



# LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

A Partnership between WOW! Children's Museum  
and Social Venture Partners Boulder County

June 2016 to November 2019



**SOCIAL VENTURE  
PARTNERS  
BOULDER COUNTY**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## PARTNERSHIP PURPOSE

At initial investment, WOW! Children’s Museum and SVP Boulder County agreed to make progress in these areas: branding/community perception, earned income/fundraising, and identifying a plan to meet WOW!’s future facility needs. We’d understand current stakeholder perception of WOW!, and improve it as needed so that WOW! is viewed as an important educational resource – not just a fun place to play. This change in perception will lead to increased school engagement, increased fundraising revenue, and stronger positioning in the search for a new facility. WOW! will have a funding plan that ensures stable revenue to invest in new permanent exhibits, traveling exhibits, and facility upgrades. Additionally, we’ll have created a plan for meeting long-term facility needs. If that plan includes a capital campaign, we’ll have conducted a feasibility study to identify the steps that must be taken during the next three years to prepare for a successful campaign.

### Goals

- Change perception of WOW! among stakeholders.
- Diversify funding model
- Build or accommodate facility to meet future needs

## OUTCOMES

At the end of our partnership, WOW! Children’s Museum is in a very different place – one of momentum, focus, and progress. A critical component of WOW!’s ongoing transformation has been its success in inviting participation of community members, community partners, and experienced professionals in its planning; and in improving the community’s perception, and awareness/ understanding. The organization has a more cohesive brand and supporting communications. And, there have been significant leaps in impact. WOW! now has a defined Early Childhood Education (ECE) learning framework that brings the organization’s educational mission to life, and is used to guide all aspects of planning ... especially in exhibit and program development. Related, WOW! made significant progress in serving more local low-income and Latino residents through community outreach and partnerships, offering culturally inclusive family events and dual language communication throughout the museum. Finally, the organization is redesigning the entire museum. It’s truly an exciting time for WOW!.

## Summary of SVP Investments

Consulting Hours*	520
Consulting Value	\$104,000
Cash Grants	\$38,500
Projects	14
Partner Volunteers	13

\* Rate conservatively valued at \$200/hour.



*“As a nonprofit participant in SVP’s Catapult program, we were able to step back and recognize our strengths – as well as work through some of our weaknesses.”*

*Darcy Morel, Interim Executive Director of WOW! Children’s Museum*



## RATIONALE FOR SVP INVESTMENT

At initial investment, SVP Boulder County was impressed with the programming and impact of the WOW! Children’s Museum. The organization demonstrated intentional use of proven practices in early childhood learning through play (such as multi-sensory programming) – all within significant space, financial, and staff constraints. WOW! was clearly kid- and family-focused with the potential to significantly increase services and, thereby, community impact. It offered affordable options for low-income and underserved populations (e.g., youth with special needs and Latino families) and desired to identify additional ways to serve more of these community members. Additionally, WOW! demonstrated qualities that SVP believes indicate potential for capacity building success: strong leadership open to change, organizational vision, solid infrastructure, dedication to proven practices, and opportunities for Partners to engage in projects. Committed to making investments with associated risks, SVP Boulder County noted that there could be challenges for the board and staff’s capacity to integrate SVP’s assistance.

## WOW! CHILDREN’S MUSEUM PROFILE

- Mission: To engage all families in educational, hands-on experiences that connect curiosity, creativity, and discovery.
- Founded: 1996
- Contact: 303.604.2424, [wowchildrensmuseum.org](http://wowchildrensmuseum.org)
- Overview: WOW! Children’s Museum is an interactive children’s museum that educates children in the arts, sciences, and soft skills through exhibits in which children can play, touch, and discover.
- Major programs or services:
  - Interactive exhibits at the museum
  - STREAM (Science, Technology, Relationships, Engineering, Art, and Math) programming, on- and offsite
  - Drop-in enrichment programs
  - Play for All initiative



## WOW! CHILDREN’S MUSEUM VISION

*Community-level: To be the informal early childhood education leader in Boulder County.*

*Child-level: To engage children in hands-on learning experiences that foster creative and innovative thinking, and problem solving; and to nurture a love of learning, and a sense of confidence and competence.*





