



Museum Profile

LANDER CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

FREMONT COUNTY, WYOMING

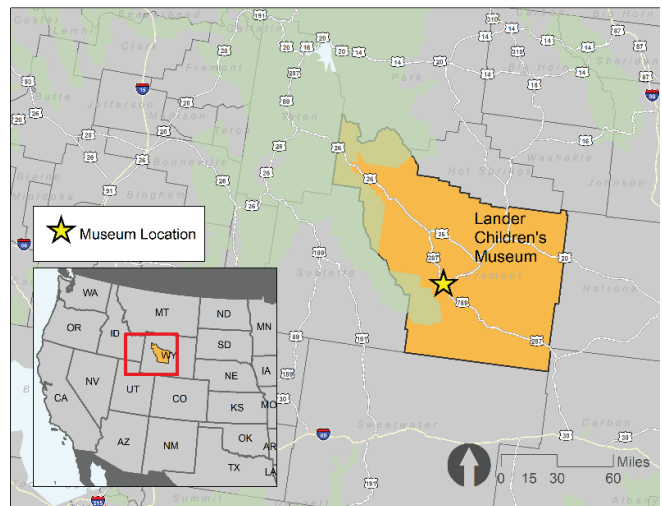
Museum Profile: Lander Children's Museum



FREMONT COUNTY, WYOMING

The Lander Children's Museum (LCM) is located in Lander, a small, tight-knit rural community with a population of 7,014. Lander is located in Fremont County, Wyoming. The museum serves more than 3,500 visitors annually, plus an additional 5,000 people through outreach and community events. LCM offers hands-on exhibits and activities and also hosts an on-site preschool, Little Curious Minds. The preschool's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum is intentionally tied into the museum's exhibits.

LCM's mission is focused on "growing minds through creative exploration and discovery." LCM "provides an intellectual hub for science, technology, engineering, art, and math" to encourage a passion for learning among children. The children's museum supports wellbeing by providing a safe, stimulating environment for children to learn, play, and explore, and it promotes social cohesion through deeply embedded ties to individuals, families, organizations, and businesses throughout the community.



FREMONT COUNTY

Fremont County, in western Wyoming, has an estimated population of approximately 40,683 and a total area of 9,266 square miles (the second largest in Wyoming). The median household income is \$53,559 a year, and the poverty rate is 9.8 percent. The county population is 70.2 percent White, 6.8 percent Hispanic, and 0.5 percent Black. Wind River

Reservation, home to the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes, is situated near the town of Lander, accounting for the 22.1 percent “Other” designation, as recorded by Census demographics. It is the seventh largest reservation in the United States and the only one in Wyoming.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Fremont County	40,683	13.6	70.2	0.5	6.8	0.4	22.1	\$53,559	9.8

Compared to other rural counties across the country, Fremont County residents experience relatively low levels of community health, and the K–12 educational sector experiences considerable challenges. Fremont County fell in the bottom quartile of rural counties on the

Community Health Index and in the bottom quartile on the School Effectiveness Index.¹ Education Services, Health Care & Social Assistance, Accommodation & Food Service, and Retail Trade represent the largest employment sectors in the county.

	Total Labor Force	% Education Services	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Accommodation & Food Service	% Retail Trade
United States*	131,362,978	9.2	14.5	8.9	10.9
Fremont County	40,683	19.0	16.0	12.0	11.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer–Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

¹ Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Fremont County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with five staff, volunteers, and board members and representatives from seven partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with staff and partners focused on understanding the programming and partnerships that support formal and informal learning and broader social wellbeing in Fremont County as well as LCM's approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create the network map included in this profile:

- Lander Children's Museum 2018 Form 990EZ
- Program evaluations for several programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select LCM programming and partnerships that support area residents' access to formal and informal education and health supports
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections LCM maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

LCM TAKES A NOVEL APPROACH TO SUPPORTING FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION

LCM and its preschool, Little Curious Minds, complement the formal education system in Wyoming. In a community with few other early childhood education centers, having its own preschool makes the museum a unique contributor to both formal and informal education. Little Curious Minds was opened in response to a perceived gap for quality early childhood education in the area. Over its lifetime, it has expanded to offer half-day and full-day programming. The curriculum is intentionally grounded in STEM themes and designed to complement the museum's exhibits. One staff member noted how unique LCM's approach is among children's museums: "We look at the preschool as a child development programming element that is tied to so many things around developmental milestones."

