



Family-Friendly Programming Helps Dance Organizations Attract Fans and See What's Beyond the Box Office

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The Wallace Foundation Provides Solid Models for Attracting Families



Ballet Hispanico Performances for Young People Program brings professional dance to school audiences nationwide. Photo credit: Christopher Duggan

The last in a series of ten case studies by The Wallace Foundation, ***Converting Family Into Fans*** (2016) by Bob Harlow and Cindy Cox Roman explores how The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco worked to attract families of all backgrounds and build the next generation of museum supporters.

The study describes how the museum convened focus groups to better understand the needs of families with young children, designed programs and exhibitions to meet those needs, offered family discounts and entered into community partnerships to build awareness of the museum's offerings. And although the museum sought to attract families, it did not want to become a children's museum. To maintain its overall profile, the study says *it took extra efforts to balance the needs of children and adults. In doing so, it worked to manage parents' expectations, created*

spaces for children to work on activities and trained its staff to draw families to areas most appropriate for children.

Those efforts, along with moving into a larger space, say Harlow and Roman, resulted in a nearly nine-fold increase in family visitors over seven years. They suggest that the museum's successes *relied in part on a nuanced understanding of its target audiences, mutually beneficial partnerships with schools and libraries and careful evaluation and refinement of engagement strategies.*

Like The Contemporary Jewish Museum, many dance organizations are also turning to various types of programming to convert families into fans. Seven such organizations are using a combination of educational outreach, community engagement, added benefit initiatives and special programming to reach all types of families and their constituent populations. Additional information on building family-friendly engagement programs can be found in the Wallace Foundation's **report**.



GroundWorks Dance Theater summer workshop at Almira Pre-K-8 Academy

FAN VERSES PATRON

While some of the dance organizations employed programming efforts that sought to give added benefit to attending a production by their organization's performance troupe or entice enrollment in their affiliated dance academy, most of their educational, family and community engagement programs were not directly targeted at turning the populations they serve into patrons but rather fans of organization as a whole and of dance as an art form.

"We came to the realization very quickly that just because we are serving 4,000 kids out in the community in low income areas and they love the dance classes they are receiving, realistically that is not going to translate to a fee-for-service revenue stream of those kids signing up for afterschool dance classes or those families attending concert dance productions and paying \$25 to \$45 a ticket," says Molly Puryear, executive director of San Diego-based Malashock Dance.

“We are working in those areas specifically because they don’t have access to dance. The focus is on serving our community.”

Removing the notion that all roads lead to patronage as the sole measure for the success of a dance organization, programs that engage families and the community at large have become important layers in the fabric of the dance organizations Dance/USA interviewed as to what they are all about. Engaging thousands people outside the studio or theater space is as important to their organizations as those participating in their core fee-for-service products such as dance classes and concert performances.

MULTIPRONGED APPROACH

Just as The Contemporary Jewish Museum reported in *Converting Family Into Fans*, designing programs and exhibitions to meet the needs of families, offering family discounts, and entering into community partnerships to build awareness, those dance organizations interviewed adopted a multipronged approach to converting families and family members into fans of their respective organizations.

One approach involved creating or modifying existing productions to meet the needs of families with small children, those with special needs and those who financially could not afford to attend regularly priced productions. And like the Jewish Museum, which wanted to attract families but not turn into a children’s museum, these dance organizations took care to not change who they were artistically, rather adding these programs to their existing offerings.

All seven organizations engaged in free or specially priced school-aged kid’s matinee performances. Most involved busing students to and from the theater and were paid in full or in part by sponsors, grants, and government or foundation funds. Others, such as Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Columbus’ BalletMet, Cincinnati Ballet and Houston’s MET*dance*, offered free, usually summertime, productions at community outdoor venues attracting thousands of individuals who might not otherwise attend their regular productions. Says MET*dance* executive director Michelle Smith of MET*dance*’s annual free outdoor performances at Houston’s Miller Outdoor Theatre: “Many treat it like a family reunion with parents, grandparents and kids all coming together having food and watching the performance together.”

Grand Rapids Ballet capitalizes on an area-wide school break each spring to present a special hour-long, one-act story ballet for kids and their families performed by GRB’s Junior Company (ages 10-19).

“Kids love to see kids dance,” says Grand Rapids Ballet artistic director Patricia Barker. “It’s really important they see what their peers are doing after school.”



Ballet Hispanico company dancers lead workshops and classes for community groups while on tour

With its Performances for Young People (PYP) program, New York's Ballet Hispanico engages school-aged kids with 50-minute productions that lead students on a guided exploration of Latin American dance forms and music. The PYP programs are generally performed by BHdos, Ballet Hispanico's second company. Says Eduardo Vilaro, the company's artistic director and CEO, the main company steps into that role when presenting PYP programs nationally and internationally. A longer version of the PYP for the entire family entitled *En Familia* is also offered and includes interactive components the family can engage in at home.