## INTRODUCTION

SVP's longest-running initiative, Catapult aims to strengthen local nonprofits from the inside out – from board governance and leadership development to strategy, fundraising, communications, technology, and more. For WOW! Children's Museum, the Catapult program resulted in "a big re-focusing," according to Vicky Johns, SVP Lead Partner working with WOW!:

*"The organization is now more clearly and intentionally education-focused, including greater outreach to our Latino community. As well, WOW! is primed to bring to life its early childhood vision in ways that get our community excited ... and to raise its profile in the community, especially among donors. The museum has really begun to shift toward more of a fundraising board, which is incredibly important for this organization. It's an exciting time to be partnering with the museum, just as they're on the cusp of getting to the next level in terms of their role and impact in the community."*

This report describes the process, deliverables, and learnings of WOW!'s participation in SVP's Catapult program.

## OUR WORK TOGETHER

### Branding/Communications and Community Outreach

Goal: Change perception of WOW! among stakeholders.

- ⇒ Collect data on the perception of WOW! across various stakeholders, including members, customers, teachers, and influencers. Then, build a plan to address the feedback with a roadmap and timeline to implement these goals.
- ⇒ Design a research/outreach plan to include key community and target stakeholders in the process.
- ⇒ Develop Latino community outreach connections and collaborations. Review and improve WOW!'s Spanish language communication in marketing, and within the museum.
- ⇒ Compile market research results to inform future exhibit/program design.
- ⇒ Revisit vision/mission and core values to ensure alignment with desired perception.

*SVP's Catapult program provides nonprofits with 3.5 years of deep-dive consulting, and works side by side with nonprofit leadership to reach strategically identified goals for greater organizational impact. Supporting cash grants enable capacity- and capability building within the nonprofit.*

**Capacity:** *Ability (core skills, management practices, strategies, and systems) of an organization to deliver programs at the targeted or desired scale with effectiveness, sustainability, and impact.*

**Capability:** *Agility of an organization to implement and deliver programs according to the way they were designed (fidelity) and with quality, achieving expected impact.*



## Branding/Communications and Community Outreach (cont.)

### Outcomes:

- ⇒ WOW! has made significant progress in serving local low-income and Latino populations through targeted community outreach and partnerships, offering culturally inclusive family events at the museum, hiring Spanish-speaking staff, and adding dual language communication throughout the museum. As a result, WOW! has seen significant increase in 'Play For All' memberships with 312 in October 2016 and 616 in October 2019. In addition to improved community impact, this initiative has had a positive impact on board and staff's sense of direction and pride in purpose while strengthening the organization's grant and general fundraising potential.
- ⇒ A critical component of WOW!'s on-going transformation has been its success in inviting the participation of community members, community partners, and experienced professionals in its planning processes. Key partners include such organizations as Boulder County Head Start; Boulder County Public Health; Colorado Children's Hospital; Boulder County Arts Alliance; ELPASO; City of Lafayette Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails; and City of Lafayette Arts and Cultural Department. WOW! plans to continue inviting community participation and partnerships in order to strengthen its role as a shared and valuable community early childhood education resource.
- ⇒ While valued in the community, there remained an opportunity to strengthen WOW's perceived learning value because the facility was considered tired and a re-refresh way overdue. As a result, WOW! realized the potential to engage the local community with a facility renovation and build community pride and ownership in the process.

Project: Two SVP Partners led a workshop on communication at the museum to work with the staff and board to assess how well the museum was delivering against WOW!'s educational mission. The workshop revealed that the educational potential was not consistent across exhibits, that exhibit signage did not clearly or consistently express learning objectives, that ...



