iexplora! Annual Report 2020-2021







2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021



Mission and Values, p. 3

Letter from Our President and Executive Director, p. 4 Early Childhood Education: Engaging Our Youngest Learners, p. 5-6 Workforce and Youth Development: Supporting Future Leaders, p. 7-9 Statewide Outreach: Taking Explora on the Road, p. 10-11 Exhibits and Visitor Experience: Welcoming All to Our Doors, p. 12-13 A New Campus in Old Town, p. 14 Financials and Organizational Strength, p. 15 Explora Donors: Making Impact Possible, p. 16-21

MISSION & VALUES

Explora's Mission:

Creating opportunities for inspirational discovery and the joy of lifelong learning through interactive experiences in Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math.



Our Values:

Learning: Explora is a learning place for people of all races, ages, genders, abilities, and backgrounds; family, caregivers, peers, and colleagues are essential partners in learning. Explora advocates for lifelong, materials-rich inquiry, while acknowledging that it isn't always easy. We value curiosity, hands-on trial and error, and the agency and growth that comes with both failing and succeeding.

Community: Explora's essential value derives from our relevance to our communities, connection to everyday lives, and role as a trusted community resource. We value diversity, in all its forms, as a source of strength; a diverse board, staff, and membership are critical to Explora's effectiveness. We value listening to our community and understand that Explora is stronger when working in partnership with others toward common goals, like helping New Mexico achieve racial equity in STEAM by creating opportunities for people of color and others who have been excluded from STEAM courses and careers.

Flexibility: We recognize power in Explora's ability to be nimble and adapt to change, and we provide staff and visitors freedom to think outside the box. We experiment and try things, even if they aren't perfect, and value creativity and innovation. We push boundaries, bend edges, and try on new roles, in order to best accomplish Explora's mission and serve our community. Organizational and financial health, along with sustainable practices, allows us to pursue new ideas, be responsive to the needs of our community, and contribute solutions to community-defined problems.

People: Explora identifies our staff and volunteers as our greatest resources, and we invest in their work and growth. We are motivated by hard work and positive collaboration to affect change in New Mexico. We believe in inclusive planning and iterate based on feedback from staff and visitors. Explora practices and cultivates generosity through listening, respect, and the sharing of time, ideas, resources, and access.

Dear Friends,

As we look back on the past year, we are filled with gratitude for the incredible support Explora received from our members, donors, and partners—including parents & caregivers, teachers, librarians, and more—throughout New Mexico and beyond. We began fiscal year 2021 (July 1, 2020-June 30, 2021) closed to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we remained closed for the next 11 months of the fiscal year. Over that period, our staff and board—with your support—rallied numerous times to sustain our mission and to continue engaging, educating, and employing New Mexico's students in STEAM.

Our service to the community, as a trusted resource for experiential science education, became even more critical as schools closed, parents and caregivers made the pivot to support their children's remote learning, and communities across the state saw the digital divide widen. In response, our dedicated staff posted daily STEAM content on our social media platforms; provided extensive virtual programs for students, intergenerational programs for families, & professional development for teachers; and developed non-digital science learning kits for distribution to those most in-need all over the state. We paused and re-tooled signature programs, like our Career Pathways Initiative, with the addition of best practices from national models of job training and youth development and input from the teens themselves. And, like many organizations nationwide, Explora took a renewed focus on increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to remain relevant and reflective of the diverse communities we serve.

Having engaged over 50,000 individuals in fiscal year 2021 (FY21), despite being closed to the public the majority of that year, we understand how fortunate we were to find new opportunities within the challenges, and to have the financial strength to provide STEAM engagement in new and innovative ways. Today, thanks to friends like you, Explora continues to provide quality STEAM education for New Mexico's children and families.

Thank you for your steadfast support.

Sincerely,

then

Benjamin Gardner Explora Board President

Joe Hastings Executive Director

CRADLE THROUGH CAREER: Engaging Our Youngest Learners

Early childhood education provides children with a solid foundation for success in elementary school and beyond. Research shows that the most effective early childhood education includes small class sizes, developmentally appropriate curricula, and meaningful family engagement <u>(Learning Policy Institute</u>), all things that are key characteristics of Explora's programs for young children.