Malashock Dance's *The Engagement Ring* is a series of accessible dance events that encourage attendees to participate, contribute, and engage with the art of dance. The series challenged local dancemakers to come up with innovative dance events that would engage families and non-regular dance goers. The specially priced productions differed from Malashock's regular performance programming and featured such interactive works as one based on use of technology in dance, where audiences were encouraged to pull out their cell phones to take photos and videos to post on social media, and another explored different elements of opera via a tour through Malashock's 11 studio spaces where audience members were encouraged to try on costumes and/or create virtual ones, examine the languages used in opera, and experience opera via sensory deprivation in a dark room where only sound was heard.

Most of those interviewed also engaged in community partnerships with other area arts organizations such as symphony orchestras and other music groups, opera companies, and visual artists. The programs served to cross pollinate audiences and broadened their reach to family members with interests in those other art forms.

Another approach to attracting families are "added benefit events" surrounding performances that seek to appeal to a variety of age demographics, such as Grand Rapids Ballet's Clara's *Nutcracker Party*, a revenue generating family event coinciding with the professional company's annual *Nutcracker* production. The party could be purchased as a standalone event or in combination with tickets to a matinee performance of *The Nutcracker*. The party included an interactive photo with *Nutcracker* characters that could be printed or directly posted to social media, an impromptu ballet class with Drosselmeyer, a reading of *The Nutcracker* story and a meal of kid-sized miniatures with a festive dessert tower at each table.

"Sometimes I think families end up having to split their time between grandparents," says Barker. "This [Clara's *Nutcracker Party*] makes it so everybody can come and be a part of something and go to a show helping to create those family traditions that enrich our lives."

The company also holds a *Nutcracker Afterglow Party* after opening night that is geared toward adults and is also attended by the ballet's directors and dancers and features desserts, dancing, and more.

Cleveland's Dancing Wheels, the nation's oldest physically integrated dance company featuring dancers with and without disabilities and its school, takes a similar approach using post-performance family parties that cater to children. The themed parties surrounding family-friendly productions such as their *The Snowman*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Daring to be Dumbo*, feature kid friendly treats including candies, cakes and ice cream, interactive games, face painting, meetings and photo opportunities with characters from the respective productions, entertainers and at one, even a petting zoo.

Dancing Wheels founder and artistic director Mary Verdi-Fletcher says "the idea of doing something after a performance got kids immersed in the fun of going to a live performance and added more family members to the theater-going mix. At the parties, children with and without disabilities got to mingle and get to know each other and play games together."

But perhaps the largest and most utilized approach by dance organizations to engage families and communities and turning them into fans of their organizations are various educational outreach and community engagement programs. Some of these programs are fee-for-service providing income for the organization, while most are free with costs paid for by sponsors through grants or by government and foundation funds.

“I think getting people moving is the answer to getting people hooked,” says Cincinnati Ballet director of education Julie Sunderland. “The connections we create are for the betterment of Cincinnati Ballet but are really for the betterment of our society. I want you to come see the ballet, but I also want to find that person who learns from an arts-integrated lesson in a way they couldn’t otherwise.”



Cincinnati Ballet's Cincy Dance! program

Cincinnati Ballet has several educational outreach and community engagement programs. CincyDance! is a free program in selected schools that provides dance classes and dance attire to more than 1,800 third graders. The program takes a long-term approach to exposing children from a wide range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to dance, and gives them the chance to learn both the discipline and the joy of dance. In addition, five students from the program annually receive scholarships to Cincinnati Ballet’s academy. Another example, In-Step, is a 50-minute interactive demonstration for K-12 and adults in schools and community centers administered by Cincinnati Ballet’s second company, CBII. Participants get a peek into a typical day in the life of a professional ballet dancer, plus see excerpts from classical repertoire and get taught some of the basics of dance. The company also holds family dance workshops that get kids and their parents dancing.

Cincinnati Ballet Educational Outreach and Community Engagement Programs by the Numbers

CincyDance!	InStep (lecture/demo)	Residencies	CincyDances in Washington Park
2012/2013	1,069	34,000	800
n/a			

2013/2014 1,500	1,349	52,400	1,100
2014/2015 1,600	1,800	72,000	1,020

Malashock Dance’s offerings include:

- Math In Motion — This cross-curricular K-8 education program, in partnership with the San Diego Unified School District Visual and Performing Arts department, adds a physical element to the process of exploring mathematical concepts aiming to increase the depth of learning and understanding, especially for students who have not been successful in a traditional sedentary classroom environment.
- Academics in Motion — Malashock Dance’s teaching artists support current academic curricula in their dance lessons. First-grade students may focus on reading comprehension skills as they explore the concepts of character, plot, and setting through movement. Third-graders can explore Japanese culture and history as they choreograph dances based on haiku and traditional woodblock prints. And fifth-graders study history and geography through the development of movement and choreography.

