

Legal Name
Network of Ensemble Theaters
Project Title
To support NET Touring and Exchange Network (NET/TEN) that places ensembles/artists at the center of the touring paradigm
Project Progress and Successes
<p>With support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Fund for National Projects, the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) researched, designed, and launched the pilot phase of a new program to strengthen the presenting and theater fields by creating an artist-centered, artist-driven exchange network. The finished result is the NET Travel & Exchange Network (NET/TEN), which aims to: 1) increase artists' competency in travel-based exchanges/touring; 2) build the field by initiating and strengthening relationships; and 3) expand the capacity for artist-run organizations to function as hosts/presenters for performance.</p> <p>When NET first started our inquiry to develop NET/TEN, our hunch had been to create a touring network that focused on regional presenting hubs; we thought that this model would support short-distance travel while providing ensembles with an opportunity to gain touring and presenting experience. However, when we tested this idea with the field (member and non-member ensembles), we discovered that for most ensembles, the motivation and manner in which work was moving was less about touring (i.e. organized, multiple-city performances) than it was about exchanges (i.e. "one-off" single-booking performances or residencies that seemed equally focused on the chance to engage with peers). Repeatedly, we heard from ensembles a desire for mutually beneficial exchanges, of many types: hosting/sharing performances, trading methods and practices, peer-to-peer organizational learning, etc.</p> <p>To date, the NET/TEN program has received over 200 applications for travel/exchange support, totaling nearly \$1M of requested funds. From these applications, we have made 44 awards and given out over \$200,000 to support artistic exchanges, with 26 states and seven countries represented in project activities.</p> <p>To learn about the short-term impact on award recipients, we commissioned a study by independent consultant, Kathie DeNobriga, to test the program's goals against grantees' actual experiences. We learned that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 87% of travel grant recipients reported that the project helped to support their artistic development; • 84% of exchange grant recipients said the program helped build their capacity for hosting other artists; • 80% of all grantees said the project has helped them articulate their artistic practice; • 53% of first-round grantees relied on the program to help initiate a new relationship; • 93% of all grantees have remained in continued conversation with their grant partners. <p>Sharing the knowledge gleaned from the grant activities is a priority for NET. We have an online Shareback Library in place on NET's website, where each grantee shares learning points from their project with the field (e.g. "How to Create a Devised Piece in 3 Steps" or "Creating Puppets out of Found Material" or "Integrating Animated Projections into a Stage Show"). Written by grantees for their artist peers, these posts are designed to be useful and reader-friendly. NET adds new material to the Shareback Library each week and promotes these additions via Facebook and Twitter, as well as through our monthly e-newsletter. As an example, the learning on "Devising in 3 Steps" received 149 unique hits</p>

in its first week of publication. We know the field is utilizing this resource, and we also understand that we need to implement new strategies to boost its use. This includes better understanding who is currently using the library (e.g. students, NET members, friends, etc.), as well as commissioning respondents to comment on the blog posts to help instigate conversations and additional user feedback.

NET is rooted in a desire for community building: to share work, make work, and see work. Through this, relationships are built that strengthen individual companies and their work. NET/TEN is vital to making this happen. In addition, we are seeing NET/TEN--supported projects receive additional support from other funding programs. For instance, the exchange between Mondo Bizarro and the Clear Creek Festival has developed into additional support from the NEFA National Theater Project to include Clear Creek as a venue for Mondo's Cry You One tour.

For NET, the program has helped us build our own organizational capacity. The multi-year commitment for the programs from DDCF, along with that of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has helped to stabilize NET's annual budget and planning for the future. We have been able to increase staff to help manage the program. The grants provide a direct member benefit, drawing in new members and helping to retain ongoing members. Our visibility within the field is heightened as awareness of the program, and the organization, increases.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Appropriately, NET/TEN's pilot phase has taught us a great deal about the program. In the first year we were concerned by the relatively small number of applications we received (23 for the Fall Seed Grant round, 39 for Exchange Grants, and 50 for the Spring Seed Grant round). In addition, we noticed that a spike in new members joining, presumably, for the grant opportunity. That wasn't a problem! What concerned us was that in each of these rounds, nearly half of the applications we received were from new members; many of our long-time NET members were not applying.

