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Publisher information: The Informal Learning Review is a copyrighted publication of Informal Learning Experiences, Inc. It appears bi-monthly in February, April, June, August, October, and December. The Informal Learning Review is edited and published by Informal Learning Experiences, Inc., tel: 720.612.7476, email: ileinc@informallearning.com, mailing address: 1776 Krameria Street, Denver, CO 80220. The Informal Learning Review is designed and produced in house. ISSN 1089-9367.

Subscription Information

The Informal Learning Review
1 year, six issues, bimonthly, print and online: $65 in the U.S., $72 in Canada/ Mexico, $80 elsewhere. Online version ONLY, $55. Individual electronic issues can be purchased for $12 and will be delivered via email. Please contact us at ileinc@informallearning.com if you would like to purchase a single issue.

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INTRODUCTION
The Discovery Trail, a museum-library partnership, has for nearly two decades fostered cooperation among cultural institutions in Ithaca and Tompkins County, New York. In this article, we describe the partnership’s formation, mission, programs, growth, and impact, along with some lessons learned for other communities considering a similar partnership of cultural organizations.

The eight member organizations include:

- Cayuga Nature Center (formerly independent, now a venue of the Paleontological Research Institution)
- Cornell Botanic Gardens (a unit of Cornell University)
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology (a unit of Cornell University)
- Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell (a unit of Cornell University)
- Museum of the Earth (a venue of the Paleontological Research Institution)
- Sciencenter (an independent organization)
- The History Center in Tompkins County (an independent organization)
- Tompkins County Public Library (a unit of Tompkins County)

In early 1999, the director of the Tompkins County Public Library invited a group of directors from local museums for lunch to discuss mutual interests and issues. The group found common ground around issues of audience development, funding, and programming, but equally important, they also discovered an affinity for each other, which led to a search for ways to collaborate for the greater good of the community.

The group also realized that they could likely have a greater capacity for local impact if they collaborated rather than competed or provided all marketing and programming independently. After meeting several more times informally over lunch, the directors decided to apply to the Institute of Museum & Library Services for a grant to develop a joint exhibition on the landscapes of upstate New York. The concept was that each of the individual organizations had a different but valuable perspective on the nature of place and landscapes, and each could add value to a series of coordinated mini-exhibitions on the topic.

The group began to meet extensively to prepare the proposal. They invited educators, exhibit developers, and a grant writer from its member organizations to assist. Three of the directors flew to Washington to discuss the project with an IMLS program officer. The fledgling organization called itself the “Partnership for Lifelong Learning” in keeping with a key goal of IMLS at the time. All indications from Washington were positive.

Although the grant was ultimately rejected, something special had happened, and the directors realized that they still wanted to continue to work together. They looked for other projects to work on collaboratively, and each organization contributed services and other necessary items to support the fledgling collaborative. One director with close ties to a local foundation was able to secure funding for a 25%-time coordinator position for two years. Another organization in the group used its 501(c)(3) status to handle the group’s finances, while other members provided website design, graphic design, meeting space, and other services. The directors began meeting monthly, and ideas for joint educational projects and marketing continued to present themselves. The group renamed itself “Discovery Trail” and purchased the URL DiscoveryTrail.net and later DiscoveryTrail.com.

MISSION AND VISION
The mission of the Discovery Trail has included two interrelated elements: education and marketing. The mission and vision statements are:

Mission: The Discovery Trail, a partnership of eight educational organizations in Tompkins County, New York, promotes awareness of its members’ programs and collections and fosters understanding of the connections among science, nature, and culture.

Vision: A community where curiosity flourishes and every resident and visitor uses the Discovery Trail to explore science, nature, and culture.

The balance between the programmatic and marketing functions has swung back and forth over the years, with some members more interested in educational programs and others on the need for more foot traffic. Of the eight member organizations, only three (Cayuga Nature Center, Museum of the Earth, and the Sciencenter) charge admission. While the other five would also like to have more
awareness and use of their offerings, marketing per se has been of less added value to them. The county's local tourism program has a strong interest in the Discovery Trail because of its value in promoting the local area to visitors and has for many years provided significant annual support for Trail's marketing program.

During the first five years, a number of program efforts were tried, such as an annual “May is Discovery Month” program, proposals on exhibitions to IMLS, and tabling at events held by others. Nothing stuck particularly well until the idea of a collaborative elementary-school field-trip program was proposed in 2004. This program has become the mainstay of the Discovery Trail, as discussed farther on.