Our signature early childhood programs, *Growing a Scientist* (for preschoolers and caregivers) and *Science to Grow On* (for children in grades K-3) provide quality, experiential engagement that supports questioning, investigating, and playing with the building blocks of science, math, and art. Children manipulate objects and variables at their own pace and are encouraged to talk about what they find. Our programs offer ways to increase the potential of young children to fully develop their cognitive, social, and emotional skills and empower their primary caregivers to learn alongside their children and further support learning at home. This was especially important during pandemic-related closures; thanks to your support, Explora continued to offer parents and caregivers a safe, high-quality resource for early childhood education in FY21.



Early Childhood Snapshot:

- 72 young children and their caregivers were engaged in Growing a Scientist programs.
- 22 youngsters participated in Explora's Science to Grow On program.
- Nearly 50 Explora Storytime! videos for young children were uploaded to YouTube. Stories were read in English & Spanish by our staff and amazing community partners.

Supporting Early Childhood Educators

Our youngest learners also thrive when their teachers are well-prepared and provide engaging activities that support student development. Explora addresses this need by providing professional development that empowers early childhood educators with the knowledge and resources they need to fully support young students' learning and engagement with STEAM.

During the pandemic, we switched from an in-person model to a virtual one, mailing out kits of materials to attendees in advance of each workshop. While sessions looked a little different than in the past, we quickly found that pivoting to digital platforms, like Zoom, actually increased the number of pre-service teachers, early childhood educators, out-of-school time staff, home visitors, and librarians who could participate in training. Your support enabled Explora to be flexible in how we reached these educators, and extended our impact into remote areas of our state. In this way, Explora served **575 early childhood educators throughout New Mexico**.

Partner Spotlight:

Explora understands that building young children's interest and skills in STEAM requires a collective approach that engages parents, supports teachers, and connects learning opportunities for STEAM throughout the community. Partnerships are integral to our effectiveness, and we are proud to highlight the following organizations who share our commitment to improving early childhood education for all New Mexico children.

- Investing in our youngest learners, their families, and their teachers, Explora and the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children partnered to offer 18 STEAM learning workshops this year for the early childhood workforce.
- In continued collaboration with Central New Mexico Community College (CNM), early childhood education students participated in remote, hands-on science learning workshops with Explora's educators. CNM students investigated the physics of rolling by making roller coasters in their living rooms and kitchens. They then applied their experiences to create lesson plans that they implemented with toddlers and preschoolers.



WORKFORCE AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: Supporting Future Leaders

Teens are a big deal at Explora. Rather than simply attending our programs and events, teens take an active role in program development & continuous improvement. They serve as advisors on different initiatives and build their leadership skills within our supportive environment. During FY21, these amazing students had a hand in designing and planning Explora's new STEM workforce development center for teens, X Studio, along with the exhibits you'll see inside. They helped us meet the challenge of creating and delivering virtual content and programs and served as frontline staff to carry out Explora's mission on our exhibit floor.

Our longest running and most popular teen program is the **Career Pathways Initiative**, or CPI. Formerly known as the Youth Intern Program, CPI provides vocational and life resources to high school and college students, so they are prepared to enter and succeed in the workforce. In addition to the new program name, we also introduced several new best practices—most notably the pivot away from stipends to a salary-based model with interns employed as Explora staff.

CPI interns also played several vital roles during our COVID-19 closure. While engaged in remote learning themselves, our interns led the production of digital engagement through our social media channels, focusing on Explora Storytime!, Try this at Home, the Intern Top 5 podcast, and TikTok. Each team was mentored by a staff member and learned technical aspects of storyboarding, telling compelling stories, lighting, public speaking, digital editing, and creating compelling content that will visually engage the audience—all transferable skills. As a result, Explora's YouTube page was improved by the addition of fresh faces and ideas. This fiscal year, 39 teens participated in the Career Pathways Initiative, and 27 teens participated in Explora's Teen Advisory Group.



Partner Spotlight:

The fifth annual New Mexico Science Fiesta went virtual in 2020! Over 125 STEAM professionals came together with Explora and STEM-NM to engage 3,400 children, families, and teachers during our week-long celebration of science, September 18-26. Together, we engaged the community in fun, meaningful activities while showcasing STEAM and its impact on our everyday lives, our community, and our future.



During our closure to the public, work continued on our X Studio teen center, thanks to the support of friends like you, the State of New Mexico, and the City of Albuquerque. X Studio construction began in the fall of 2020, and Explora staff continued to implement existing teen programs while also piloting several new workforce development initiatives, including camps & classes on creating digital media, physical computing, fabrication, and music. Teens created rotoscope animations, 3D-printed game tokens, developed 8-bit video games, assembled their own computers, recorded and edited movies, and so much more. Mentorship continued to be an important part of the X Studio pedagogy, and scientists, professionals, and industry experts engaged with teens during these X Studio program opportunities.



