needs, and increase their own visibility.

While many such partnerships already exist for specific initiatives, this research invites libraries and museums to dream bigger! Deeper, longer, and more holistic partnerships may create a world of new opportunities across the three overarching aims of healing, learning, and community. To build stronger, long-term library-museum partnerships, you can consider a new collaboration from the perspective of both partners. Ask what resources and expertise your museum has that a library would value. How can you contribute to existing programs and fill programming gaps? For example, few museums are partnering with libraries for health and wellbeing programs, yet they are both addressing health-related topics through other partnerships. Creating joint health-related programs is one-way children's museums and libraries can expand their partnerships.

Additionally, ask what you need out of a collaboration. Some museums need help running programs and can benefit from additional staffing a library might be able to provide. Others might need physical space for an event or assistance with outreach. Museums and libraries partnerships are more likely to be sustained when each provides what they are best equipped to do. Beyond strategic alignment and the sharing of expertise, NILPPA data indicate that transparency is essential for successful library-museum collaborations. This includes establishing regular communications, setting clear expectations, and collectively addressing operational challenges. By discussing these things before and during program planning, children's museums can ensure that their collaborations with libraries will be productive, valuable, effective, and sustainable.

About This Research

Data for this report comes from two surveys. That pertaining to children's museums' collaborations with libraries was collected through the Spring 2023 ACM Member Collaborations survey. The dataset contains information from 59 member institutions. Data on library collaborations with museums was collected through a NILPPA survey of US libraries conducted in 2022. This dataset contains information from 314 libraries. Research for both of these projects is supported by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (Grant #s: MG-251839-OMS-22; MG-80-19-0042-19; LG-250153-OLS-21).

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