

Nonprofit Theater Fundraising Challenges

Post Pandemic

by

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ABSTRACT

Non profit theater's donor base and expectations are shifting rapidly as the United States emerges from the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and concurrent socio-political and economic crises. Through philanthropic research and interviews with non profit fundraising professionals, fundraising challenges theaters are facing are explored in hopes of creating strategies to develop new and more invested audiences and patrons. Nonprofit theaters need to rethink their programmatic goals along with cultivating a more inclusive community to initiate a stronger relationship with a younger and more diverse donor base.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges nonprofit theater endured post pandemic increased as the industry had to build itself all over again. Theaters had to adapt when they faced a decrease in funding to maintain the nonprofit running. Although some wealthy donors gave what they could to nonprofits, other theaters experienced the opposite.

A shifting political and social environment as well as impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the need for the performing arts community including the theater industry to drastically re-think its operations, programming and practices related to financial stability. The research which follows aims to discover new fundraising strategies to engage with a new audience.

The topics to be covered include post pandemic funding challenges resulting from COVID-19's financial impact on nonprofit theaters along with recommendations and adaptations proposed by active fundraising professionals in Manhattan based theaters. This study concludes with three fundraising strategies to be used by nonprofit theaters for patron list development. My methods of research include industry articles written by development professionals, nonprofit theater blogs, as well as interviews with three development professionals working in diverse, reputable theaters in Manhattan. I interviewed Shayla Titley, Director of Patron Programs and Services at [The Public Theater](#), Cheyenne Myrie, Director of Individual Giving and Special Events at [The Signature Theater](#), and Hannah Bees, Project Manager at [Advance NYC](#).

This thesis was inspired and informed in part as a result of my current position as a Development Assistant at [HB Studio](#). Upon seeing how limited our donor base is, I wanted to find ways to expand it without impacting the artistic mission. Therefore, this thesis is for aspiring development professionals to keep in mind about the various challenges nonprofit theater funding is faced with.

Non Profit Theater in the United States

Theater began as entertainment for the Ancient Greeks in the 6th Century B.C. Theatrical productions are still widely popular and are experienced in a variety of presentation forms that allow theater artists (actors, dancers, stage designers, etc) to express themselves through spoken drama, dance, music and art. When most think of theater, they are likely to imagine a musical theater production on Broadway and those famous red seats. Notable recent Broadway hits that have reached millions of Americans and international visitors include [The Lion King](#), [Phantom of the Opera](#), and [Aladdin](#). At a Broadway show, audiences experience a large cast dancing beautiful choreography and singing at the same time along with speaking in character to communicate an often broadly entertaining or humorous story. Depending on the show, the stage will be decked out with a set design supporting the setting of the show. For example, the Broadway musical, [Waitress](#), is set in a diner. So, the set looks exactly like a diner and you might even smell the cherry pie! Large budget commercial musicals can truly immerse you into the play through the costumes, set, and even through the actors' often exaggerated portrayal of a character. Broadway musicals are produced in New York and generally take the form of a for-profit or commercial business model. Commercial theaters are privately owned and rely on ticket sales or member dues to operate. A few commercial theater organizations today are [The](#)

[Shubert Organization](#), [Jujamcyn Theaters](#), and [Disney on Broadway](#). Due to the for-profit structure, commercial theaters are ineligible for foundation grants or donations. Therefore relying on private investors, crowdfunding, and ticket sales to sustain a profit (Craig).

A less familiar type of theater for many Americans is the non-musical or “plays” produced and presented through nonprofit theaters and other arts organizations committed to live production and presentation. Nonprofit theaters are organizations producing theater for charitable, literary, and educational purposes. Nonprofits have the 501(c)(3) tax status classifying the organization as a specific type of organization that is beneficial or charitable to individuals or communities (UpCounsel). Nonprofit theaters do not aim to create a profit, unlike commercial producing organizations. In New York City, prominent nonprofit theaters dedicated to classic and/or contemporary dramas, comedies and other types of theater include The Public Theater, The Signature Theater, and HB Studios all located in New York City.

Nonprofit theaters are essential and vital to the development of the art of drama and support an entire ecosystem of theatrical producers and audiences. Many nonprofit theaters' programming support contemporary works by young or lesser known playwrights and/or types of theater that align with the organization's artistic mission. Nonprofit organizations are organized around their mission, which is a statement of existence summarizing the reason or purpose for why an organization exists and might also include organizational vision and values. The mission answers the questions of who, what and why. The mission statement is a cornerstone guiding programming and other aspects of organizational operations and is essential for incentivizing community, corporate, foundation and government based funding. The Public Theater's mission is to, “continue the work of its visionary founder Joe Papp as a civic institution engaging, both on-stage and off, with some of the most important ideas and social issues of today” (The Public

Theater). Nonprofit theaters rely on donations, government funding, private funding, and ticketed events in order to put on a production (Craig).

Funding Nonprofit Theater

The majority of nonprofit theaters rely equally on two general categories of revenue sources: unearned (contributed) and earned income (Renz). Earned income is to sell a service or product to make a profit. Unearned income includes financial help and other resources that come from private donors, state, or federal government funding, and anything that is given to the nonprofit (Armanino). Generally, earned income accounts for about 60% of a nonprofit theater's revenue (Figure 1, Addendum A).

Nonprofit theater organization's earned income can include facility rentals, program ads, ticket sales, food and beverage sales, merchandise sales, sponsorships and investments (Armanino, Americans for the Arts). For example, The Public Theater's main earned income source comes from their box office ticket sales seen in The Public Theater's Program Service Revenue in their 2019 Form 990 (Figure 2, Addendum A). Due to The Public's abundant theater program and successful marketing for the 2019 fiscal year, over twelve million dollars in ticket sales was brought in from this long-established New York based nonprofit. A strong showing in earned revenue is vital for a nonprofit theater to achieve because it elevates the reputation of the organization and its programming as "in demand" or supported by theater audiences.

Unearned income might include donations from individual, corporate or nonprofit business entities, state or federal government grants, and revenue from fundraising events. Government support of the arts exists at federal, state and local levels and includes direct support

through grants as well as indirect support through tax-exemptions. The [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA), an independent agency of the United States Federal Government, is an example of how the government offers assistance funds to arts organizations across the country. It awards grants to the nonprofit theater field for the production or presentation of traditional or classical repertoire, new plays, development laboratories, showcases, artist residencies, work for young audiences, experimental work, community-based work, outdoor historical dramas, and puppetry (NEA). There are corporations that give to arts organizations well. The aerospace company, [Boeing](#), located in Chicago, Illinois, gives \$12 million in grants to the arts. Along with in-kind donations and a matching program employee's donations to the arts dollar by dollar. If one of their employees decided to donate a thousand dollars to The Public Theater, then Boeing would match that donation (BCA). Family foundations are another type of foundation that contribute to unearned income. A family foundation is a private foundation run by a family and funded by the family's assets to serve a philanthropic mission. Family foundations can support a variety of causes and some of them support the arts. A few of them include the [Mellon Foundation](#), the [Scherman Foundation](#), and the [Shubert Foundation](#).