Additionally, the cross-cutting themes of the Discovery Trail Partnership are:

Leadership: to enhance our guests’ experience of the world of learning and to advocate its importance;

Community-wide involvement: Community-wide involvement: to promote lifelong engagement in Tompkins County’s informal educational resources and to encourage people of all ages to pursue self-directed learning outside the classroom;

Project development: to develop innovative, collaborative educational projects;

Audience development: to reach new audiences and increase the diversity and number of our guests.

COLLABORATION AND GOVERNANCE

Although there has always been a certain amount of tension between the two elements of the mission - marketing and education - the directors of the member organizations have been able to face this tension openly and head-on. They have agreed that the higher calling is to be a force for good in the community, and that the balance of marketing vs. program delivery, while important, should not derail the bigger goal.

The spread in budget size among the eight partner organizations is dramatic - a factor of about 50. While this could potentially lead to control by the larger organizations in the collaborative, this has never been an issue. From the beginning, board members have ignored the size of their building, staff, and budget and focused on ways to support the collaboration. Each director gets equal weight and one vote in all matters.

Each organization pays annual dues, which in addition to providing needed support also provides a match to get county tourism funding. The dues assessments currently vary by a factor of 8, and the directors have decided to support this ratio and approach because the larger organizations are much more complex and have other divisions that are not closely related to visitor services and educational programming.

OPERATIONS

After nine years as an informal partnership, the Discovery Trail adopted bylaws and became a 501(c)(3) organization in 2008. It now has a full time executive director, a position that started as a 25% coordinator and has expanded to full-time over the years. The professional staff is enhanced by student interns, marketing and education committees that are populated by staff at member museums, and volunteers.

The board now includes the directors of each member organization, up to two at-large members, and the executive director, who is ex officio and nonvoting.

The three primary organizational functions include marketing, managing the Kids Discover the Trail! (KDT!) educational program, and fundraising for KDT!.

MARKETING

Marketing became a prime focus in the early years, especially after several programmatic grant applications proved unsuccessful. The goal of the marketing program is two-fold: 1) to make local residents more aware of the educational offerings of the eight sites, so that they will make better use of them and promote them through word-of-mouth to their family and friends, and 2) to promote the Discovery Trail sites to tourists through regional channels that are too expensive for any one site.

Marketing methods have developed over the years and currently include a website www.DiscoveryTrail.com, a widely distributed joint brochure (see Figure 1), and local press and broadcast media. The growth of social media has led to many new collaborative marketing efforts, including the cross-promotion of events among the eight members, joint familiarization (FAM) tours during which front-desk staff members visit each of the eight sites, and a summer events flier distributed to schools, hotels, and the Convention & Visitors Bureau.

While each organization has its own public and media relations staff, the Discovery Trail provides another layer of promotion that unifies the eight organizations as a significant cultural and educational attraction for the region. This marketing effort is supported by a committee of staff members from the member organizations. This group meets periodically to advise the executive director and
assist with specific projects, such as a new brochure or the writing of an article.

The Discovery Trail contracts with a local consultant for a bi-annual summer visitor survey. This intercept survey catches guests as they walk toward the entrance of a site and provides trend data on demographics, marketing awareness, and other variables. The survey is funded through the local tourism program. In addition, the Discovery Trail also tracks monthly attendance at the eight sites and reports the data to its members and the county’s Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The impact of the Discovery Trail’s marketing program is difficult to assess, because of the many variables, such as the promotion already provided by its individual members, what exhibitions are on display at member museums, weather, etc. Overall, there has been a 3.5% increase in attendance at the museum venues from 2015 to 2016. One of the key marketing strategies has been to promote word-of-mouth, which although important (65% of guest at member sites cite word-of-mouth as their reason for visiting) is notoriously difficult to assign to specific promotional efforts.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING
After several early years of unsuccessful IMLS grant proposals and a general lack of significant impact from five years of local programming efforts, the Discovery Trail struck pay dirt in 2004 when the president of the Ithaca Public Education Initiative, a local educational foundation, suggested that the Discovery Trail collaborate with the local school system to enhance the school system’s formal educational program through the Discovery Trail’s informal educational offerings. A key goal was to enhance school programs in a way that did not drain resources from either the schools or the Discovery Trail. After a year of intense listening, planning, and community building, the answer emerged in the form of a pilot program, called “Kids Discover the Trail!” in which each of the eight Discovery Trail sites would be linked to a grade level, starting in Pre-K and extending through 5th grade.

Figure 1: A joint print brochure promotes the Discovery Trail venues throughout upstate New York.