Partner Spotlight:

During the past unprecedented year, Explora was fortunate to work with a statewide network of job training and youth development partners. We are pleased to highlight the partnerships below, all of which illustrate our shared impact on the community.

- Together with the **City of Albuquerque**, Explora organized a Youth Development Summit on March 19, 2021 that hosted **42 participants from 23 arts and cultural organizations**. The "Stepping Stones" virtual summit was organized around building strong youth programs that include support, learning, and pathway structures, and celebrating our community's strong youth programs.
- With support from Air Force Research Lab–New Mexico, Explora facilitated a series of professional development workshops to equip teachers with knowledge, tools, and strategies to implement the NM STEM Ready! science standards. We engaged 600 teachers through 23 workshops, Project STEAM Echo, and the Maker Educator Community of Practice. In addition, more than 1,500 students, teachers, and STEM professionals were served through the Classroom Connections program.
- The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of having open discussions about mental health and the need for easily-accessible resources geared specifically for teens. In collaboration with **NM EPSCoR**, Explora's CPI interns interviewed local mental health professionals, asking questions relevant to their lived experiences, and curated the resulting videos on our website, along with other mental health resources.



Meet Clarissa, our first STEM Scholar!

In 2021, Explora launched a scholarship program for promising high school students of color, called **STEM Scholars**. Through this initiative, we are able to directly support the aspirations of some amazing students seeking to earn STEM degrees right here in New Mexico! One of our first two scholarship recipients, Clarissa, was a stellar high school student with a 4.0 GPA who now attends the New Mexico Institute of Mining & Technology to study biology and chemistry. Clarissa is also a graduate of our CPI program, and has continued to support Explora programs virtually while she studies at NM Tech!



Increasing space for our teens at X Studio!

STATEWIDE OUTREACH: Taking Explora on the Road

Every year, Explora's educators travel to communities across the state to bring hands-on STEAM education to thousands of children and families. With COVID-related closures and travel restrictions in place for much of the year, however, our team had to re-imagine ways to engage students living in rural, Tribal, and remote communities. One tool, of course, was virtual, online programming, and our team quickly developed the knowledge and skills to produce digital STEAM lessons and to post content on our social media channels on a daily basis. We also kept in close-contact with teachers and librarians throughout the state, who voiced a need for non-digital content, because their students lack broadband internet access or a home computer. In response, Explora developed **STEAM Learning Kits**—self-contained science activities, complete with materials and instructions written in English, Spanish, and Diné—which we mailed and delivered statewide. Our efforts to keep kids across New Mexico connected to STEAM learning were made possible thanks to your support and enabled major impact during challenging times.

Partner Spotlight:

Our statewide network of partners was essential to Explora's success engaging students in dire need of enrichment in the wake of school closures. We kept in close contact with teachers, librarians, and out-of-school time educators to find out how to best support STEAM learning in their communities.

- Thanks to partners across New Mexico, Explora distributed our STEAM Learning Kits through library summer reading programs, home visiting programs, afterschool programs, and even meal distribution programs. A few of these partnerships we're happy to share include: Office of Diné Youth, Ngage NM in southern New Mexico, PlaySharity in Deming, Embudo Valley Community Library, NM Child First Network, Octavia Fellin Public Library in Gallup (see their Facebook advertisement for Explora Kit distribution, at right) and Albuguergue Housing Authority.
- Explora also engaged in unique collaborative projects, such as the School Garden project. In collaboration with Albuquerque Public Schools Coordinated School Health Department, Explora co-hosted a month-long series of workshops focused on school gardens. The series included 35 presenters, 14 workshops, and two networking events. In total, over 200 teachers participated!

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At Explora, we believe that children should have equitable access to STEAM learning opportunities, regardless of where they may live or what resources their parents may have. Oftentimes, that means finding unique ways to engage students and families. For example, in collaboration with Albuquerque Housing Authority (AHA) and Feed NM Kids, Explora's STEM Activity Cards were included inside over 200 snack packs that were distributed through schools and community organizations in December 2020. Later in 2021, Explora again teamed up with AHA & Feed NM Kids, along with APS Title I, to host two Family Science Nights for AHA families. Families who attended the free, virtual events shared that they loved the science experiments that Explora demonstrated and enjoyed the time together as a family. One parent said, "Thank you for the fun family night! My son had a blast."