The most significant source of donations to nonprofit theaters is associated with individual giving. Individual giving is a person donating to a nonprofit because they support the mission. An individual donor can vary from a public high school teenager to wealthy retiree. Theaters create annual appeals or campaigns that tie to a communications campaign sent out to the list of current and potential donors asking them to give to the organization. Once this person contributes, they are called a donor and on a donor list to keep track of who's donating. Based on development policies at HB Studio a major donor is someone who donates more than a thousand dollars and a regular donor donates from a dollar up or more. However, it all depends on the size

and budget of an organization. At a smaller nonprofit, \$100 or \$500 may be considered a major gift (Shamah). A prospect is a potential donor and nonprofit theaters are always finding ways to increase prospects.

As seen in Figure 1, Addendum A government funding for these organizations only accounts for 10%. Meanwhile, individual giving ranks higher at 23%. Government support is limited, so nonprofit theaters have to rely on donor giving to fund day to day programs. To back this information, on the Form 990 for The Public Theater, it is noticeable that in the Contributions, Gifts, Grants, and Other Similar Contributions that The Public receives around one million of funding from government grants. All other contributions which we can assume count for individual and other types of donations are an estimated total of around forty two million (Figure 2, Addendum A). Therefore, there is a significant difference in the total financial value of grants that can be expected to come from government grant programs and the donations, grants and other gifts that are contributed by individual donors to nonprofit theaters.

A development director is responsible for planning and oversight of fundraising strategies for nonprofit theaters. A major aspect of their work is establishing and building relationships with prospects and existing donors. The development team structure varies according to the budget scope and financial needs of each theater. A larger organization like The Public Theater has a development team consisting of 25 people in different departments such as, Individual Giving, Special Events, and Major Gift Officers. Compared to the Signature Theater, which only has five employees on their development team. Development teams coordinate fundraising events, annual appeals, and galas for the nonprofit to execute to get more donors.

Challenges to Theater Sustainability in the 21st century

Pre-COVID 19 Challenges

In 2018, the Theater Communication Group (TCG), the national networking organization for theater professionals, reported that 1,855 Theaters in the nonprofit theater field attracted 39 million audience members to 170,000 performances of 21,000 productions. However, in 2019 the TCG noted that attendance decreased to 38 million (Theater Facts). See Figure 5, Addendum A and Figure 6, Addendum A for the statistics for estimated nonprofit theater attendance, income, and workforce.

CUNA, the change in Unrestricted Net Assets, is a particularly important measure of fiscal stability for organizations and is the result of total unrestricted income minus total expenses. It also represents the annual bottom line, indicating whether the organization brought in enough income to cover its expenses. Positive CUNA indicates that there was surplus income after paying all expenses, whereas negative CUNA shows that the income brought was insufficient (Theater Facts). With the decline in net assets, there was a slight decrease in audience.

In the Pre-COVID 19 years from 2015 to 2019, finances were generally stable. Theater Communications Group reported that earned and unearned income growth surpassed inflation (TCG Theater Facts, 2019). This resulted in artistic, administrative, and monetary growth; the change in Unrestricted Net Assets (CUNA) represented 4.6% of total expenses, a 5-year low. See **Figure 4** for the decrease compared to previous years.

These could be tied to the demand for theater. As expenses grew, so did the demand for work. It is a possibility that not enough people were attending theaters. Although as shown in

Figure 7, single ticket sales increased by 12.5% from 2018 along with subscriptions. Booked-in events such as special curated events for theaters decreased by 8.6%. While audiences weren't declining the demand for theater was not as strong as in previous years. Therefore, the decline in nonprofit theater funding and audience participation has been a challenge even prior to the current pandemic.

COVID-19's Financial Impact on Theaters

In 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating to artists and arts organizations dedicated to public presentations including the nonprofit theater community. The Covid-19 pandemic is an ongoing global pandemic of a severe respiratory disease called coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) declared on March 11, 2020 in the United States. Symptoms spread quickly and varied from undetectable to deadly. Due to the severity of it spreading, lockdowns were enforced and everyone around the world were asked to isolate with many asked to avoid public places and stay home unless necessary. Broadway, home to many of Manhattan's most popular commercial and nonprofit theaters, shut down for the very first time at the height of COVID-19. Theater organizations across the country had to halt in person productions, some transitioned their productions to video streaming platforms, and all suffered the loss of funding from audiences and donors.

In response to the imminent closure of U.S. nonprofit theaters and a groundswell of advocacy from the creative industries, the federal government took action. The Small Business Association (SBA) administered The Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG) program, supported as bipartisan legislation led by Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat (Glinton). This program provided more than \$16 billion in

grants to venues such as performing arts organizations that were forced to shut down due to the impacts of the pandemic.

However, according to data provided by the SBA, more than 4,500 applicants were denied this support, sometimes without substantiation. Many of those denied say applicants with nearly identical business models — and sometimes direct competitors — have been approved (Rogers, Schlesinger, Serrano-Roman). The Studio Theatre in Little Rock, AR was directly affected by this program. While their online performances weren't able to support much of the debt they needed to pay off, the SVOG program seemed like a godsend to them and the theater anticipated a \$130,000 grant. They were denied help with no explanation (Rogers, Schlesinger, Serrano-Roman). Even with federal support, the theater community struggled to meet their margins. The Milwaukee Chamber Theater sent out and extended an emergency fundraising appeal while simultaneously announcing a \$150,000 challenge match. This meant that any gift coming through would be matched by Caran and Joel Quadracci through the Windhover Foundation with support from Donna and Donald Baumgartner and the Herzfeld Foundation. Although more than 500 donors supported this campaign, they still fell short of a deficit at \$365,000 (Higgins).

In an interview conducted for this senior project, Director of Patron Programs for New York's The Public Theater, Shayla Titley, discussed the fiscal challenges facing The Public post-pandemic. Titley notes that the theater experienced a significant decrease in participation during the pandemic both in terms of audiences and funders. After the premiere of the acclaimed musical by Lin Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton* (2015), there were more people than ever wanting to support The Public in hopes for the next "Hamilton" or big hit. However, Titley notes, "during the pandemic, basically there was no programming. So because there was no programming, the

number of people supporting the organization really dipped” (Titley). Titley says this happened because patrons were no longer supporting The Public as an organization with a philanthropic artistic mission. Rather, patrons were supporting The Public Theater to ensure the lights could stay on - simply not as inspirational. While they had no in-person productions (Online productions were showcased) during the pandemic, patrons were also struggling financially (Titley). The Public Theater was doing what it could to promote its onstage mission onstage, but funding non-programmatic off-stage needs (general operating funding) posed a very different challenge. The issue Titley illuminates here has long been a topic of frustration for fundraisers in the nonprofit world.