Says Puryear: “Culminating performances in multiple schools over the past five years are the most attended events at those schools. The schools love it because parent engagement is the most important factor in a child’s success.”

“To expand your audiences it’s not about a ticket sale, it’s about how you can engage kids of all ages and their families,” says METdance’s Smith. On average Smith says METdance reaches 7,000 kids a year in the Houston area with its educational outreach and community engagement programs of which 78 percent are Hispanic and are from lower income families. Some of its programs include:

- Swing, Jive, and Pop into Dance! — The PK-8 program incorporates history, fashion, music, and the arts in an energy-filled hour of dance while learning fun facts about American history and culture. METdance’s performers dance through the dance styles of the 1930s, ‘50s and ‘70s culminating with the hip-hop music and movement of today. The performance highlights key points in dance, music, and pop culture from each decade. Students, teachers, and audience members have the opportunity to interact with the performers and to participate.
- DANCEfocus — The K-12 program provides in-depth exposure to a specific genre of dance including creative movement, ballet, tap, jazz, contemporary, modern, and social dance forms. The workshop/residency can be designed to coordinate with any curriculum and can be geared to any skill/experience level. Students also receive historical information relating to the chosen genre of dance.

Like Cincinnati Ballet’s CincyDance! program, Grand Rapids Ballet’s The Dance Immersion Program (DIP) is geared toward Grand Rapids students gaining a greater appreciation for dance as an art form by experiencing it in a positive, supportive and educational environment. More than 2,000 students annually participate in the program. In addition to the classes at their school, students attend at least one performance by the Grand Rapids Ballet and each year five students from each DIP school are awarded 100 percent scholarships to continue their dance education at the Grand Rapids Ballet School.

While most organizations surveyed for this article focused efforts on educational outreach and community engagement programs targeted school-aged populations of varying socioeconomic

levels, Cleveland-based GroundWorks Dance Theater's GroundWorks Exchange programs adopt a broader view.

"That's the great divide in dance education programming. You reach the students just fine and they are completely engaged and the parents generally aren't," says GroundWorks

DanceTheater's founder and artistic director David Shimotakahara. "Rather than focusing on those problems we try to use what we do to connect with others' creativity."

Shimotakahara says it is important with their programs that they engage the public with not just a show-and-tell attitude (i.e., this is what we do and now we are going to show you how to do it).

They are about engaging people in an effort to create an exchange.



GroundWorks Dance Theater guest artist workshop with CSU

One of those programs is GroundWorks' Action/Reaction, which connects with college age creatives and introduces them to the creative tools used in dance and relates that back to what they do. Another aspect of the educational outreach and community engagement programs several of the dance organizations offered, were programs designed for families with special needs.



Cincinnati Ballet's sensory friendly *Nutcracker*

In addition to the current trend of dance companies offering sensory-friendly dance productions such as Cincinnati Ballet's *The Nutcracker* that opened ballet up to 800 families that had not attended a Cincinnati Ballet production before, the company's Ballet Moves — in partnership with Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Department of Physical Therapy — offers classes for children and young-adults with Down syndrome and Cerebral Palsy at Cincinnati Ballet studios. Similarly, Malashock Dance's Dance with thisABILITY! in partnership with San Diego's St. Madeleine Sophie's Center teaches young adults with different abilities a dance class focused on fine and gross motor skills, spatial awareness, musicality, and self-expression through movement.

Grand Rapids Ballet's adaptive dance programs Explorer Dance (for children age three and up with Down syndrome) and Dancing with Parkinson's (for adults with Parkinson's disease) allow participants to experience the joy of dancing who may otherwise not have the opportunity to do so. Students benefit from increased self-esteem, improved overall fitness, and improved classroom skills (listening to the instructor, focusing on tasks and following directions).

LONG VIEW

"We are all about planting seeds for the future," says Cincinnati Ballet's Sunderland. She cited a WolfBrown arts study their organization was a part of that concluded that individuals involved in the arts as kids were more likely to become arts patrons as adults. "We've taken a focus of getting people experientially involved in dance," says Sunderland. "That seems to be the future of how to create the next generation of ticket buyers."

That long view approach is an important aspect to each of these organization's educational, family and community engagement programs. "You hope that over time the butts end up in the seats at your performances, but I think for us it's more important to create new experiences and relationships in the community wherever and whenever we can," Sunderland said.

And while for most of the educational, family, and community engagement programs' resulting revenue was a trickle versus a stream for these dance organizations, they played and continue to play an invaluable role in serving their communities, raising the profile of their organizations and helping to ensure the future of their organizations and dance as an art form while making new fans of their organizations.

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