Figure 2: The Sciencenter empowers children to use science in shaping a better future. Its program focuses on the science of renewable energy. Students are experimenting with their own windmill.
Each class in that grade would go to the corresponding Discovery Trail site each year for a field trip with a program that supported the formal school curriculum. Fifth grade classes would go to two sites, so that by the start of the sixth grade, all children would have visited all eight sites. Figures 2 - 6 show a sample of activities from the Kids Discover the Trail! program.

This program began with a 20% pilot, expanded the following year, and after 12 years has now grown to include every class in the Ithaca City and Trumansburg School Districts and 80% of the remaining elementary classes in the other four school districts countywide. Figure 7 shows the growth of the program since its inception.

KDT! is free to schools and funded by a combination of sources, including:

Figure 3 (above): Cayuga Nature Center cultivates awareness, appreciation, and responsibility for the natural world through outdoor and environmental education.

Figure 4 (top right): The Cornell Lab of Ornithology introduces children to the world of birds and biodiversity through its field trip program.

Figure 5 (bottom right): At the History Center in Tompkins County, students learn what it was like to go to school in the nineteenth century at the Eight Square Schoolhouse, a well-preserved octagonal one-room schoolhouse.

Figure 6 (below): Cornell Botanic Gardens visits each class at its school to prepare them for their field trip, which focuses on getting to know wildflowers. The program has inspired teachers so much that several now volunteer for the program in retirement.
● 48% from Discovery Trail fundraising
● 38% from the New York State Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)
● 18% from foundations or PTAs connected with each school district

In addition, the Ithaca City School District contributes 25% salary for a master teacher who helps coordinate the program, and each district provides its own busing. A professional, independent evaluator evaluates the program every year, and the data are used to improve the program the following year.

The main goals of the Kids Discover the Trail! Program are:

1) To enhance the educational programming at elementary schools;
2) To provide equal access to programming, regardless of ability to pay or get to the sites;
3) To foster a culture of tolerance for differences in culture and background from the start;
4) To promote the offerings of the Discovery Trail sites by bringing children in at the earliest possible age.

KDT! has now become the single most important program of the Discovery Trail. By the time children have completed 5th grade, they have visited each of the eight sites at least once - regardless of their capacity to pay, which varies considerably from the well-off academic communities near Cornell to rural areas with extremely few resources. Pre- and post-visit activities are available to enhance the programming at each site. Every child receives a book each year connected with their field trip to read at home with their parents. Every child also receives a free family come-back pass for sites that charge admission.

Elementary classes from the Ithaca City School District, which has eight elementary schools, are paired up with another school. Buses pick up a class at one school and then drive to another school to get the buddy-up class. Each child has a buddy for their field trip from the other school, with the goal of fostering appreciation for different cultures and social norms, which vary dramatically throughout the school district.

The impact of KDT! has been significant. In the 2016-17 school year 3,990 children in 232 classes attended field trips at the eight Discovery Trail sites. A professional third-party annual evaluation consistently indicates widespread support from teachers, parents, museums, and children. Over 30% of parents polled have reported doing something at home with their children based on the field trip. The Ithaca City School District has observed a dramatic reduction in adolescent conflicts in middle school, which it attributes in large part to the pairing of children from rural, urban, and suburban schools in their elementary years and the understanding of cultural differences that this repeated experience over the elementary years promotes. KDT! has become one of the district’s key equity programs and receives enthusiastic support from school administrators, staff, and board members.

Providing equal access to programming has become a key goal of the program and is a feature that sponsors focus

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>3990</td>
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Figure 7: Number of children served by the Kids Discover the Trail! program since inception.
Teachers also appreciate the fact that regardless of their school’s location or funding, their students can participate, as indicated by many teachers in their annual evaluation questionnaires. Several recent teacher comments include:

“All children have the same shared experience outside of the school building! It’s fun to see how excited they are and I love listening to their conversations about the new things they are experiencing/learning together.”

“In providing equal access to the Discovery Trail sites for local school children, KDT! serves a deep educational need in our community. KDT! provides access to children in the outlying towns who are least likely to be able to visit the Discovery Trail sites on their own.”

Other recent evaluation results indicate the value that teachers place on the support that local museums can have:

- 100% plan to participate next year
- 99% agree that the program enhances the school experience by its support of curriculum-based learning
- 97% agree that KDT! meets its equity goals and provides equal access to all Discovery Trail sites.