Current Challenges in Funding nonprofit Theater

Today (Spring 2023), the theater community is struggling to get back to a full production schedule post-Covid and is beset with a host of associated new issues including performing without mask restrictions, complying with COVID-19 policies to accommodate audiences, and strategizing new ways to renew community awareness and interest in supporting nonprofit theater. Statista’s Research Department released an audience attendance report in January of 2023 reporting the decrease in theater audience attendance from 2005 to 2021. People were less inclined to attend theater in 2021 compared to the year prior. Right before the shutdown in March 2020, it’s estimated that 13.64 million people attended non-musical nonprofit theater in New York City. Whereas, in 2021 only 8.58 million people attended (Statista). An almost 75% decline in ticket sales! While the pandemic precipitated this sudden decrease in audience attendees, the on-going need to develop a diverse and committed younger audience remains an on-going strategic challenge facing nonprofit non-musical theater in New York and elsewhere.

With Baby Boomers slowly dying out, it is essential for theater managers, marketers and development directors to adapt and innovate programming and revenue strategies with younger generations now coming of age. Many established theaters and others in the traditional performing arts are challenged with connecting and cultivating relationships with younger donors and audiences. In this section, an exploration of factors contributing to new theater donors and audience cultivation will be examined.

Diversifying the Ecosystem for Funding the Arts

Theaters are over reliant on support from Gen X and Baby Boomers. To diversify their funding and ticket buying base, theater managers need to reach out and connect to the generations that may not feel welcomed: Millennials and Gen Z. Millennials (Born between 1981 and 1996) are the generation between Gen X (Born between 1965 and 1981) and Gen Z (Born between 1995 and 2012) (Wittebrood). Millennials are optimistic about the future, tech savvy, passionate about learning, and strive for meaningful interactions. Generation Z was born into a world driven by technological advances including the fast rise and predominance of social media as a preferred means of social connection and communication. Some might say they are chronically online, where their whole personality is based on a persona online. Gen Z values self care, mental health, independence, diversity, and activism (Wittebrood, Bird).

As reported by [Ogiv](#), a fundraising platform, Millennials and Gen Z values vary as Millennials tend to support research and public policy, international affairs, and education causes. Gen Z 's favorite causes to support are environment conservation & wildlife, arts, culture, humanities, and youth development (Figure 9, Addendum A). Poor social media presence and engagement from a nonprofit prevents both Millennials and Gen Z from making a

donation (Figure 10, Addendum A). While Gen Z prefers to donate to nonprofits via social media platforms, Millennials prefer to give via a text message or app (Figure 11, Addendum A). When asked how regularly they would like to receive updates from the nonprofit they supported, both Gen Z and Millennials reported that they'd like to hear back once a month (Figure 12, Addendum A). Another aspect Gen Z and Millennials both agreed on was that they stopped donating to a non profit because they couldn't afford to continue giving (Figure 13, Addendum A). For Millennials and Gen Z to give their support to nonprofit theaters there needs to be a focus on boosting social media presence, DEI policies, and an organizational commitment to address larger societal problems (Qgiv).

Making Theater Matter

The mission and narrative of many nonprofit theaters are not connecting to today's Gen Z and Millennials donors. Berkeley Repertory Theater managing director, Susan Medak says, "The idea of giving money for the sake of an aesthetic value has almost completely evaporated. It has profoundly shifted away from that toward the idea of culture as a tool of social change. They want to know, what is the socially transformative good?" (Miller). Millennials and Gen Z want to support an organization that actively improves society. Organizations that these generations would give their full support to include Planned Parenthood, the NAACP, The Humane Society, and progressive political campaigns. In an interview with Hannah Bees, Project Manager at [Advance NYC](#), she notes;

"I would love to get younger donors in the door. I have yet to find the formula for that. And I think it's also a sign of the times. I personally would give to Planned Parenthood over a dance organization or something like that because I feel threatened. And so it's the current

political climate. It's the current economic climate and it's the historic demographics of the performing arts and performing arts staffing.”. Theaters’ due diligence should include questions such as, “Is our season making a substantial change in society?” (Bees)

Ms. Bees is expressing feelings and values common to those coming of age during the pandemic and concurrent socio-political movements such as [Black Lives Matter](#) sparked by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

As a result of the Black Lives Matter Movement, multiple social justice nonprofit organizations received large gift donations. The NAACP received \$5 million from (Stueber). The Minnesota Freedom Fund received \$40 million in global donations (Parkar). The National Bail Fund Network received over \$80 million donations. The North Minneapolis food, work, and housing program, Al-Maa’uun received \$400,000. While the mission of nonprofits focused on social justice strikes donors of all ages and people around the world, as well as major donors and corporations.

In 2020, Jeff Bezos’s former wife, Mackenzie Bezos, reported that she had given over \$585 million dollars to support racial equity causes as part of her philanthropic pursuits (Murphy). The impact of the social turmoil of this time was so intense that a theater paused fundraising after George Floyd’s death (Stiffman). Executive Director of ArtsEmerson, David Howse, expresses why he stopped the fundraising after this emotional time.

“ There were folks who were reaching out asking where they should give their money — particularly white people — asking me personally. There was a lot of energy and effort towards this act of releasing or absolving. For me, the act of giving money at this moment felt too easy.” (Stiffman)

Howse's feeling of donating "too easily" equates to Medak's idea of giving money for the sake of an aesthetic value alone. Howse elaborates:

"Don't get me wrong. It's not that we didn't need the money. We definitely needed the money. But I wanted to feel good about the asking and the receiving and the giving from the donor. And so I wanted to have a different conversation and talk about why this moment is actually much larger. I didn't want us to be perceived as jumping on the bandwagon when we had already been on the bandwagon." (Stiffman)

Howse's statement describes the motive of Gen Z and Millennial philanthropists. These generations don't want to give money just to satisfy the social construct. They want to give because they see the severity of the environmental and socio-political crises impacting their communities and the world. They truly understand that social issues are not a simple thing to change. Therefore, when donating to these types of causes it's important that the organization is staying authentic and true to their word. There are many nonprofit theaters that superficially advocate for diverse policy changes.