*“SVP Boulder County helped us focus on the bigger picture and advance our organizational goals. Through the Catapult program, we received the expertise we needed to structure and facilitate focus groups, better support and develop our board, and think more strategically.”*

*Darcy Morel, Interim Executive Director of WOW! Children's Museum*





## **Branding/Communications and Community Outreach (cont.)**

- ⇒ ... signage did not facilitate adult-child engagement, and that Spanish language signage was inconsistent. The initial impact was a tonal shift in communication from: PLAY! LEARN! IMAGINE! to the more collaborative and invitational 'Let's Play! Let's Learn! Let's Imagine!' and a re-design of all exhibit signage to communicate the specific learning objectives of each exhibit in both English and Spanish.
- ⇒ Two Partners facilitated a work session with staff on messaging content and structure for the 'Together We Grow' fundraising campaign brochure to ensure that it reflected WOW!'s mission and early childhood education framework, while demonstrating both the multi-phased goals and progress of the capital campaign.
- ⇒ As the formal WOW!-SVP partnership comes to a close, two SVP Partners continue to work on a project regarding WOW!'s logo and name. A member/community research study has been designed and interviews have been completed with all staff and board members.
- ⇒ Two SVP Partners led a community outreach study consisting of a member/community survey and focus groups with Latino and Head Start families.

## **Fundraising**

Goal: Diversify the funding model.

- ⇒ Research other children's museum funding models.
- ⇒ Analyze business model.
- ⇒ Create fundraising plan.

Outcome: As a result of our fundraising projects, the team developed donor recognition, gift acceptance, and stewardship policies; created a fundraising plan; created a goal and strategy to engage the board of directors in fundraising; and hired additional staff. WOW!'s funding model/fundraising plan and infrastructure have been strengthened to ensure that the nonprofit is well-positioned for sustainability and growth.

## *Summary of Consulting*

### *Board Development*

- ⇒ *Patricia Burgess, Barbara Truan, Carolyn Powell, Shawna Peterson, Nia Wassink, Jennie Arbogash*

### *Communications/Branding and Community Outreach*

- ⇒ *Vicky Johns, Patricia Burgess, Tony George, Barbara Truan*

### *Executive Search*

- ⇒ *Vicky Johns and Tom Briggs*

### *Fundraising*

- ⇒ *Shawna Peterson*

### *Financial Management*

- ⇒ *Tim Watson*

### *Executive Director Peer Learning*

- ⇒ *Kristin Imo and Jodi Grossman*

### *Lead Partner*

- ⇒ *Vicky Johns*



## **Fundraising (continued)**

**Project:** An SVP Boulder County Partner teamed with WOW! staff to audit and assess funding sources and identify opportunities to strengthen overall giving. The audit consisted of a study of existing fundraising plans, funding sources, and an evaluation of staff and board participation in fundraising. The audit concluded the need for a more focused effort on individual giving; the need for more resources devoted to fundraising; and that internal policies and procedures need to be created and or updated. After completion of the audit, SVP worked in partnership with WOW! staff to create new policies, write a plan, engage board members in fundraising, and increase investment in fundraising.

## **Board Development**

**Goal:** Strengthen the board of director's effectiveness to govern the organization.

- ⇒ Strengthen board engagement and understanding of board governance proven practices.
- ⇒ Develop board commitment to the process of long-term and intentional board recruitment.
- ⇒ Give board members the tools they need to be effective ambassadors for WOW!, and to initiate and maintain donor relationships.

**Outcome:** Progress in this area was gradual and involved weathering the discomfort of board attrition, but today's WOW! board is working toward being stronger, more effective, and more balanced in experience levels and skill-sets. We realized progress in organizing, creating processes for board recruitment, and some new recruitment. Board members also received substantial support developing engagement techniques, and the board is still working on how to successfully engage members so they are able to provide meaningful feedback that advances organizational goals.

**Project:** Six SVP Boulder County Partners worked on a series of projects with WOW!. Partners provided board training on roles and responsibilities, fundraising, communication, and board engagement. We worked with the board to identify board recruitment priorities, develop recruitment targeting, and refine recruitment guidelines and processes; and we provided coaching support for the board chair.

## **Financial Management**

**Goal:** Improved financial management for future sustainability.

**Outcome:** In process at the time of this writing.

**Project:** One SVP Partner worked with WOW! board and staff to create a financial dashboard and improve the budget development process.



## Executive Search

**Goal:** Hire a qualified executive director with the skills, experience, and enthusiasm needed to meet the organization's mission.