Outreach Snapshot:

- **17,364 children and adults** engaged in STEAM learning through statewide outreach.
- 9,605 students and family members engaged in Family Science Night events.
- Over **10,000 non-digital STEAM Learning Kits** distributed to children across New Mexico, like these delivered to Valencia County schools, in partnership with Facebook and the Los Lunas Data Center.



EXHIBITS AND VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT EXPLORA: Finding New Ways to Welcome Visitors

Explora has provided hands-on STEAM education in New Mexico for nearly 30 years and serves our state as a trusted resource for STEAM learning for people of all ages and abilities. Since opening our doors in 2003, we have welcomed over a half-million visitors. Additionally, Explora has served as a host for partner workshops and competitions; a unique venue to celebrate a birthday, high school prom, or wedding; and as a safe space for home visits, occupational therapy, and more.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, however, serving the community and prioritizing safety meant closing our museum to the public. Although we spent most of FY21 closed, we did find ways to welcome people to Explora. For example, we offered limited in-person STEAM programs, such as camps and afterschool programs with partners, including **Partnership for Community Action**, **NM Child First**, **Valle Vista Elementary**, and **Misión San Juan Diego**. We also continued to collaborate with partners to maintain and improve our exhibits, as highlighted in the spotlight, below.

Partner Spotlight:

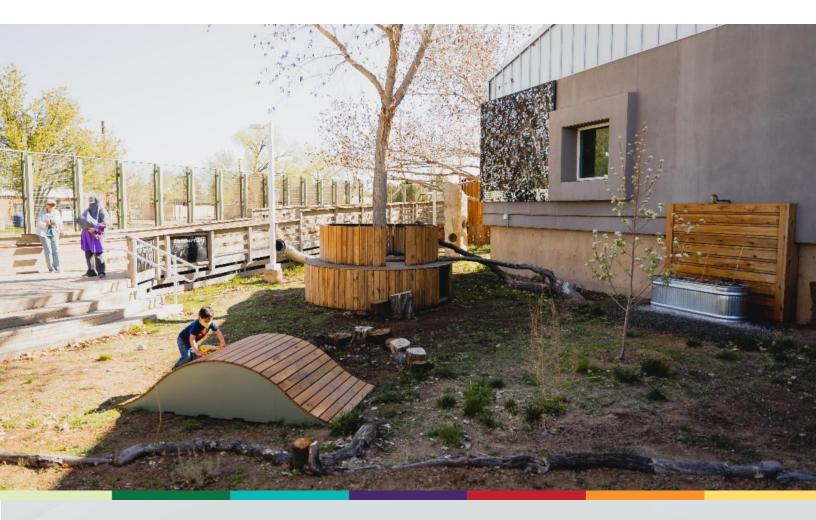
In November 2020, Explora teamed up with Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge and a youth crew from the Ancestral Lands Program. We came together to co-create the first publicly-hosted Albuquerque Backyard Refuge pocket garden in Explora's new Nature's Notes exhibition space. A team of six young adults spent two weeks completing a multi-intentional outdoor environment-part wildlife pocket garden and part playscape—focused on supporting pollinators and seed-eating birds. The Ancestral Lands crew also joined Explora's exhibit developers to create a sculpture that captures and directs rainwater in a way that enhances the sound of falling rain. Rounding out our partnership, the project received funding support from the NISE Network Sustainability Fellowship professional development program.



Thank You To Our Explora Members!

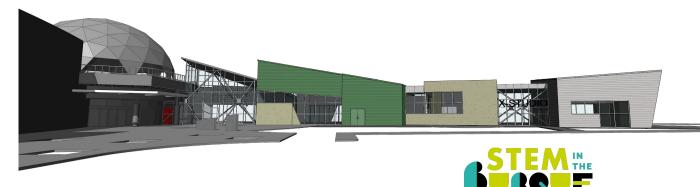
Our members, who hail from communities throughout New Mexico and beyond, are the heart of Explora. During our closure, Explora members remained engaged and up-to-date via weekly electronic newsletters and social media and were often the first to sign up for our virtual programs. Each membership that was active at our closure on March 13, 2020 was extended by 13 months from its original expiration date, and we continued to attract new members throughout FY21. In fact, many new families joined Explora during our **Frontline Membership** program; Explora donated a free family membership to a frontline service provider with each new membership purchased, gifted, or renewed. In addition, we made over **32,000** free memberships available to families in financial need through our **Community Partner Membership Program**.