Action and Authenticity vs. Advertising

Chicago's largest regional theater, Victory Gardens Theater is a perfect example of an organization inauthentically claiming its diversity and inclusion. In July 2022, Victory Theater Garden's entire cohort of resident artists resigned due to allegations of racism, financial mismanagement, and lack of transparency regarding staff issues. Playwright Erika Dickerson-Depenza pulled the Victory's right to her play, *cullud wattah*, due to "The white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values espoused by the board of directors at Victory Gardens Theater" (Cullwell-Block). The play went on to premiere at The Public Theater instead. Evident

on-going lack of support for racial equity issues was the board decision to ask then-Executive Director and Executive Artistic Director Erica Daniels and Board Chairman Steve Miller to step down in 2020, a result of Victory's lack of response following the police murder of George Floyd. Supposedly a newsletter was sent to their subscribers in May 2022, voicing Victory's support for the Black Lives Matter movement providing a handful of links to social justice organizations. However, the newsletter did not include pledges to change internal organizational operations or management. The newsletter also did not include the Victory's leadership planned steps to take in response to the movement (Figueroa). Today, the theater remains with only a Board of Directors after all of their employees resigned in 2022. According to their website, the board has transitioned the organization to a foundation with no planned productions anytime soon (Victory Gardens Theater).

The American Repertory Theater in Cambridge made a statement during the Black Lives Matter movement that the theater is committed to dismantling white supremacy similar to the Victory Gardens Theater. On A.R.T's website there is an Anti-Racism and Accountability page releasing reports to update their audience, artists, and community on their action steps to make theater that is anti-racist and equitable for all (A.R.T). However, Lorraine Kanyike's interaction with a patron says otherwise. As she was helping an older patron take his seat she heard him utter, "Do your job, [N-word]" . A year after the incident Kanyike never heard about what happened to the patron nor was the interaction mentioned again. A.R.T says, "They identified, contacted and banned the patron from returning, but acknowledged they should've told Kanyike as well as the rest of their staff" (Guerra). The first steps A.R.T's leadership should have taken was to acknowledge the situation, talk to the patron after the show, let Kanyike know when the patron was banned, and then apologize to Kanyike about the situation. Theater organizations that

hide racist interactions aren't living up to their mission for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment.

Younger theater patrons and donors will dive into this history and see that the organization isn't aligning with their promotional brand. This damages the company's reputation which tarnishes the trust between the donor and nonprofit. Prospects want to be able to trust an organization, but when most of these missions are two faced it's hard to do so.

Addressing Funding Systemically

The challenge with funding is that it is not based on a foundation of equitable practice. Inequities are built into the ecosystem of U.S. funding starting with funds distributed through government and foundation grants. Hannah Bees says because of the capitalist society we live in, there aren't enough regular people overlooking support needed to fund arts programs.,

“So there's a lack of whatever government oversight might need to be there and support for organizations that make it possible or that make it necessary for the public to come in and fund these things. And there is enough wealth in this world among all the white old CEOs in New York City to be able to single-handedly fund all these organizations. And so philanthropy is complicated for me because I recognize that we are a part of this machine that gives a really rich guy a pat on the back for giving us \$50,000 and he feels good. And everyone says he is so benevolent when he has 5 billion. And it's like, it's not even a drop in the bucket for him too. My big struggle with philanthropy is I still feel like it (promotes) the system we live in.” (Bees)

Supporting Bees experience is 2017 research by [Helicon Collaborative](#) with support from the Surdna Foundation reporting that, “Just 2 percent of all cultural institutions receive nearly 60 percent of all contributed revenue, up approximately 5 percentage points over a decade”. This

cohort is made up of 925 cultural groups with annual budgets of over \$5 million (Helicon Collaborative). According to the Collaborative, few organizations of color based in low-income communities are included in this large budget group, while the majority of these organizations serve an audience that are predominantly wealthy and white. This shows a bias towards distributing funds to an organization with a larger budget and a mission that brings in an audience from wealthier backgrounds as opposed to appearing accessible for all (Figure 14, Addendum A) for statistics reported by the National Center for Charitable Statistics regarding funding distribution by budget size. Meanwhile, Organizations that represent people of color, low-income, and rural communities receive less than 4% of arts foundation funding (Figure 15, Addendum A) for the percentages of arts foundation funding vs. the U.S. population provided by the U.S. Census Foundation Center.

Bees also noted that family foundations act according to their own bias making funding decisions.

“If a black led dance organization is applying for a grant somewhere, I think it is more fair for that application to be read and decided upon by fellow dancers and choreographers, people who understand the community, people who experience this, who live this, who know what it means to do all of these things. And it doesn't necessarily mean all black led dance organizations, but it means representatives from across the board who really truly can measure impact.” (Bees)

There needs to be a shift in values and strategies that determine which organizations should receive funds and to what degree. The New York State Council of the Arts (NYSCA) provides a great example of how family foundations and other government funds should choose their grantees. NYSCA allows open applications for panelists to choose the grantees. The

qualifications for a panelist is to span a range of artistic practices, nonprofit management and must demonstrate expertise in at least one of NYSCA's evaluation criteria creating a well rounded panelist with no bias, but a thorough understanding of the arts and financial stability. As the structural challenge outlined here is systemic, there's no simple answer to solve this. It is a field that still needs to evolve from within. A start to changing this system would be to create awareness and educate e patrons, corporations, and family foundations that are distributing these funds inequitably. As the arts funding industry as a whole takes on the research and strategic thinking and planning to move forward a more equitable approach to charitable giving, theater industry professionals are adapting and innovating approaches and tactics that better align with a rising generation of funders.

Strategies for Innovation/Adaptation in Funding Theater

New Fundraising Strategies

In order to gain deeper understanding of current field strategies that are enabling development and funding success, I conducted interviews with the following individuals:

Cheyenne Martin, Director of Individual Giving and Special Events, Signature Theater Company, a theater devoted to creating an artistic home for storytellers (Signature Theater).

Shayla Titley, Director of Patron Programs and Services, The Public Theater, which was one of the United State's first nonprofit theater founded in 1945 by Joseph Papp where new and classical works are seasonally produced (The Public Theater). **Hannah Bees**, Project Manager,

Advance NYC, a consulting team of nonprofit fundraising professionals.

I asked these rounds of questions:

- How did Covid impact your organization?

- What changes have been made since? How were you able to adapt?
- What are major challenges for future fundraising?
- What are new/different fundraising approaches?
- What strategies are striking with younger donors?

As a result of these detailed conversations, I realized there are many ways the future of fundraising can further evolve to ensure future financial stability e for nonprofit theaters with DEI values in context. I have outlined three fundraising strategies nonprofit theater organizations need to take in order to foster an equitable approach to fundraising and cultivate a younger donor base. The initiatives summarized here are based on current practices utilized by The Public Theater, Signature Theater, and HB Studio.

Telling the Story with New Generations in Mind (Who Provides Value?)