**Outcome:** The search process was robust and resulted in the board selecting a new, highly qualified executive director.

**Project:** One SVP Boulder County Partner provided support and guidance to the executive director search committee.

## Facility

**Goal:** Build or accommodate a facility to meet future needs.

**Outcome:** The result has been hiring additional fundraising support staff, purchasing fundraising software for prospect identification, and the quiet launch of the Together We Grow mini-capital or renovation campaign that seeks to raise \$880K to fund a museum redesign. As of September 2019, \$383K has been raised, and the redesign is well underway.

- ⇒ In June 2018, the first phase of this project was completed with the opening of Forest Of Light. Inspired by WOW!'s sensory friendly playtime, Forest Of Light is a sensory-rich experience designed to encourage play for children of all abilities.
- ⇒ The Children's Discovery Garden, featuring nature play and a demonstration garden, opened in Summer 2019, translating the learning framework into outdoor environments that invite play, discovery, and exploration.
- ⇒ In Fall 2019, Micro U will open. This dedicated, skills-appropriate learning lab for infants and toddlers is designed to help WOW!'s youngest visitors develop cognitive and physical skills. Renovations to the south wing Town Square are underway, along with the creation of a Community Art Garden on the north side of the building.
- ⇒ Completing the transformation of the learning environment is scheduled for 2021 with the renovation of the north wing.

**Project:** In 2017, it became clear that the multi-million-dollar capital campaign that would be required to move to a new facility was unrealistic, and WOW! set to work refocusing its ambitions. This work required carefully considering its staffing, funding, and fundraising potential; as well as establishing an attainable fundraising goal designed to develop long-term relationship, while simultaneously creating physical changes to the museum's space.

## Wrap-up

A mismatch between the expectations of the initial Lead Partner and the executive director led to stalled engagement. With few projects happening, it was hard for WOW! to realize the value of SVP's role. SVP Boulder County already knew that setting clear expectations and regular check-ins between key contact points is critical. From this experience, we learned to make a change more quickly if an initial match between a Lead Partner and Investee isn't working. Additionally, before this...



## Wrap-up (continued)

...investment, Co-Lead Partners were common, but not required; they are now the standard expectation.

The Lead Partner change became an opportunity to recalibrate the engagement and get some projects moving. The In-Museum Communication Workshop was our first real project and, perhaps because there was a clear and an actionable outcome, it helped the WOW! board and staff appreciate the role and value of the SVP Boulder County partnership. It also seemed that working directly with staff leadership beyond the executive director built trust, allowing the engagement to move forward more quickly.

In September 2017, WOW!’s retreat with a professional museum consultant ignited a wake-up call for staff and board leadership. This process led to a decision that a multi-million-dollar capital campaign to move to, or build, a new facility was unrealistic. With the challenges and shortcomings of the organization in sharp focus, the need for change became the priority; both staff and board were eager for SVP involvement and guidance as WOW! refocused its goals.

Board engagement and development has been an ongoing focus of SVP Boulder County’s work with WOW!. Progress on these issues was slow, but resulted in real headway by the end of SVP’s engagement. What could SVP have done differently or better to accelerate this work? We believe this experience underscores that board capacity and engagement are critical components of a successful investment. This is always an area that the investment selection process pays close attention to, and that should not change. With hindsight, the WOW! board may have benefitted from an assessment and proven practice training as a kick-off to our partnership.

## WOW! CHILDREN’S MUSEUM GROWTH

	2016	2017	2018
Income (Earned)	\$467,997	\$506,721	\$524,813
Income (Raised)	\$171,150	\$180,345	\$251,688
Total Income	\$639,147	\$687,066	\$776,502
Expense	\$593,603	\$626,697	\$717,992
Employees	16	16	15
Volunteers	180	170	175
Total Members	1,708	1,772	1,833
Total Play for All Members	303	369	554
Total Visitors	79,862	91,457	86,681

*“SVP Boulder County is an incredible support system. We would never have been able to pay for and benefit from the financial coaching, fundraising coaching, and board development coaching we received from SVP Partners.”*

*Darcy Morel, Interim Executive Director of WOW! Children’s Museum*