

The Seattle Universal Math Museum: Transforming Perceptions of Math

—ELLEN EISCHEN

What got you into math? *MAA FOCUS* readers are likely to have some favorite memories. For many people, though, math is boring drills and incomprehensible symbols in a stuffy classroom, or math is only for a particular kind of person. Many get turned off to math, declaring it “boring,” “too hard,” or “anxiety-provoking.”

Tracy Drinkwater, a math educator in Seattle, decided to create the Seattle Universal Math Museum (SUMM) to help transform perceptions of math. In 2019, she founded SUMM as a non-profit, with the goal of creating a math museum for kids in third through eighth grade. She wanted to introduce kids to awe-inspiring parts of math that they might otherwise never experience. Drinkwater explains, “We are focusing on serving audiences that have not traditionally been drawn to

math by highlighting the connections math has to all aspects of our lives and a variety of cultures and disciplines.” SUMM will feature hands-on exhibits and engaging stories. Drinkwater expects that SUMM will have a permanent space in about five years, making it the only math museum in the United States other than the National Museum of Mathematics (MoMath) in New York City.

SUMM has been piloting an increasing number of programs. In November, a mathematical art exhibit, *For the Love of Math!*, introduced community members to a creative side of math. This past school year, SUMM offered a career fair for middle schoolers and an origami workshop for teachers. This summer, SUMM has offered children’s enrichment activities on the intersection of math with topics ranging from music to architecture to origami.

Artist’s rendering of the planned Seattle Universal Math Museum.





More artist's renderings of possible exhibits and activities.

SUMM continues to expand its programs and reach. Board members are currently seeking a temporary space for the museum. In the short term, there are plans to create a SUM-Mobile traveling exhibit that will visit schools and community spaces. Meanwhile, Board members continue to work on plans for a permanent museum, to be located in an accessible location that is convenient and welcoming to a diverse group

of visitors. Drinkwater says, "It seems like every few weeks I hear from another teacher who has had the same idea and is so glad we are on track to build the museum."

To help carry out these activities, SUMM has fifty volunteers and consultants, who bring an impressive array of relevant expertise. Board members include MoMath founder Glen Whitney, former President of the Society of Actuaries Craig Reynolds, and Washington State Senator Lisa Wellman. The Advisory Board and the Exhibits Committee, on which I serve, include programmers, artists, educators, and other math enthusiasts. In addition, the museum continues to hire more staff with expertise in museum development, exhibit concept design, fundraising, and marketing.

Programming and space for the museum require substantial funding, which has thus far come from generous donors and a grant. Last year, SUMM surpassed its goal of raising \$150,000 in seed money. Recently, SUMM was awarded a grant for \$88,000 by Washington State. SUMM is now embarking on a goal of raising \$3 million to help support the costs of a temporary space, the SUMMobile traveling exhibit, and an expansion of programs offered by professional staff.

As SUMM grows, there are numerous opportunities to get involved. Several times per month, Drinkwater holds Zoom "Lunch and Learns," in which she introduces people to SUMM. Volunteers are needed in a variety of roles, such as fundraising, social media, and education. You can learn more at seattlemathmuseum.org/.

Ellen Eischen is an associate professor of mathematics at the University of Oregon. She serves on the Advisory Board and the Exhibits Committee of the Seattle Universal Math Museum. Her work is partly supported by NSF CAREER grant DMS-1751281.

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