The first strategy is to prioritize and place more value on cultivating longtime supporters, even those who give at a lower level than major gift donors. In my interview with Shayla Titley (Public Theater), she touched on several practical ideas The Public is implementing to diversify their donor list.

One of strategies that stood out was a breakfast with The Public's Board of Directors's chairman with patrons that had donated over three thousand dollars in gifts as well as patrons giving less than one hundred, but who've attended more than 100 productions at the Public.

Titley elaborates on this event:

“ One of the things that we've tried to do is to look at not just to look at and to not just prioritize people who are giving four, five, six plus level gifts. So as an example, we went through everyone that we have in our database to say who, who's been spending time here, who's

seen over a hundred plus productions. Those people are important and valuable to us. It's not that they have never given an extra dollar or anything like that, but they're valuable. They're important, and we should recognize them as such. And we're trying to give them opportunities to be in the room and to be made to feel special when we're doing certain things for donors as well.” (Titley)

This type of engagement demonstrates that the organization is not only acknowledging or valuing patrons due to their personal wealth but equally those who have stood by the organization as ticket buyers - truly an equitable approach to fundraising. Although the longtime supporters weren't able to provide a major gift, they were still there for the first production of Hamilton or made it for both opening and closing night of a certain production, or brought more people to watch a play. They hold the same value as a major donor because they are fully supporting the organization in ways donations can not.

Placing equal value on small donors who are loyal audiences creates the organization accountable for providing accessibility and inclusiveness in terms of pricing and other marketing practices. For example, during the Question and Answer portion of the breakfast, one of the guests asked, “What are you going to do to keep tickets affordable?”. The individual asking the question is a patron who is a person of color, who donates at the \$100 scale, and has seen over a hundred of The Public's productions. Titley notes:

“... the reason why that's important is because she asked a question that typically, if you're giving thousands of dollars, you're not thinking about ticket affordability, right?” (Titley)

When it comes to cultivating your donor base, money should not be the first factor. Patrons are not to be seen as money signs because without a connection there will be no incentive for them to donate. At events like the breakfast we can bridge the connection between

wealthy patrons and those supportive of the organization, which is vital to provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere while affirming values that brand the organization with a rising generation of donors as well as long-time contributors in mind.

Encouraging Donors through Community Events

The second development strategy is programming based and targets new and potential donors. Theaters need to create more community events to foster an environment that's genuine and welcoming to prospects. In my conversation with Myrie, she spoke about the diverse community programming the Signature Theater is doing to foster this type of environment. "People want to give whatever they can give to places that feel like community spaces, and you can only do that when you foster that kind of environment" (Myrie). If an organization's environment is not welcoming you won't see a lot of diverse faces. You will also find people that will not be able to trust you with their money. Hence why patrons are more willing to donate to social justice issues because they can see a problem and have the urge to change it. However, if a theater organization implements artistic programming or practices that don't connect to social values and preferences of their audience, they are less inclined to get involved.

The Signature Theater has implemented an initiative called [SigSocial](#) on select weekdays. **Sigsocial** is an industry networking event produced by Signature with themes such as BIPOC Mixer, AAPI mixer, and even a millennium mixer where millennials or those a fan of the 2000s pop culture get to connect on the dancefloor (Figures 16 & 17, Addendum A). These events are held in The Signature Theater space and give a chance for people in the industry to connect. Myrie says:

“Something that I've seen work really well to start folks off and get engaged is really investing in having organizations that do communications and programming for specific communities. Do black theater nights, do queer theater nights, create that space and create that environment. And once the audience becomes invested in those activities, they can become a little bit more invested in the organization.” (Myrie)

These types of activities also encourage younger donors since it's about the experience for them as Myrie says, “It's about (creating) the experience of the night out for younger generations usually. And so that's definitely where I see a lot of value for them, where I actually see a turnout in people coming” (Myrie). Theaters are over reliant on the same outdated fundraising strategies and donor base. Creating a space where people can just connect without the pressure of donating, will make a difference in who you'll see more often at your productions and, ultimately, on your donor list.

The Power of Social Media

The third fundraising strategy is communications and promotion based. Theater organizations are recommended to more fully utilize their social media platforms to maximize their reach and connection with diverse audiences and donors. With the Silent Generation (Born between 1928 and 1945) and Boomers increasingly a smaller percentage of the donor base, it's time for theaters to adapt their communication strategies and tools to meet expectations and behaviors of Millennials and Gen Z.

As previously mentioned in the challenges section, Gen Z and Millennials tend to look at an organization's presence on social media and use that to decide if it's an organization worth supporting. There are several social media platforms people of all ages use such as Facebook,

Instagram, Tik Tok, and Twitter. These tools allow theaters to upload and share 10 second videos of a class or production. There's a feature on all of these platforms to post a photo or video on your "story" and it will disappear in 24 hours. This feature is wonderful for introducing a cast, posting behind the scene content, and interacting with your followers by asking them questions. Social media holds the power to interact with anyone around the world through a digital device. If non profit theaters utilized this, they are reaching out to people from the other side of the country and possibly creating an impact. It's also a way we can communicate, which is so important for developing a donor base.

As said in the previous section, both Gen Z and Millennials like to hear from the organization they're supporting at least once a month. Social media is the tool to use in this case. Looking at the Lincoln Center's Instagram page (Figure 18, Addendum A) they utilize this platform by catering posts to their audience. On their page, they have a variety of photos and videos. There are snippets of the operas. As well as aesthetic pictures of a Lincoln Center outdoor concert. To entice tourists or new patrons, they've posted a cute video of a child dancing with the caption, "Are you looking to make the most out of your summer in New York City?" as the cover image. From high schoolers to tourists their welcoming presence captures a fun night out in New York City and an experience you don't want to miss. As Myrie noted, Generation Z and Millennials thrive off of experiences and if your organization can show that through social media, you are developing a new audience of prospect donors. Therefore, nonprofit theaters should not undermine the capabilities of social media.

Conclusion

The Spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic shut theaters around the world putting enormous stress on many organizations already facing financial instability. Concurrently, social movements and their impact on fast shifting demographics affirmed the long-standing need for arts organizations to institute policies and practices supporting diverse, equitable, and inclusive values and venues. Although the philanthropic industry is challenged systemically by inequities regarding the distribution of funds and favoring wealthy major donors over longtime supporters, development professionals and nonprofit theaters across the country can implement tactics to restructure the system.

