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# OED Graduate Assistants Help NRV Children's Museum Plan For The Future



Children's museums are important for a child's early growth and development, as graduate assistants from Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development (OED) discovered while performing an organizational analysis of the Children's

Museum of Blacksburg. The museum has relocated to Christiansburg's New River Valley Mall and will reopen soon under the new name Wonder Universe.

The children's museum seeks to help children up to the age of eight develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills. A valuable place for children to socialize, learn, and play, the museum previously attracted over 20,000 people a year. When the former Executive Director of the Children's Museum, Dr. Sarah Hanks, contacted OED, she was interested in receiving ideas for how best to expand the museum's value in its Christiansburg location, as one of the museum's goals is to draw in 45,000 attendees for its first year of operations.

During the first phase of the project, students worked to understand the value the Blacksburg Children's Museum brought to the New River Valley region. In January 2019, graduate assistants conducted a literature review and explored six case studies that looked at children's museums on a national and college-town level. One of the focuses of this process was to learn about museum marketing and membership. As children's museums are a relatively new phenomenon, many people have yet to be exposed to them and marketing is essential in making these museums more popular.

The students also conducted a market analysis where they collected demographic data and pinpointed how the museum could access new market segments. In particular, they found the museum could focus on reaching more lower to middle income families. Other research foci included the importance of building partnerships and expanding funding. From the case studies and literature review, OED students identified best practices for sustaining a children's museum and uncovered what exhibits were most successful with children.

During the next phase of the project, the students worked on providing recommendations to the museum, drawing from their research and survey responses from museum members and non-members.

One of the most popular exhibits at the Children's Museum of Blacksburg was the Blue Blocks, a set of blue cubes that children can stack and use to build whatever comes to mind, harnessing their creativity. In the new location, which will be 6,000 sq. ft. larger, people wanted to see similarly interactive exhibits that promote creativity and include problem-solving components.

One key finding from the research was that museums where adults can

participate and play with their child are more helpful for a child's early development. When coming up with recommendations, Khushboo Gupta, a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Public and International Affairs, said an important factor for them to think about was ensuring the museum is not just for children but for the whole family.

The recommendations the graduate assistants put forth for Wonder Universe include expanding the museum's footprint, developing innovative exhibits that encourage hands-on engagement and collaboration, providing exhibits that are both adult and child-friendly, and diversifying partnerships to allow for more subsidized memberships and better access for all to the museum.

According to the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs, investing in high quality early childhood programs can yield \$4-\$9 per \$1 invested. Neda Moayerian, a Ph.D. candidate in Planning, Governing, and Globalization said on the importance of children's museums, "I think it's a long-term sustainable way of elevating society."

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