The current preschool teacher has been at the museum for four years and actively participates in professional development and knowledge-sharing groups with other private preschools and the public elementary school in Lander. The public elementary school convenes one of these groups, which provides a platform for area preschools to discuss professional development opportunities, share STEM resources, and guide preschool operators' curriculums to ensure they align with the kindergarten-readiness standards established by the school district.

Students from Little Curious Minds are regarded as having a high rate of kindergarten readiness; the preschool uses the Bracken School Readiness Assessment to track the growth of the children in its program and shares its results with the local elementary school so that teachers can have insight into the preparation levels of their children. Interviews with preschool staff, parents of children who attended the preschool, and

the school district liaison suggest that children coming through the Little Curious Minds preschool are consistently well prepared for kindergarten in the public system.

LCM is widely seen as a community resource for encouraging out-of-school learning and creative play. It provides a supportive environment for children to explore, getting them started with critical thinking and problem-solving from an early age. LCM also plays a role in facilitating broader education networks. The museum provides curricular support to educators on STEM programs for their classrooms. LCM hosts field trips from the local school district and the neighboring Wind River reservation and offers after-school, weekend, and summer STEM programming on-site. Its approach encourages children to “create on their own, with no parameters, and emphasizes hands-on activities that support developmental goals.” In response to community need, the museum also founded a dedicated class for babies and toddlers (separate from Little Curious Minds) that provides music and sensory activities and also seeks to build

parenting capacity in the wider community—as one volunteer explained, “We encourage parents to bond with children and get them to get down to their level.” One community member said in reference to LCM’s role in the community:

“I see their contributions as educators . . . like a safe place for my children to go play and learn and interact with kids they normally wouldn’t . . . they meet people and learn new things. They expand on [children’s] formal education. I know a lot of teachers, former and current, are part of the museum . . . I think that LCM meshes well and fits well with our formal education systems; they work with the schools.”

LCM staff and volunteers have relationships with individual teachers and respond to requests for various curricular supports and resources. And in-house programming often links back to the formal education system: Children “learn formally in the school, then come out [to LCM] and apply it and practice it.”

LCM PARTNERS AND PROGRAMMING REFLECT TIGHT-KNIT RELATIONSHIPS

LCM and Little Curious Minds are characterized by informal partnerships and organic networks. Relationships in Lander are very much predicated on personal relationships. There are informal relationships between parents whose children attend Little Curious Minds and the museum that inform year-to-year programming. For instance, a parent who works locally at the National Outdoor Leadership School or the Game and Fish Department will visit the museum to share a lesson related to his or her work that ties into STEM learning. The Little Curious Minds’ curriculum also emphasizes using the surrounding environment as a classroom. This approach connects children with their surroundings and their wider community.

The museum and preschool also draw on the skill sets and resources of the community for their programming—for instance, offering a music or art class taught by local residents and partnering with the local yoga studio for monthly preschool classes. The preschool also has partnerships with the library and child development services. LCM has financial and in-kind partnerships with local businesses that support its events and programs. The nature of the rural community is such that many business owners bring their children to the museum—there is overlap between patronage and partnership, a web of social interactions, and close social connection.

The museum is consistently involved in community events—whether it is holiday parades, the farmer’s market, or outdoor concerts, the museum attends and provides activities for local children. During Fire Safety Week, the Fire Department visits the preschool for health and safety programming with kids and parents. By “showing up for its community” on a regular basis, LCM has become a firm part of the area’s social fabric. It provides consistent opportunities for the community to gather, participate in activities, and build connections with one another.

Another critical role LCM plays within the broader network of the community is as a recreational

outlet for families, particularly in Wyoming’s long winter months. Respondents overwhelmingly said that a vital health need in the area was for a place to go where children could play, learn, and explore and where families could socialize in a safe and inclusive environment. Other than the museum, there are few resources for children and families in Lander. LCM is often referred to as a “safe space” where children are encouraged and supported and where parents can meet and interact. The museum’s role in sustaining both educational and social networks in a remote area makes a considerable contribution to the overall wellbeing of individuals, families, and the broader community.

