

drg

 Sciencenter



Executive Director

The Sciencenter

Ithaca, New York

Salary: \$165,000 - \$200,000

The Organization

The Sciencenter is a creative, hands-on science learning organization located in Ithaca, in New York State's Finger Lakes region. Since opening its doors, the Sciencenter has grown from a community idea into a nationally recognized informal science education institution — one built, quite literally, by its community, and sustained by a remarkable depth of local engagement that spans generations of Ithaca families.



The Sciencenter occupies an expanded, 40,000-square-foot facility and is home to hands-on exhibits, live exhibits, an outdoor science park, an in-house exhibit design and production team, and a professional science education staff. It has pioneered programming for three distinct age cohorts — Early Explorers (0–5), Young Scientists (5–11), and Future Science Leaders (11–14) — and has built one of the most distinctive business models of any museum its size, drawing more grant funding relative to budget than almost any peer institution and ranking among the country's top producers of traveling, in-house-built museum exhibits, which circulate to science centers and similar venues across the U.S.

The Sciencenter is committed to making science accessible to the entire community, regardless of background or resources — a commitment that shapes every aspect of the organization.

The Position

The Executive Director is the chief executive officer of the Sciencenter and its most visible representative to the board, staff, donors, government agencies, academic partners, and the general public. Reporting to the Board of Trustees through its Executive Committee, the Executive Director is accountable for the Sciencenter's programmatic vision, its financial health and sustainability, and its continued standing as one of the most respected and beloved institutions in the region — while ensuring the organization remains accessible, relevant, and responsive to a growing and increasingly diverse community. The successful candidate will bring the emotional intelligence, maturity, and secure sense of self to build on a well-loved founding legacy while confidently charting the Sciencenter's next chapter.

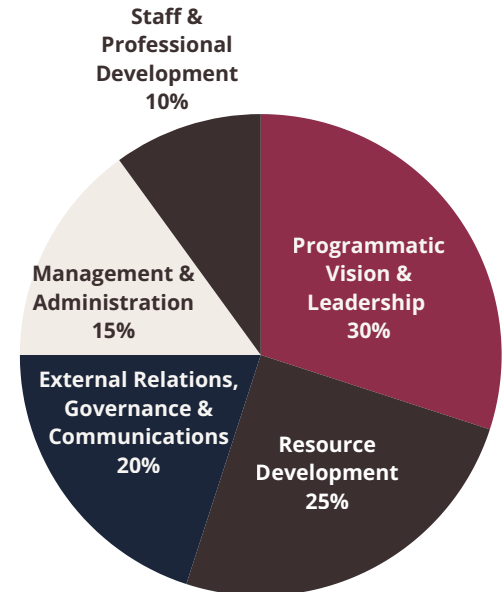
The Sciencenter has been led by Executive Director Michelle Kortenaar for the past seven years. Under her outstanding leadership, the organization has improved its facilities, grown and strengthened its exhibits, deepened its connections to the local community, and developed the guiding mission, vision, values, and goals that align its priorities with funding and focus. In partnership with a highly qualified, engaged, and respected staff, Michelle fostered an internal culture of genuine collaboration and cooperation, including a positive working relationship with the Sciencenter union. Her decision to retire creates an opportunity for the next Executive Director to sustain the strong foundation she has developed and to build on her many successes. This is a full-time, exempt, on-site role based in Ithaca, New York.

At a glance

- ~\$3M annual operating budget
- 26 professional staff across 5 departments
- 40,000 SF facility on 2.4 acres
- ~100,000 annual visitors
- 2,500+ family memberships
- 10+ traveling exhibitions on tour nationally
- \$8.5M+ endowment
- \$250,000+ annual fund
- 550+ donors
- Diversified funding across NSF and federal grants, foundations, and earned revenue
- Strong ties to Cornell University and Ithaca College

Programmatic Vision & Leadership (~30%)

- Set and communicate a compelling strategic vision for the Sciencenter that energizes trustees, staff, volunteers, and the broader community.
- Lead strategic planning in close partnership with the board and collaboratively with staff, translating vision into clear, actionable plans.
- Maintain the organization's culture and its core values — informal science education, community service, entertainment, and entrepreneurial spirit.
- Ensure exhibits and educational programs remain innovative and impactful, working in concert with staff to incorporate new techniques and technologies as appropriate.
- Maintain the Sciencenter's standing as a recognized national leader among museum-field peers, including ASTC, ACM, and AAM.
- Champion equitable access to informal science education across Ithaca's ethnically and economically diverse communities.
- Honor the Sciencenter's foundation and legacy while introducing new ideas and innovations.



Resource Development (~25%)

- Serve as the organization's lead development officer, personally engaged in major-gift cultivation, the annual fund, and endowment growth.
- Build and sustain philanthropic support from individuals, corporations, foundations, and grant-making agencies.
- Lead the development of new and diversified sources of earned income, sustaining the entrepreneurial energy behind exhibit sales, touring exhibitions, and new business activity.
- Ensure the endowment is prudently managed and actively grown for long-term sustainability.

