

Dance/USA's Engaging Dance Audiences Overview of Project Idea Submissions

Summary

With generous support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, Dance/USA launched Engaging Dance Audiences (EDA), a \$1.9 million pilot program that will enable the dance field to explore methods of engaging audiences, learn from peers, and share the learning nationally. One aspect of the EDA initiative is funding for model projects. As part of the grantee selection process, EDA issued a Call for Project Ideas (Ideas or Submissions), to which 179 organizations responded. This report shares observations about the current practices and plans in audience engagement, as gleaned from a review of those Submissions, including much consistency and some divergence.

EDA submissions came from a total of 35 states. By far the most prevalent region was the Northeast, with 48% of Idea Submissions coming from this part of the country, followed by the West with 24%. Together, New York and California account for nearly half of all Submissions. Submissions came from a variety of organizations: companies, educational institutions, service organizations, presenters, and an agent. Companies account for over half, or 54%, of all Submissions. Based on a close qualitative review, seven areas emerged as consistent among the submissions.

1) Technology. Nearly 90% (125) of the Submissions incorporated technology, which seemed to be the prevalent trend. While some technology content was specific, the majority was general in nature. Many organizations were making earnest attempts at integrating new technology with existing programs or systems; however they seemed to struggle with how best to do it. The level of, and desire for technological innovation fell within in five areas. Of the Submissions that discussed technology, almost three-quarters, or 92, spoke of **social networking**. Tactics would be used to increase awareness about performances and artists and attract new (and possibly younger) audiences to attend events. One-third of all submissions planned to incorporate **video and/or podcasting** into their project design, generally in one of two categories: uploading streaming or archived footage of artists, or providing a platform for user-generated video content. **Texting** as a tool for audience participation and research was mentioned by 12 organizations. Some advocated its use during the actual performance as a way to incorporate audience feedback quickly and directly into the work, while others wanted to use it for promotional purposes (particularly with younger audiences) and market research to poll and gather information about patrons. A small number (15, or 8%) of organizations asked for funds to help **build or upgrade their websites**. About 20% of the Submissions showed a **firmer grasp of technological concepts** and were web savvy. For instance, one company suggested building two digital platforms for audience engagement, one for nonprofessionals that would include interviews and footage, and another for professional instructors and students. Another proposed a series of site-specific performances at public landmarks that would be accompanied by an original podcast and video blogging, while another wanted to launch an online pay-per-view series of contemporary dance programming.

2) Performance and Viewing. The vast majority of Submissions (89%) involved performances and/or viewing of work, whether live or online. Not surprisingly, almost two thirds (115, or 64%) of the Ideas were **linked to specific performances or series** and the events surrounding them, whether by developing related educational activities, increasing levels of audience engagement and promotion, or simply investing in the performance or series itself. The 43 (24%) Submissions that hinged on the **creation of new work** reflected a rich range of ideas and projects. Some (37, or 21%) Submissions were

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based around **events**, including festivals, awards, and contests. Only 20 (11%) of the organizations suggested various ways for **off-site audiences to view a live performance**. One presenter proposed to simulcast an out-of-town performance to a movie theatre in the company's home city, much like the MET Opera has successfully done. Other ideas mostly focused on using video feeds to reach audiences via the internet. Several (17 or 9%) included **prerecorded dance** as an element in their projects through screenings or film festivals. A small number of Submissions (4 or 2%) related to other kinds of engagement in conjunction with performance, such as an audience response system with sensors that would measure audiences' levels of engagement during performances.

3) Partnerships. Over half of the Submissions specifically mentioned partnerships. Almost half, 72 (40%), proposed arts partnerships that took many forms, from established relationships to new collaborations with a variety of artists and companies, either by providing them with a space to rehearse or perform, or by supporting or commissioning a new work. Presenters, as well as ballet and other companies, also suggested interdisciplinary partnerships—working with museums, symphonies, operas, theatres, and galleries, and a few proposed partnering with dance schools and studios. These partnerships could either have a research component (for instance, to gather data on how many dance students attend dance performances) or a creative component (by choreographing for them or inviting them to participate in programs). The 60 (34%) of partnerships with **non-arts organizations** often involved an educational component, particularly with schools and universities. Other partnerships focused on civic or social goals, partnering with local government, service organizations, or even the community as a whole.

4) Audience Participation. Of all Submissions, 84% spoke of audience participation, both online and in person. The nature of the participation ranged from workshops and panel discussions to more direct involvement in design and choreography. The most prevalent form was **educational events**, which 62% of all Submissions planned to incorporate. But “education” was interpreted broadly to include many different types of activities, ranging from workshops to collaborations with public schools to developing curriculum for art teachers. Other organizations discussed ways that dance companies and audiences could work together to create educational experiences, such as a presenter who wanted to create a year-long program exploring how audience engagement enlightens public perspectives. Museum and gallery visits, programs for dance educators, and public dance literacy events were also mentioned.