SUSTAINABILITY IN SMALL TOWNS DEPENDS ON ACTIVE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Given Lander’s small population and remote location, LCM cannot sustain its operations through membership or entry fees. It relies heavily on financial and in-kind donations made by local partners—for instance, the furniture store supplies items for raffles, and the grocery store donates craft materials. However, there is a feeling of reciprocity where the museum is perceived as an essential community resource; therefore, local businesses are happy to support LCM where possible.

From an operational standpoint, a group of committed volunteers runs LCM; the preschool teacher is the only full-time paid staff member. The preschool itself is estimated to contribute 50 percent of revenue—having it on-site is an innovative way to ensure a measure of financial sustainability for a small institution. The museum also organizes yearly fundraisers with partners and benefits from a formal commitment to philanthropy in the surrounding community. Lander has an active Community Foundation that facilitates an annual Challenge for Charities funding drive, which raises thousands of dollars for local organizations.

There is a palpable feeling of mutual support and community in Lander. People consistently support local businesses; in turn, local businesses support sports teams and youth programs and engage in local philanthropy. As one partner and longtime resident said:

“Lander in general—and this has been my experience my whole entire life—is we always take care of each other. It doesn’t matter if you’ve lived here for two years or your family goes back three generations. We take care of our own, support each other, make sure we have what we need. There are pushes for ‘shop local’ to support these small businesses because they do support us.”

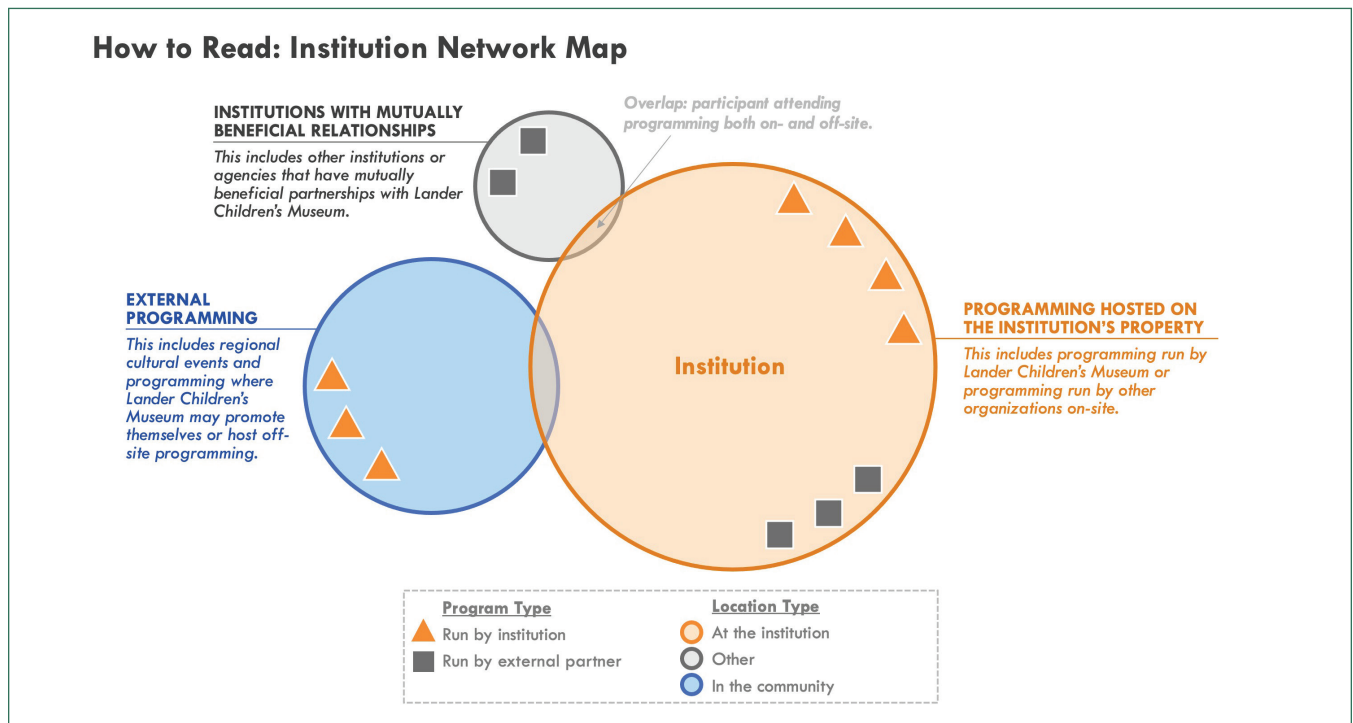
The same is true for support for the LCM. By providing a place for the community to come together and for its children to learn, explore, and engage, LCM supports education and broader wellbeing in Fremont County. Its approach to tying in museum exhibits with STEM curriculum through its preschool and its school district partnerships also encourage formal and informal education. The level of support that LCM enjoys within the wider area points to its role as a valued resource that is responsive to community needs.