External Relations, Governance & Communications (~20%)

- Serve as the Sciencenter's chief spokesperson and marketing representative across electronic media, exhibits, broadcast, print, and public forums.
- Nurture and strengthen relationships with Cornell University, Ithaca College, regional businesses, foundations, and government agencies.
- Support the board in its governance role: coordinate board and committee meetings, keep trustees informed on policy and budget matters, and help ensure strong board composition and practice.
- Engage the Advisory Board and community groups in substantive, collaborative dialogue.
- Represent the Sciencenter before governmental bodies, educational institutions, and community organizations.



Management & Administration (~15%)

- Provide oversight of the strategic plan, annual budgets, and financial and personnel policy, ensuring accountability throughout
- Ensure compliance with all applicable laws and regulations governing operations, finance, personnel, health and safety, and liability.
- Ensure the ongoing value of the Sciencenter's physical assets, with an eye toward expanding footprint and reach over time.
- Ensure safe, well-maintained facilities that enhance the visitor, staff, and volunteer experience.

Staff & Professional Development (~10%)

- Select, train, and organize a highly functional, diverse management team, providing leadership by example and holding high standards of excellence and ethics.
- Provide for annual performance review and ongoing professional development of staff.
- Maintain and advance diversity among staff and volunteers, consistent with equal-opportunity principles.
- Support staff participation in professional programs, conferences, and field-wide educational opportunities.

The ideal candidate for the Executive Director position brings the following competencies:

People Leadership

Works alongside staff, values their expertise, and leads as a partner rather than a boss.

Fundraising & Financial Management

At ease with donors, budgets, and significant asks, and clear-eyed about funding risk.

Union & Labor Relations

Patient and trust-building, skilled in good-faith negotiation ahead of the 2028 CBA renewal.

Community Building

Actively present in Ithaca, building relationships across the community and its institutions.

Strategic Discipline

Preserves what works, prioritizes limited resources, and measures impact.

Communication & Transparency

Clear, accessible, and calm under conflict, sharing both good news and hard news.

Curiosity & Creativity

At home with experimentation, prototyping, and playful, hands-on science.

Adaptability & Judgment

Navigates uncertainty and competing priorities without overextending the organization.

Mission & Values Alignment

Chooses the Sciencenter for what it is and builds on it rather than remaking it.



Qualifications

- Seven or more years of progressively responsible nonprofit management experience; museum or informal-education experience strongly preferred. Equivalent experience with a demonstrated understanding of nonprofit governance will also be considered.
- A curious mind and entrepreneurial spirit, evidenced by a track record of past achievement.
- Proven success in fundraising and revenue diversification, particularly major-gift cultivation, as a nonprofit executive
- Demonstrated success in public relations and communications across a range of media and audiences.
- Skilled at setting clear goals and motivating diverse teams toward outstanding results, with a genuine respect for and appreciation of the expertise, initiative, and versatility of a passionate staff.
- Strong grounding in nonprofit management fundamentals: planning, budgeting, proposal writing, and human resources, including working in a unionized environment.
- Bachelor's degree required; advanced degree preferred. Given the Sciencenter's close relationship with the scientific community, working knowledge of science and scientific principles — and the ability to speak comfortably about them — is required.
- Demonstrated commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and belonging, with experience advancing these values within an organization's programs, operations, and culture.



Personal & Professional Attributes

- The emotional intelligence, maturity, and secure sense of self to build on a well-loved founding legacy while confidently leading the organization forward at a measured and thoughtful pace.
- A continuous learner who welcomes a diversity of ideas and perspectives
- A community-minded, collaborative, and highly ethical leader with strong personal values and a genuine commitment to others
- A sincere interest in building trust and relationships with staff, board, donors, and the broader community
- Comfort operating as the public face of the organization, paired with the discipline to manage its people, finances, and operations well.
- An affinity for hands-on, playful, experiential approaches to learning — and a leadership style that reflects that same spirit of curiosity and engagement.

Work Environment

The Sciencenter is a community-built, hands-on science museum in the heart of Ithaca, New York, and the surrounding Finger Lakes region. This is an on-site leadership role at the center of a close-knit organization — roughly 26 professional staff across five departments — with a deeply collaborative internal culture and a positive, established working relationship with the Sciencenter union. Its people are experienced, creative, and committed, and the next Executive Director will be expected to build trust and lead in genuine partnership with them. The Sciencenter also maintains strong ties to Cornell University and Ithaca College and sits in a vibrant college town with easy access to the natural beauty of the Finger Lakes.

Compensation and Benefits

Salary

\$165,000 - \$200,000

Benefits

A competitive and comprehensive benefits package including health insurance, 403(b) Plan with employer contribution, short- and long-term disability insurance, 9 paid holidays, 10 paid sick days, and 14 paid vacation days.

Timeline and Next Steps

If you are interested in this position, please [click here](#). All applicants will receive an email confirming receipt of their application.

We encourage candidates of all backgrounds to apply even if you do not meet all of the qualifications outlined above. If you are selected to move forward for an initial screening call, we expect you to hear from us by November.

The Sciencenter is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

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