To be effective, development strategies and tactics should be tailored to the organization and its mission. After deliberate research and successful interviews, fundraising's success is built on developing connections and the cultivation of long-term relationships and connections through diverse storytelling. To do so, theater professionals are recommended to hold frequent due diligence meetings ensuring the mission is authentically serving the organization and community (Doyle, Sakaue, Shaughnessy). Theaters must develop a plan to incorporate more diverse, inclusive, and equitable practices throughout all operational areas including programming, production, marketing and development. Theaters can promote fundraising events where major donors and supporters on a lower giving level can come together to connect with the organization's executives. This allows equitable treatment and encourages long time supporters to keep coming and increase their support. For major donors these types of events make them feel like their money is being valued in how it's being used. It also gives major donors and long time supporters the opportunity to use their voice to express how the organization can improve. Programming initiatives not only invite the community's perspective

on how the organization can grow, but as well gives a prospect a safe space. Gen Z and Millennials thrive off of experiences, so holding weekly mixers or a monthly playwriting club inspires these generations to give their support. Another attribute in developing a new audience is through the power of social media. Generation Z are social media mavens and dictate their personality and issues on social media platforms. They get most of their news and advertisements on apps like Tik Tok and Instagram. So, using these platforms to advocate for a theater's play season or networking events will be useful and attract this new generation of consumers into your organization. Gen Z and Millennials look for relevance in an organization and a solution to societal problems, so theaters should create strides in adapting to current times.

The long-term fiscal viability of nonprofit live theater is to be determined. There is more need for existing professionals to rethink outdated practices and tools in order to develop a younger and more diverse donor base. There are so many questions to ask and no formulaic equation to solve this because there are so many possibilities to take. Although these initiatives will not solve the systemic issue at hand, the concepts behind them, if implemented, will move non profit theaters forward. For now, development professionals must have practices to include the younger generations in their campaigns, create a community that is welcoming, and tell a compelling and authentic story that resonates with those who bring along their own diverse stories and experience.

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ADDENDUM A: FIGURES

Figures

**Revenue Sources for
Nonprofit Arts & Cultural Organizations**
(Pre-Pandemic, Estimated)

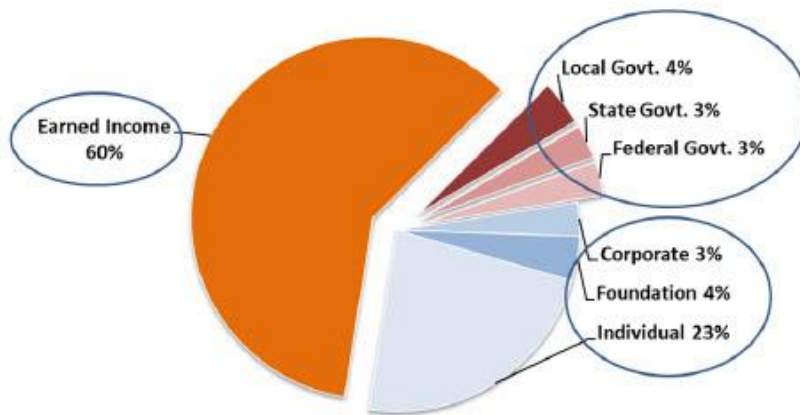


Figure 1

c		n	Total. Add lines 1a-1f	45,866,012
Program Service Revenue	2 a	BOX OFFICE INCOME	711110	12,510,987
	b	CO-PRODUCTION FEES, ENHANCEMENT I	900099	2,122,950
	c	WORKSHOPS/EVENTS	900099	186,193
	d			
	e			
	f	All other program service revenue		
	g	Total. Add lines 2a-2f		14,820,130

Figure 2

Contributions, Gifts, Grants and Other Similar Amounts	1 a	Federated campaigns	1a	
	b	Membership dues	1b	
	c	Fundraising events	1c	2,523,888
	d	Related organizations	1d	
	e	Government grants (contributions)	1e	1,231,571
	f	All other contributions, gifts, grants, and similar amounts not included above	1f	42,110,553
	g	Noncash contributions included in lines 1a-1f: \$		271,627
	h	Total. Add lines 1a-1f		45,866,012

Figure 3

FIGURE B:
TREND THEATRE AVERAGE EARNED INCOME, CONTRIBUTED INCOME, TOTAL INCOME, EXPENSES, AND CUNA

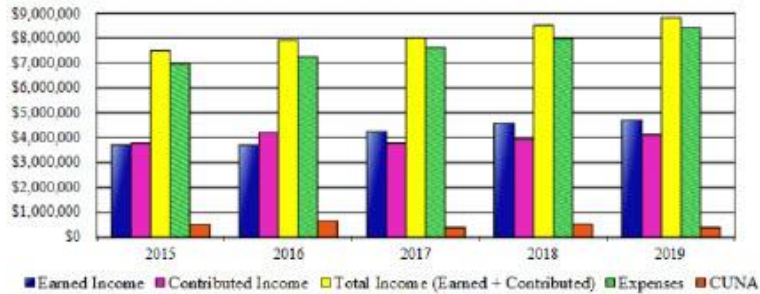


Figure 4

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED 2019 UNIVERSE OF U.S. PROFESSIONAL NOT-FOR-PROFIT THEATRES (1,953 Theatres)		
Estimated Productivity		
Attendance	38,000,000	
Subscribers	1,200,000	
Performances	180,000	
Productions	21,000	
Estimated Finances		
Earned Income	\$ 1,600,000,000	
Contributed Income	\$ 1,400,000,000	
Total Income	\$ 3,000,000,000	
Total Expenses	\$ 2,800,000,000	
Change in Unrestricted Net Assets (CUNA)	\$ 200,000,000	
Earned Income as a % of Total Income	53%	
Contributed Income as a % of Total Income	47%	
CUNA as a % of Total	7.3%	
Estimated Workforce		
		% of Total
Artistic	88,000	61%
Administrative	23,000	16%
Production/Technical	34,000	23%
Total Paid Personnel	145,000	

Figure 5

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED 2018 UNIVERSE OF U.S. PROFESSIONAL NOT-FOR-PROFIT THEATRES (1,855 Theatres)		
ESTIMATED PRODUCTIVITY		
Attendance	39,000,000	
Subscribers	1,000,000	
Performances	170,000	
Productions	21,000	
ESTIMATED FINANCES		
Earned Income	\$ 1,450,000,000	
Contributed Income	\$ 1,360,000,000	
Total Income	\$ 2,810,000,000	
Total Expenses	\$ 2,660,000,000	
Change in Unrestricted Net Assets (CUNA)	\$ 150,000,000	
Earned Income as a % of Total Income	52%	
Contributed Income as a % of Total Income	48%	
CUNA as a % of Total Expenses	5.6%	
ESTIMATED WORKFORCE		% of Total
Artistic	105,000	66%
Administrative	21,000	13%
Production/Technical	34,000	21%
Total Paid Personnel	160,000	

