

Change Sweeping Through Sciencenter

By Clara MacCarald

Last Thursday the Sciencenter in Ithaca broke ground for the Curiosity Playground, a new science playground for kids ages five and under, while launching a \$3.8 million fundraising campaign called “Curious. Confident. Inspired—a reimagination of exhibits and programs.” The wave of reimagination will wash through every part of the Sciencenter, replacing, enhancing, or expanding everything in its path, from the building itself to the exhibits and programming.

The Sciencenter already entertains about 100,000 visitors onsite every year and reaches more through off-site programming. Charlie Trautmann, executive director, says the popular facility hopes to deepen its impact on all ages, starting with young children and continuing into the teenage years. It’s not just about having fun with science, it’s about empowering kids to use science to shape a better future, regardless of their eventual career track. “This is a future that every kid is going to inherit, whether they want it or not,” says Trautmann.

The early phase of the campaign raised more than \$2.6 million, according to Trautmann. The multitude of planned projects will have staggered rollouts so that there is always something new for visitors to discover. “We did it this way because we didn’t want everything to come out at once,” says Trautmann. Some projects, such as a renovation of downstairs bathrooms and the revamping of the touch tank, have already begun.

Trautmann predicts the impact of these changes will be huge, with something new to excite and engage every kid in the wider community. Although the traveling exhibit changes every four months,

some of the others have been housed by the Sciencenter since the building opened 20 years ago.

The footprint of the building itself will stay the same, but walls are coming down inside to make way for a new floorplan. “We’re drastically expanding the public space,” deputy director Tim Scott says.

The improvements aimed at “Early Explorers” (up to age five) include new workshops and a Family Learning Lab. Curiosity Corner, the indoor space dedicated to the youngest learners, is expanding in size and number of exhibits. It will even have its own dedicated water fountain and family bathroom, with a low sink and toilet along with regular-sized fixtures. Trautmann points out that such infrastructure, while not directly educational, supports families as they use the exhibits.

Curiosity Corner will have a new door opening onto the Curiosity Playground, which should be completed over the course of the next year, according to Scott. Unlike the current outdoor Science Playground, young kids won’t have to compete with older ones, which Scott notes can be especially important to two- and three-year-olds who might be intimidated when there’s a flood of elementary school students.

The playground design is not finalized, but Scott says it will include three different areas for three age categories: non-walkers, toddlers and preschoolers. Each have different abilities and interests. Playground features will be geared toward developing an interest in science from a young age, says Scott, by encouraging discovery, exploration of cause and effect, and development of large motor skills.

The “Young Scientist” (ages five to 11) part of the campaign includes



Current and former members of the Sciencenter Board of Trustees join Executive Director Charles Trautmann (in blue) and staff to break ground on the 1800-square-foot Curiosity Playground, a project of the capital campaign announced last week.

four new galleries, although these and the 24 new and expanded exhibits will have a broad appeal. In general, Trautmann says, the idea is to not make exhibits too age-specific. Often kids continue to enjoy the same exhibits over time while getting more out of them as they grow older. Another program aimed at this age but with wide benefits reduces admission for low-income families. Parents can show an Electronic Benefit Transfer card at the desk and pay only a dollar per family member.

The new sustainability gallery will explore sustainable practices as well as energy and waste issues. Another will focus on health. The health gallery will include plenty of opportunities to move around. “We want kids to be active while they’re learning about exercise and being healthy,” says Scott.

The new ocean science gallery will include a tidal pool whose fake rocks are currently being molded

from real ones in coastal Maine. The pool will be larger than the old touch tank with more space for visitors to crowd around and viewing windows on the sides. Maine species such as horseshoe crabs, whelks, sea urchins and schooling fish will take up residence inside, while a chute in the wall will simulate an occasional tidal surge that flows through the faux rockwork.

As the nearby “Journey of Water” exhibit demonstrates, water from Cascadilla Creek will eventually end up in the Atlantic Ocean. “We want people to have a global view,” says Trautmann. And a local view: the fourth new gallery will have live animals native to New York.

Look for many other changes at the Sciencenter in the coming months, from new mini-golf challenges that were tested by “Future Science Leaders” (ages 11 to 14) to an expansion of the Sagan Planet Walk

TC3 Adds Degree Programs in Applied Science, Human Services

The Tompkins Cortland Community College Board of Trustees has approved the addition of two new degree programs: associate of applied science (A.A.S.) in Applied Science and Technology and associate in science (A.S.) in Human Services. Each will be sent to SUNY and the New York State Education department for final approval. If approved, each program will begin enrolling students for the fall 2015 semester.

The Applied Science and Technology degree came as the result of consultation with several local businesses. The program is designed to help students obtain skill and knowledge necessary

for mid-level technical positions, giving them the flexibility to choose from a variety of scientific and technology fields to meet their specific needs.

The flexibility of the design will make the program attractive to a variety of students, including those who are completing or have completed technical programs, certifications, military training, or other prior learning. The program was unofficially vetted through the National STEM consortium and offers a strong articulation for high school students participating in the national P-Tech initiative.

The new Human Services A.S. program complements two existing Human Services options –

a certificate program and an A.A.S. program. The A.S. program is designed for a student who plans to transfer on to earn a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Human Services or Social Work or a Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.).

Coursework will fulfill SUNY Transfer Path and General Education requirements for Social Work while allowing for elective coursework in alcohol/substance abuse counseling, criminal justice, early childhood education, mental health, and the social sciences. Students will also have the opportunity to participate in one semester of field instruction to prepare for continuing education and future employment.



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