SECONDARY IMPACTS
The Discovery Trail has had significant secondary, or indirect impacts that go beyond the number of children served through its programs and attendance at its member institutions. In particular, the Discovery Trail has dramatically improved relationships within the community. The member museums, once seeing each other as competitors, now see each other as collaborators in a local effort that has much more impact potential than any of them could have alone.

Cornell, like many universities, is interested in fostering town-gown relations. Its participation in Discovery Trail programming has led to a remarkable improvement in its community relations, while simultaneously opening the doors to several of its world-class venues so that every child in the community can visit.

Funders, including foundations, individuals, businesses, and governments, have welcomed the spirit of collaboration that the Discovery Trail has brought about and have in a number of cases increased their support of individual members, even as they have added the KDT! program as another mouth to feed on their own docket.

The Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is responsible for county tourism promotion, regularly cites the Discovery Trail for providing a unified, easy interface with its eight member organizations. While tourism in not the prime audience for any of the organizations, each recognizes the important role that tourism plays in keeping the community vibrant and attractive.

Local realtors likewise play a role in promoting the Discovery Trail. As they show houses to people considering a move into the area, they often cite the Discovery Trail as a cultural and educational benefit, enhancing the area’s attractiveness and supporting the recruiting of talent by local businesses and educational institutions.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS
As the Discovery Trail matures, it continues to assess its impact, mission, and vision, along with operational aspects such as its appropriate budget and staff size. As of this writing, 76% of eligible elementary classes had participated in the Kids Discover the Trail! program in the 2016-17 school year, and this number is expected to grow to 80% the following year, an effort that will require additional fundraising and coordination with rural schools. Funding requirements increase as the number of schools served increases, while New York State has reduced its support approximately 1% per year over the past decade.

While attendance at member sites is not expected to grow dramatically in the next five years, the Discovery Trail is preparing to experiment with more social media, digital marketing, and word-of-mouth techniques to maximize the impact of its marketing efforts and maintain its audience numbers in the face of changing demographics.

LESSONS LEARNED
During the 18 years since the formation of the Discovery Trail, we have learned much about collaboration, community, and impact. Four key lessons include:

1. Paid staff is essential
Coordinating the program, administration, and fundraising for the marketing and educational mission of the Discovery Trail requires a level of time and attention that would not be possible without paid staff. We were fortunate to receive a two-year grant for a 25% coordinator position at the start of the Discovery Trail, which we were able to leverage and grow to full time. It is absolutely essential that the paid executive director have a personality that is unflaggingly positive, invites participation at whatever level is realistic for each organization and its director, and is able to work around the inevitable periods when board members and their staff are unavailable because of other responsibilities.

2. Partners must constantly balance individual goals and...
The collective greater good and defer to the latter whenever possible
Potential conflicts arise in virtually all matters, such as financial contributions (dues), programmatic directions, contributions of staff time, and fundraising from the same donors that the organizations go to individually. We have continued to prosper and grow because each organization has been willing to see the benefits to be gained through the success of the collaborative effort. Sometimes these benefits are indirect, such as when donors to individual organizations increase their giving because they like the collaborative spirit that the Discovery Trail brings to the community.

3. Participation builds shared buy-in
The Discovery Trail board meets at a different venue for each board meeting, so each director gets a chance to host the group each year. Each organization looks for something it can contribute, whether providing a board officer, space for the executive director, or graphic design assistance. This distributed participation has led to a shared responsibility for the organization.

4. Diverse income sources build strength
The Discovery Trail’s sources of income include state education funds; county tourism promotion funds; member dues; fundraising from foundations, businesses, and universities; and significant in-kind services from members and the school district. We have purposely avoided funding our programs from one or two large sources, but instead have built a broad base of funding with the same sense of shared responsibility among funders as we seek among our eight member organizations.

Charlie Trautmann was founding chair of the Discovery Trail board. He is director emeritus of the Sciencenter and adjunct professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Cornell University. He may be reached at cTrautmann@sciencenter.org. Star Bressler is executive director of the Discovery Trail and may be reached at director@DiscoveryTrail.com. Warren Allmon is chair of the Discovery Trail board and director of the Paleontological Research Institution, which has two venues: the Museum of the Earth and the Cayuga Nature Center. He is adjunct professor of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Cornell University and may be reached at wda1@cornell.edu.
On the cover:

*The Experimentarium opened on January 9, 1991 in an old brewery in Hellerup, the northern part of Copenhagen. In 2017, after 9 years of planning, fundraising, and construction, the Experimentarium re-opened with 16 new exhibits.*

*Full story on page 9.*