Figure 6

TABLE 2: AVERAGE EARNED INCOME (84 theatres)					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Subscription Income	\$955,544	\$943,590	\$988,377	\$961,794	\$1,085,547
Single Ticket Income	1,560,672	1,585,945	1,684,232	1,703,120	1,915,520
Booked-In Events	59,727	61,572	55,779	64,864	59,288
Total Ticket Income	\$2,575,943	\$2,591,107	\$2,728,388	\$2,729,779	\$3,060,355

Figure 7

TABLE 2: AVERAGE EARNED INCOME (136 theatres)					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Subscriptions	446,020	401,828	495,557	437,530	80,098
Single Ticket Income	1,041,711	1,013,267	1,322,493	899,746	75,790
Total Ticket Income	1,487,731	1,415,095	1,818,050	1,337,275	155,888

Figure 8

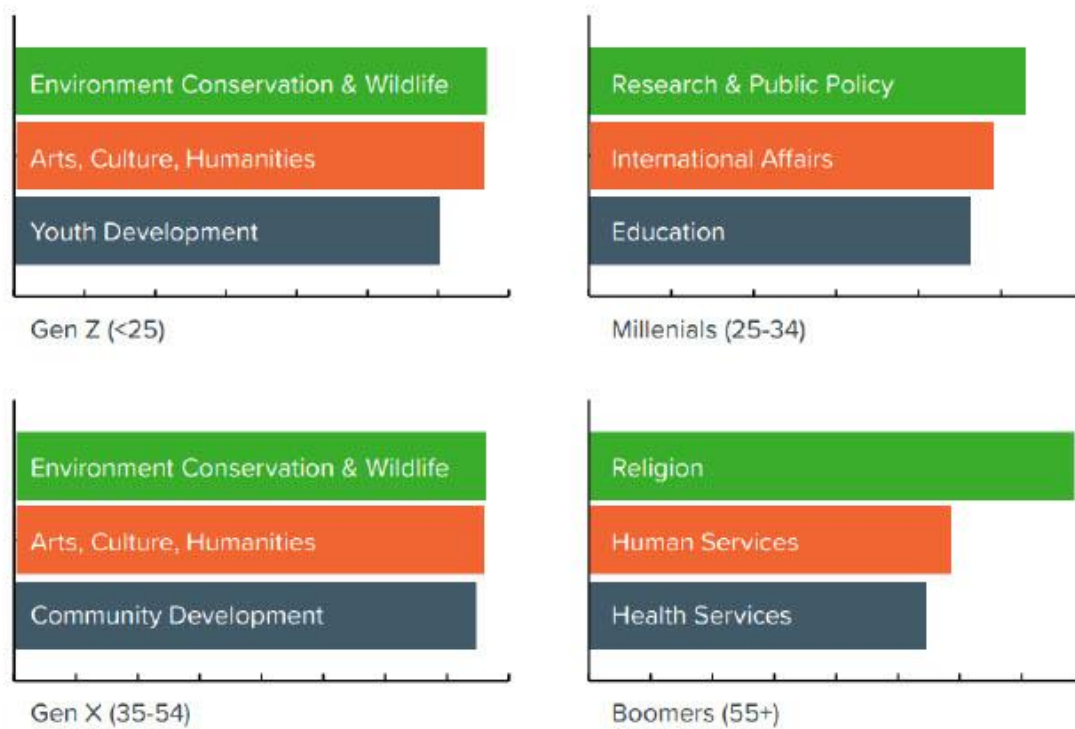
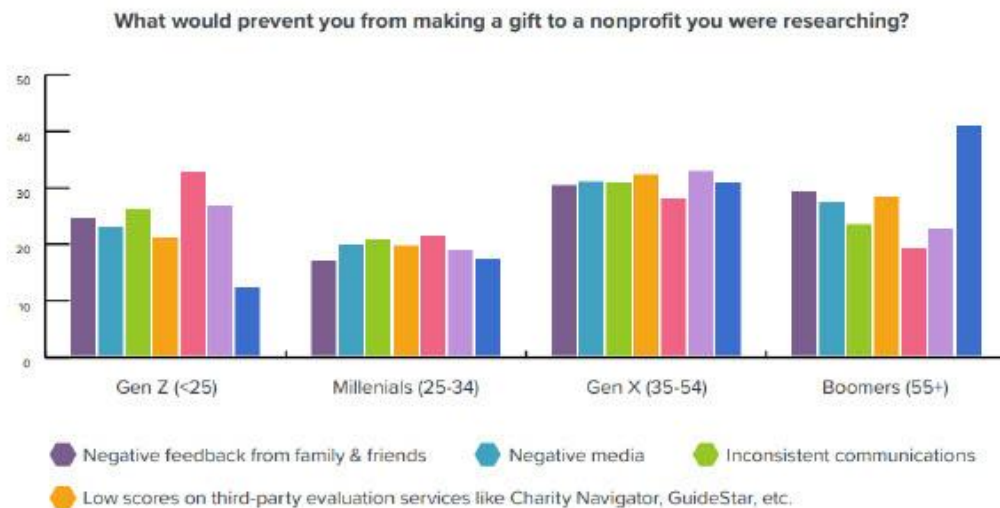


