

Bimonthly magazine of the Association of Science and Technology Centers

# Dimensions

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The 10,000-square-foot, LEED Platinum education center at the Swaner Preserve and EcoCenter in Park City, Utah is a key attraction of the 1,200-acre wetland ecosystem nature preserve. Photo courtesy Swaner Preserve and EcoCenter

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Members of the spectrUM Discovery Area, Missoula Public Library, and Missoula Food Bank & Community Center gather for one of their biweekly meetings at EmPower Place. Photo by Nathalie Wolfram

# Breaking Down Silos ... and Moving in Together

*By Jessie Herbert-Meny, Amanda Duley, Nathalie Wolfram, Aaron Brock, and Jessica Allred*

In 2015, the University of Montana spectrUM Discovery Area, with our partners the Missoula Food Bank & Community Center and the Missoula Public Library, set out with a big idea. With our shared vision of inclusion, access, and closing the opportunity gap for children in our community, we planned to create a one-of-a-kind learning center, located at the food bank, where children and families from all backgrounds could learn, play, read, and eat together.

We opened the doors to EmPower Place in summer 2017 with a National Leadership Grant for Museums from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and brick-and-mortar funding from the Missoula Redevelopment Agency. One part science center, one part library, and one part meal site, EmPower Place is much greater than the sum of its parts: It's a vibrant hub for children and families that builds community while breaking down the stigma of food insecurity.

The city of Missoula owns the portion of the

Missoula Food Bank & Community Center that holds EmPower Place, and spectrUM leases the space from the city. Our leadership team, in which all three organizations are represented, makes decisions together about how EmPower Place operates.

Every day at EmPower Place—for a total of 33 hours throughout the week—families can explore hands-on science exhibits, including a permanent ball and gear wall, plus additional rotating exhibits such as a light table for exploring X-rays, a virtual watershed exhibit, Soma cubes, and signage

Students participate in a cooking class led by the Missoula Food Bank & Community Center. Photo by Quinn Mawhinney



SpectrUM's AmeriCorps team leader Jordan Fernandez plays with an EmPower Place visitor. Photo by Amanda Duley

featuring STEM role models. Educators from spectrUM facilitate the exhibits, asking visitors questions to generate conversation and spark inquiry and curiosity. Twice a week, spectrUM educators also lead hands-on science activities aimed at both pre-K learners and older children, frequently joined by STEM role models from the University of Montana and the community. The Missoula Public Library offers weekly Tiny Tales story times, while the food bank's educator leads art and afterschool programming. Annually, spectrUM offers a "Get EmPowered for College" event aimed at high school students and their families, as well as older, potentially non-traditional students.



Kids make scribble bots at EmPower Place with volunteers from the Missoula Food Bank & Community Center. Photo by Amanda Duley

To the children and families who visit, EmPower Place is seamlessly integrated, with our three organizations' programming, staffing, exhibits, and activities flowing throughout the space. But this cohesion did not come effortlessly; in this article, we describe design elements for collaboration that allowed our three unique organizations, each with its own mission and culture, to coalesce around a guiding vision and create an innovative, award-winning learning center for our community.

### WHY WORK COLLECTIVELY?

Based in Missoula, spectrUM engages an estimated 20,000 visitors annually at our main location and an additional 20,000 people annually at pop-up programming in rural and tribal communities across our region and state. Prior to opening EmPower Place with our partners, we had long sought to address access disparities by removing cost barriers for families with free memberships and scholarships for programming. Yet at our Missoula location, we



continued to fall short in reaching audiences reflective of the city’s socioeconomic diversity.

EmPower Place grew from the recognition that cost is just one barrier to access. Visiting a museum can be challenging for a family with limited transportation options, or for parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet. For a family experiencing financial or other stresses, museum and out-of-school enrichment experiences might feel like a luxury rather than a necessity. With EmPower Place, we brought the museum to the food bank—a place that one in five Missoula County families visit at least once a year for food assistance—and made admission free for all.

EmPower Place quickly became a beloved neighborhood and community gathering place. Program evaluation conducted by Beth Covitt, spectrUM’s head of science education research and evaluation, indicates that EmPower Place creates a positive, enriching environment for children and families at the food bank. From a recent evaluation survey of 172 visitors, Covitt found that 94% agreed or strongly



Kids play at EmPower Place. Photo by Cal Stewart

agreed with the statement that “visiting EmPower Place has made shopping at the food bank a better experience for my family.” We found that EmPower Place is helping reduce the stigma of using a food bank, and we are reaching children and families who had not previously visited spectrUM or the Missoula Public Library. Since EmPower Place’s grand opening in summer 2017, it has served 15,000 visitors annually, with many children and families visiting regularly.

### HOW DID WE DO IT?

We recognized early on that we were in uncharted territory, and through the process of building EmPower Place, we learned a lot about what it takes to break down silos and work collaboratively. In bringing our three organizations into a single, 1,200-square-foot space, we encountered differences, not in our vision and goals but rather in our organizational styles and cultures. We learned that partnerships at this level of intensity are messy and require frequent, intentional communication, compromise, humility, and commitment. As a collaborative, we developed five guiding principles: trust and support, high-quality collaboration, effective communication, respect, and shared ownership. These principles helped us move our project forward in ways that were mutually agreeable to all partners.

### LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT WORKING COLLECTIVELY

Although not an exhaustive list, the following are lessons we have learned about working as a collective.