One-third of all organizations (67 or 37%) also proposed to involve audiences by using some of the **social networking tools** already discussed. For instance, several presenters wanted audiences to use tools such as text messaging and Twitter to communicate during performances. Another wanted to perform a kind of online call-and-response to involve audiences in dancing and transmitting performances online. A company suggested an “Internet Roadmap” that would allow audiences to participate in a dance from its creation to its performance, using online scrapbooks, a weekly dance radio show, and a YouTube video contest for college students, among other techniques. Some (22 or 12%) organizations thought of ways to allow audiences to **vote online** for performers, works, or awards. While one presenter wanted to let the audience decide which companies would appear in their season, others involved online dance competitions in which viewers could vote for their favorites. Still other suggestions allowed the audience to vote for a People's Choice award at an award ceremony or film festival.

Almost one-third (55 or 31%) of the projects involved the participation of audiences **directly in the dance**, either as performers or as sources of inspiration for movement. Some projects would take place in nontraditional venues, or even be conducted remotely. In one example, dancers would spontaneously engage community members in public spaces to learn Latin dance steps. Other projects dealt with engaging audiences in their own spaces, such as private homes and neighborhoods. Some proposed that audiences (particularly younger ones) would send in videos of their own dances, some of which would eventually be presented at performances. **Social events** proposed by arts organizations varied according to

the kind of demographic they were trying to reach and were included in almost one-third of projects (53 or 30%). Projects aimed at young people often included dance parties. While technological connections were popular with arts organizations, 51 (28%) did still plan to **engage the audience in person with dancers**. For instance, a few planned salons, in which audiences could watch a performance and discuss it with the performers. Others offered free dance lessons and dance labs. A smaller number of Submissions (24 or 13%) suggested ways audience members could **participate in the creation of new work** without necessarily dancing. These ways included helping develop choreography, as well as providing ideas, memories, and thoughts for dancers to draw on in developing dances. One company suggested that audiences could send photos, videos, and text messages to be projected onstage during a performance, influencing the dancers' movements.

5) Target Audiences. While all applicants were asked about their target audiences, **84% of all Submissions mentioned target audiences in a substantial way while describing their project Idea**. Half of the Submitters (91) had a great many ideas for bringing **new audiences** into the dance world. "New" audiences were interpreted to mean any group that the organization does not currently reach, as self-reported. These new viewers included diverse ethnic and social communities, adult novices, crossover audiences from different disciplines (such as music or poetry), and random passersby (in the case of some performances in public spaces). The most prevalent of the "new" populations that organizations hoped to target were **younger audiences**, which were highlighted on over half (90) of the Submissions. "Younger" is a relative term and, depending on the organization, could apply to elementary age children, high school and college age, young professional, or other demographics. Organizations proposed three major ways of attracting younger audiences: by means of social networking and Web 2.0 technology (such as blogs, texts, YouTube video competitions, and more), educational programs (residences, activities in conjunction with schools or studios), or by tailoring their programming towards younger demographics in some way (child-friendly dances, performances that include dance parties, and more). The 72 (40%) Submissions that focused on strengthening organizations' **core audiences** often involved extra events, workshops, and opportunities to act as supplements to performances. These "extras" could be the chance to interact with artists, to attend pre-show talks, or to vote for different lineups for the dance season—they would both reward core audiences with more access and opportunities, and keep them engaged in the organization. Many also hoped to re-engage lapsed audiences and a few organizations suggested creating "dance ambassadors" to build connections with community members. The few projects involving **dance studios as audiences** were concerned with one of two goals: to research and try to lessen the seeming disconnect between the people who take dance classes in studios and the people who attend dance performances, or to use dance students in studios as a resource for the creation and production of work.

6) Research and 7) Peer-to-Peer Learning. A smaller subset of Submissions (**less than one-third**) **intended to conduct research or promote peer learning as part of their EDA Idea**. A total of 32 (18%) submissions involved a **research component**, which was usually a means of evaluating the success of a project or tactic, or as way of drawing conclusions about aspects of contemporary dance audiences (demographics, for instance). Some organizations had already amassed a body of research on which they wanted to build. Research topics ranged from the general—a company interested in using surveys to study the benefits of dance participation—to the very specific—an initiative using research, fieldwork and more to explore the values of indigenous dances of Latin America. A small number of organizations (24, or 13%) who had amassed some useful information or developed efficient methodologies and ideas were **outspoken in their desire to share what they had learned** with other arts organizations. They wanted to work with like-minded organizations to strengthen skills in areas such as technology, social networking, and dance literacy.

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