

Potsdam, New York is located in northern New York State in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. This rural area is relatively remote with a population of roughly 130,000 people in the surrounding “North Country” region. In the greater Potsdam/Canton area the average annual family income is roughly \$40,000 with 22% of the population living below the poverty level. Although there are many low-income families in the region, the population also includes university faculty from four local colleges including; SUNY Canton, SUNY Potsdam, Clarkson University, and St. Lawrence University. The nearest metropolitan areas with interactive children’s museums are across the Canadian border in Ottawa and Montreal, about two hours away. Although the Potsdam/Canton area is home to four colleges, there are relatively few cultural institutions geared toward children and families. The northern climate with an extended winter season creates the need for indoor family oriented spaces and activities. A Children’s Museum in the Potsdam/Canton area would fill this much needed void.

Although there are limited cultural institutions, university faculty, local businesses and artisans provide a wealth of resources to draw from in the creation of an interactive children’s museum. University faculty in disciplines such as elementary and literacy education, museum studies, art and music education, early childhood education, life sciences, engineering, and social sciences could serve as exhibit developers, advisors and board members for this proposed museum. Because the local population is small and the area is not a tourist destination, university and business partnerships would be integral to the vision of this institution. The museum could serve as a learning lab for faculty across the four campuses in education, science and the humanities. Research related projects and grants could provide an additional source of funding for the museum. Also, university students in a range of disciplines could earn credit through internships and practicums in the exhibit spaces. In addition to academic alliances, local businesses such as the Potsdam Food Co-op and family-owned hardware stores have been integral to the community for decades and could serve as local partners. The museum could also serve additional community needs for vacation week and summer camps, family and community functions, and school field trips.

SUNY Potsdam faculty members from the education department and museum studies department have begun to reach out to potential stakeholders in the broader Potsdam/Canton area. The first step towards our vision of creating the North Country Children’s Museum is to submit a grant to fund a “Rightsizing” assessment. This assessment would inform a realistic scope for the institution based on our population, location and resources. We have also begun to work with the Potsdam Office of Planning and Development to discuss potential museum sites in the historic downtown area.

Given the wealth of local expertise and lack of family-oriented cultural institutions in the Potsdam/Canton area, we believe an interactive children’s museum would be a valuable and valued community resource in this socio-economically diverse area. We envision an institution that supports children as creative and engaged learners and thinkers through exploring our rich cultural and geographical region.