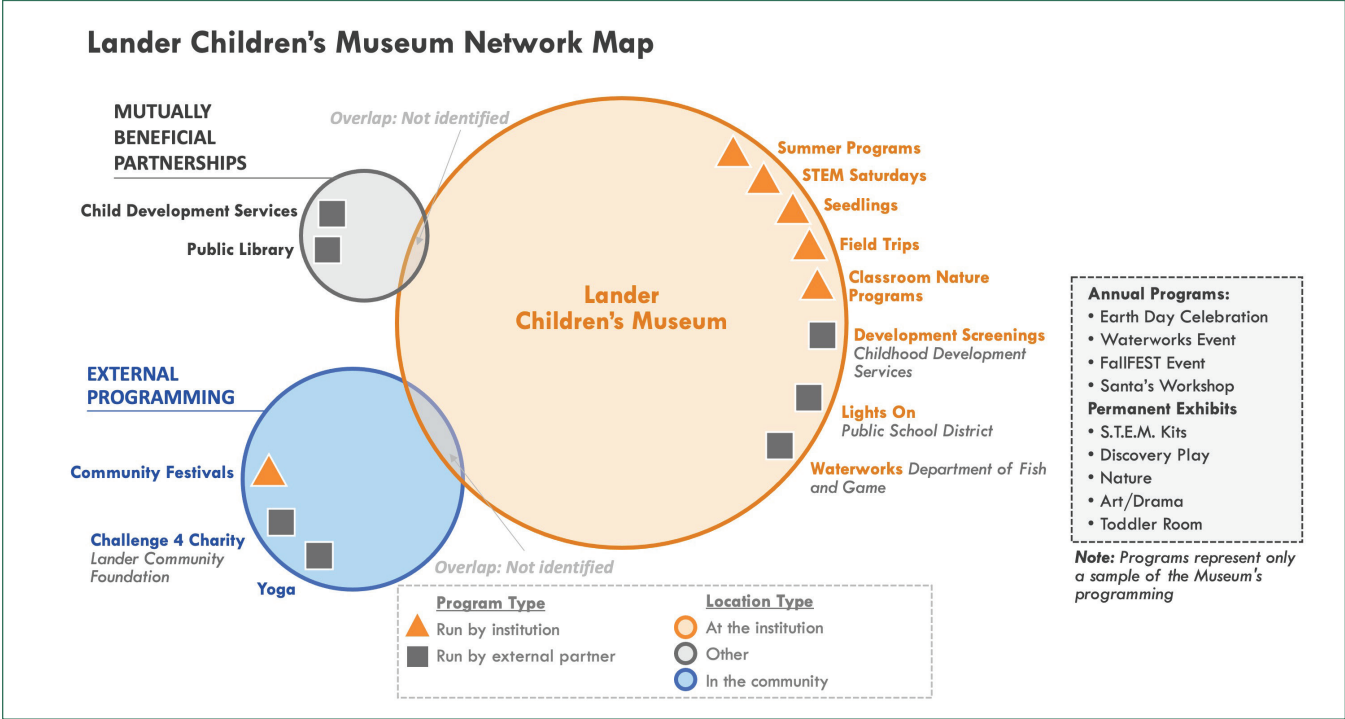
LANDER CHILDREN'S MUSEUM NETWORK MAP

Using data provided by LCM, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections LCM maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between the LCM and those entities that offer programming at the museum itself and those

that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the museum, and it includes examples of off-site, LCM-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the museum's programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the museum maintains.

NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between LCM and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the museum in different ways.





The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections across the programs offered by LCM. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the museum—both programs produced by LCM and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by LCM and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other organizations that have reciprocal relationships with the museum.