To investigate this, we worked with Shugoll Research in Washington, D.C. to create and manage a survey of our members to better understand the barriers they face in accessing the NET/TEN program. Some of the learning and adjustments:

- NET members were almost unanimously aware of the program
- Members were confused by the title; many assumed that they had to tour work
 - Responding Adjustment: we shifted the name of the name of the program from "Touring & Exchange Network" to "Travel & Exchange Network" to clarify the types of grants we are awarding
- Many face capacity obstacles, preventing them from applying to the program
 - Responding Adjustment: we continued to provided one-on-one support, as needed, and offered a webinar and additional online technical assistance
- Many assumed that due to their size, geography and/or lack of name recognition, they would be less competitive applicants
 - Responding Adjustment: we posted statistics about the grantees on our website and shared them via e-newsletter, to show the range of geographies, sizes, and level of recognition of the grantees.

As we approach the end of the program's second year, we have seen improvement in these areas. Applications are steadily increasing (50 Fall Travel, 52 Exchange, 66 Spring Travel in

the latest cycle) and the ratio of applicants has shifted: existing members now submit more than 60% of applications.

Our communication of the program's goals is an area that we continue to improve. This is a very different type of grant opportunity that we are offering, one that supports relationship building and the exchange of skills and knowledge, as well as performances. As mentioned above, our members found the original name of the program confusing, believing that they had to tour a performance in order to apply (touring is allowable and encouraged, but it is in no way the sole focus). There was also confusion about the "Seed Grant" moniker, in terms of members not knowing what that meant (e.g. Was it the name of the program? Was it the type of grant? What does "seed" mean?) To make the program clearer to our members, we removed both the "Seed" and "Touring" titles and replaced them with "Travel," which is easier to comprehend at a glance. Initial responses from applicants and our members indicate that the change makes both the name and the intention of the program clearer. Also, we adjusted the font and colors of our printing and online materials to make the elements visually distinct from each other.

Regarding communication, we initially had a hard time developing the platform for disseminating the knowledge and learning from the grantees. Our plan was to create an online space/page/library that could function as a forum for the exchange of ideas and a resource for other potential applicants, while increasing traffic to the NET website. Since much of our early efforts were spent on developing the guidelines and online application system for the program, it wasn't until late in the first year that we were able to dedicate enough focus to finding the right platform for dissemination. We needed a platform that was user-friendly (for both uploading and accessing/searching for information) and that could serve as a long-term resource while requiring only minimal staff maintenance. Working with our IT consultants, we resolved these issues and we now host a robust page for NET/TEN documentation and learning. As the program continues to move forward, we are able to post weekly "Sharebacks" from our grantees.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

One of our learnings from the NET/TEN program has given rise to a question that NET is interested in posing to the field: Originally, it was our intention to purchase print ads for NET/TEN in various publications. However, as we researched the offerings, we came to understand that the available outlets are not the ones that are reaching our members. For instance, we considered purchasing an ad in American Theatre magazine, but their readership targets individuals and institutional theaters (there is only a small overlap between NET members and ensembles in TCG). Given the cost of the advertisements, it did not seem like a prudent expenditure. The sites that do reach our members are those we have existing relationships with and that offer the promotion for free (e.g. HowlRound, Alternate ROOTS, etc.). We know that the most effective communication strategy is word of mouth; our efforts are therefore focused in increasing member communication and promotion within their own networks. We are left, however, wondering if there is a need for a more centralized communication system for our sector and if this is something NET should take up?

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

<http://www.ensembletheaters.net/sharebacks>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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