Explora was also grateful to be able to show our love for our amazing members by bringing back Member Specials and exclusive first-looks at new Explora exhibits. In April of 2021, before we re-opened to the general public, Explora invited our members to a sneak preview of our new *Nature's Notes* outdoor exhibition. This new set of exhibits allows exploration into the types of "music" made by plants, animals, bodies of water, and the environment as they all interact. The exhibits are located in a naturally-landscaped portion of the museum's outdoor space, which was previously unused as an exhibit area. *Nature's Notes* allows Explora to increase the experiential engagement we offer our visitors in the topics of biology and ecology.



A NEW CAMPUS IN OLD TOWN: Explora's expanding Cradle through Career STEAM Learning Campus

Explora has thrived in Old Town, Albuquerque, adjacent to exemplary museums, art centers, and parks, and the Old Town, Sawmill, and Wells Park neighborhoods, all of which have a long, proud history. Explora is honored to be part of this community. After years of planning, Explora is expanding on our current site and on an additional 4.5-acre parcel across 18th Street. Phase One of our Cradle through Career STEAM Learning Campus capital project is **X Studio**, our STEAM workforce development center for teens, which is currently under construction, set to open summer 2022. *STEM in the Burque* is X Studio's main interactive exhibition, aimed at highlighting local STEM research and projects along with real career pathways. It is about cool jobs that solve big problems and pay well—right here in Albuquerque.

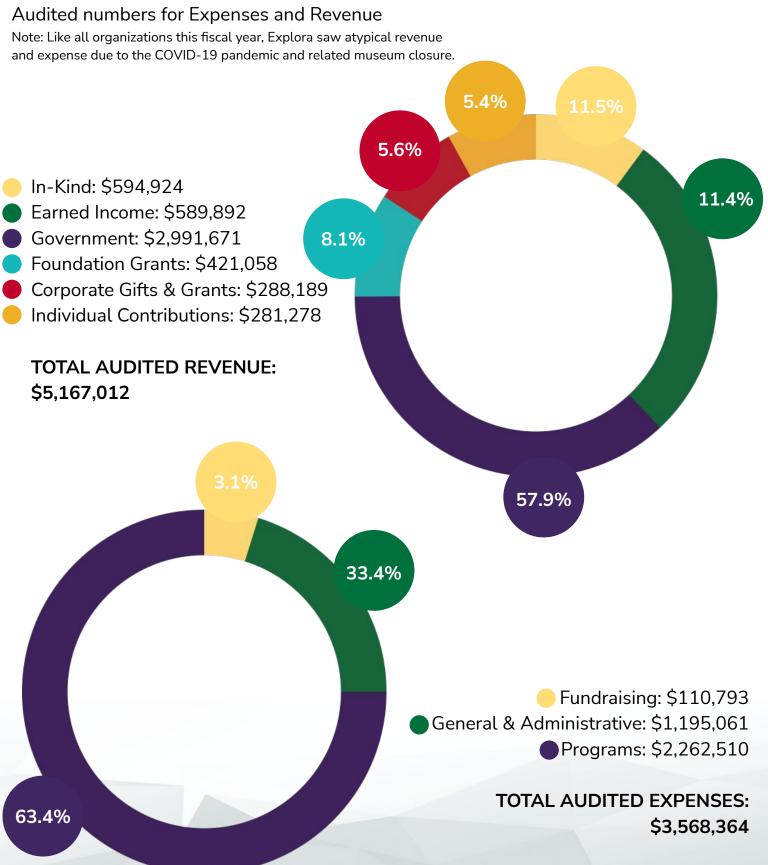




Phase 2 of the expanded Campus is in the planning stage now. **Brillante** will be the state's only full-time museum-based STEAM early learning center. It will be inspired by the world-famous Reggio Emilia method and will serve over 100 infants, toddlers, and young children with rich STEAM learning experiences. **Brillante** also will develop our state's next generation of early childhood development professionals, serving as the lab school for local higher education institutions, like CNM. Additionally, it will provide ongoing professional development for early childhood educators from across New Mexico and state-of-the-art facilities, like a materials-rich atelier, that can be used by other local centers.

FINANCIALS-EXPLORA ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH

7/1/2020-6/30/2021





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