#### Identify your guiding light

Our organizations share a common vision of closing the opportunity gap for children in our



## ROY L. SHAFER LEADING EDGE AWARDS

Recognizing the power of this collaborative approach to break down silos, ASTC honored spectrUM with the 2019 Roy L. Shafer Leading Edge Award for Visitor Experience (small institution).

community. The Missoula Food Bank & Community Center sees this vision through the lens of food security, Missoula Public Library through literacy, and spectrUM Discovery Area through STEM and higher education. Identifying this shared vision—and our unique perspectives on it—was one of the first tasks we undertook as a collective. When all was running smoothly, our guiding light provided cohesion and reminded us of our shared values; when we encountered challenges, it pointed toward a resolution.

### **Prioritize relationships**

When we opened EmPower Place, we felt a sense of urgency to move quickly to develop as many programs and opportunities as we could for our community. Yet we learned to respect that each organization moves at its own pace, and to manage opportunities and decision making accordingly. Although EmPower Place is at its core a place of growth and innovation, we also learned early on the importance of building trust and growing and innovating as a team.

### **Start small, then scale up**

EmPower Place was built on a foundation of small experiments in collaboration. For years, spectrUM had been visiting the food bank and the library regularly. These drop-in collaborations relied on the premise that “we’ll keep doing what we do, and you can come and do what you do alongside us.” All three of our organizations pride ourselves on being good team players; we based our decision to collaborate on EmPower Place in part on this strong shared history. EmPower Place formalized this partnership by bringing our organizations under a single roof, and our ability to work collectively relied on the trust and relationships we had built through years of lighter, lower-stakes collaboration.



### **Identify each partner’s role**

EmPower Place has an operations team that consists of leadership and staff from each of our three anchor organizations. Monthly team meetings create a space to make programming decisions, reflect on what’s working and what’s not, and plan ahead. To define each partner’s unique role in the collective, we also created a “roles” document that has proven especially useful for identifying who is responsible for specific tasks like marketing or onboarding new staff.

### **Develop a collective standard operating procedure**

Each of our organizations came to EmPower Place with its own organizational procedures, but we quickly learned that, just as EmPower Place was not solely a library, science museum, or food bank, so we could not simply replicate our existing procedures. This learning process can be challenging, but we ultimately emerged with a collective operating procedure that is truly co-authored and co-owned, and that helps us in decision making as a team.



Kids explore the ever-popular ball and gear wall at EmPower Place. Photo by Amanda Duley

### Communicate continuously

Ongoing communication is vital. In EmPower Place’s early stages, we mistakenly assumed that because we were aligned in our big vision, we also had a clear road map for navigating the day-to-day experiences. In the drop-in partnership model, policy and decision making are typically guided by the host organization, leaving little room for ambiguity or conflict. But in our collaborative “all under one roof” model, we found that we did not always agree on answers to high-stakes questions. For example, do we sign children in and out? How do we make sure that every child gets back to the right parent or guardian every time? At what age—if ever—can children visit EmPower Place unattended by an adult? We intentionally did not set up EmPower Place as a traditional childcare facility, but we nevertheless struggled with the tension between security and accessibility.

These ambiguities and conflicts did not resolve with any single policy change; rather, we doubled down on developing a communication plan and trained our staff on our collective brand and roles. Most important, we have learned to identify and vocalize concerns early and address both challenges and opportunities preemptively rather than reactively.

### QUESTIONS FOR SCIENCE CENTERS TO CONSIDER AS THEY EXPLORE COLLABORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

We recommend considering the following questions to help you and your partners identify real needs in your community and develop a collaborative plan to meet those needs:

- What does your community value and what are its strengths?
- What are the needs of parents and families in your community? Are there gaps in existing programs?
- What locations might work best, considering factors such as bus routes, neighborhood-level needs, and potential to serve high-need audiences?

Kids play together and parents support each other at EmPower Place (middle). The Missoula Public Library provides a reading nook and books at EmPower Place (bottom). Photos by Amanda Duley





A girl makes snow at EmPower Place. Photo by Amanda Duley.

- Who could partner with you, specifically on leadership and planning, programming, and fundraising?
- What is your sustainability plan and your community's capacity to support your efforts financially?

**What questions should you be asking potential partners?**

- What are the unique strengths that your organization could bring to this partnership?
- What is your history of partnering with other organizations and how did your missions align?
- What is your organization's capacity to partner? Can you contribute to funding or staffing?
- What is your process for answering tough questions, and how do you address conflict or disagreement?

- Are there differences between our organizations—cultural, structural, or operational—that you can preemptively acknowledge and address?
- What are your goals? What are you trying to achieve? What's your guiding light?
- What does success look like?
- How will you respond if you fall short of achieving your goals?

Our commitment to EmPower Place as a team has created a community learning center that allows us to make a much greater impact than any of our individual organizations could make on their own. The lessons we have learned in building, programming, and sustaining EmPower Place are now informing the next phase in spectrUM's growth, as we prepare to relocate our primary museum location to Missoula's library/museum complex (now under construction) in the summer of 2020.

The new complex—nearly 100 times larger than the current EmPower Place—will house our public library, a children's museum, a media resource center, and spectrUM, with free admission for all. The Missoula Food Bank & Community Center will continue to provide free meals at the new complex and we'll be joined by two additional partners—Missoula Community Access Television and Families First Learning Lab, a nonprofit that offers parenting classes and learning-through-play activities for children. With our partners, we're preparing to import and scale the lessons we learned at EmPower Place while continuing to pursue that guiding light of barrier-free access for all.

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