Figure 9



● Poor social media presence
 ● Outdated website
 ● Other

Figure 10

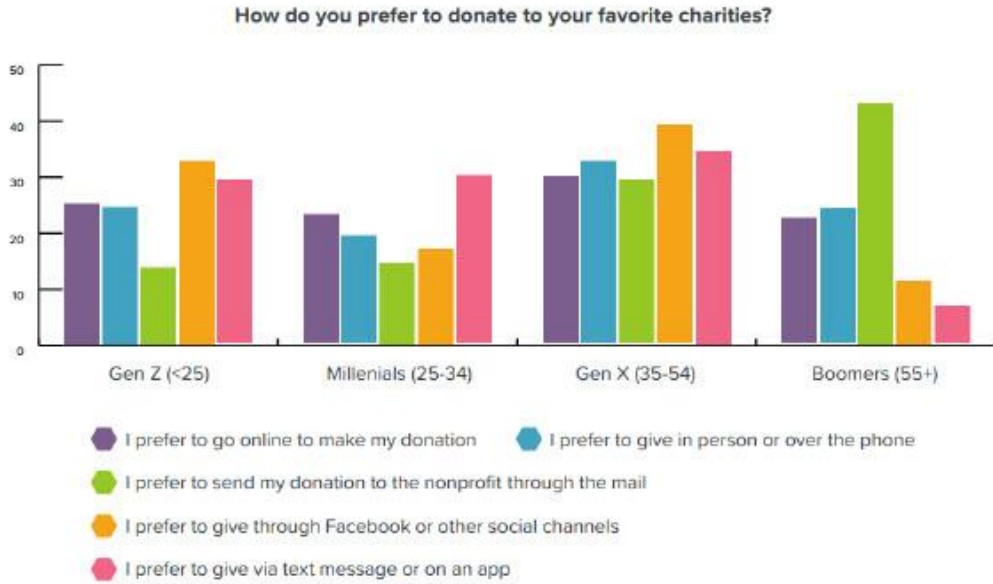


Figure 11

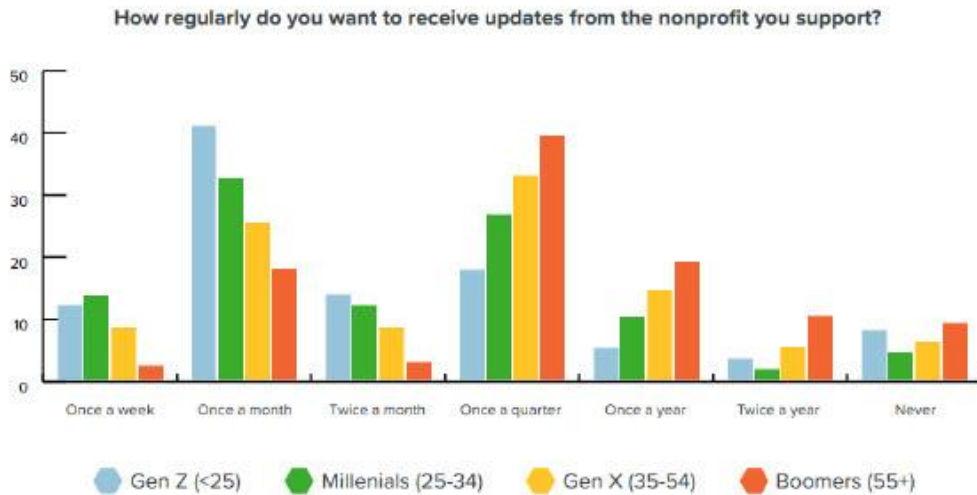
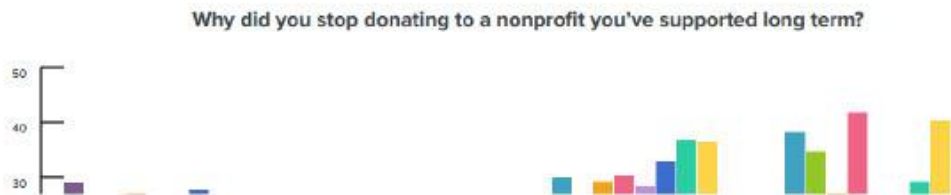


Figure 12



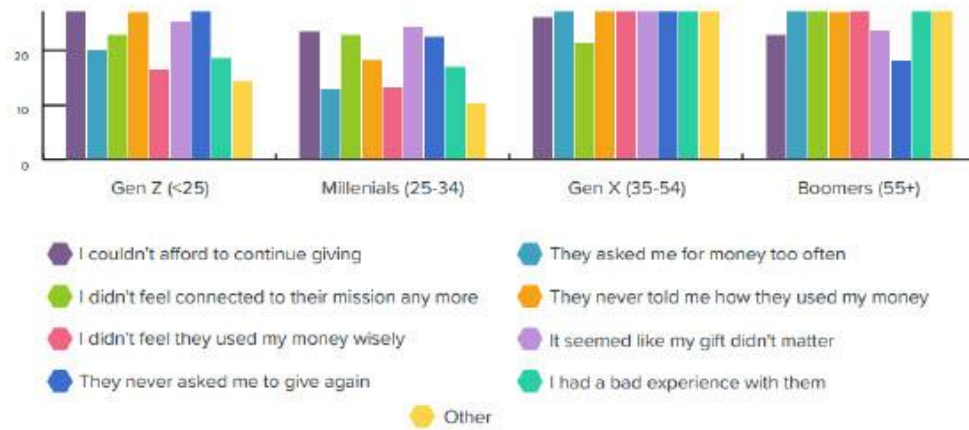


Figure 13

Funding Distribution by Budget Size

Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics (2015)

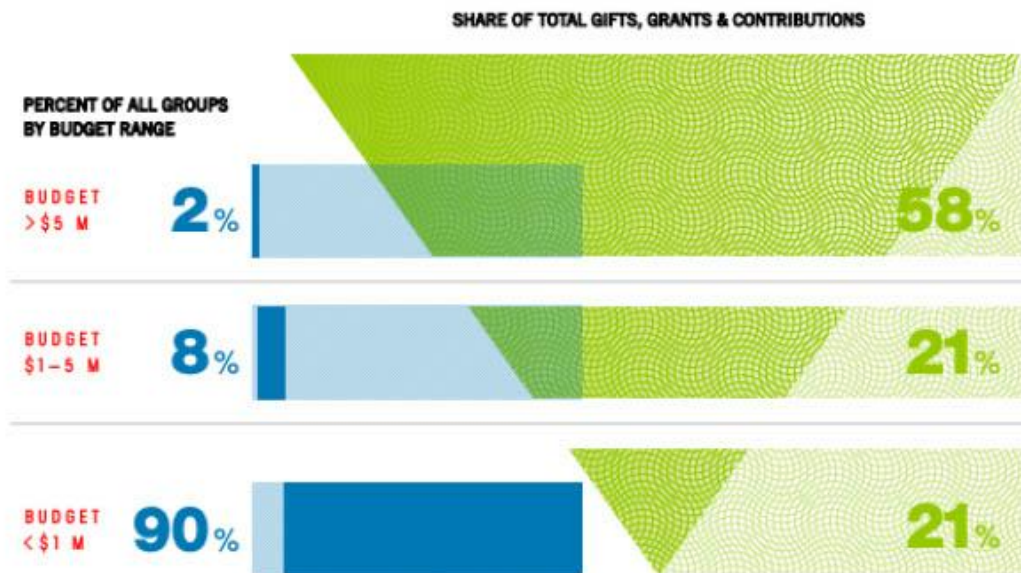
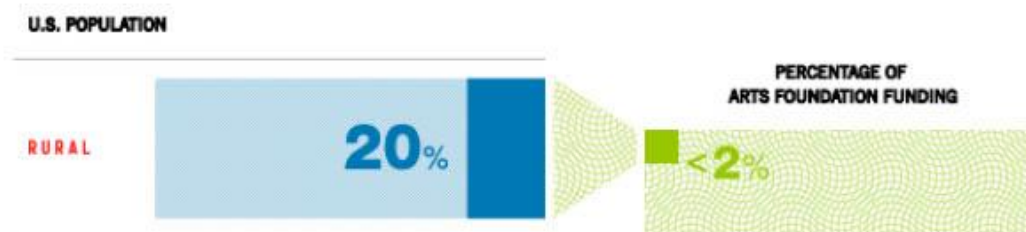


Figure 14

Arts Foundation Funding to Communities

Source: U.S. Census, Foundation Center (2016)



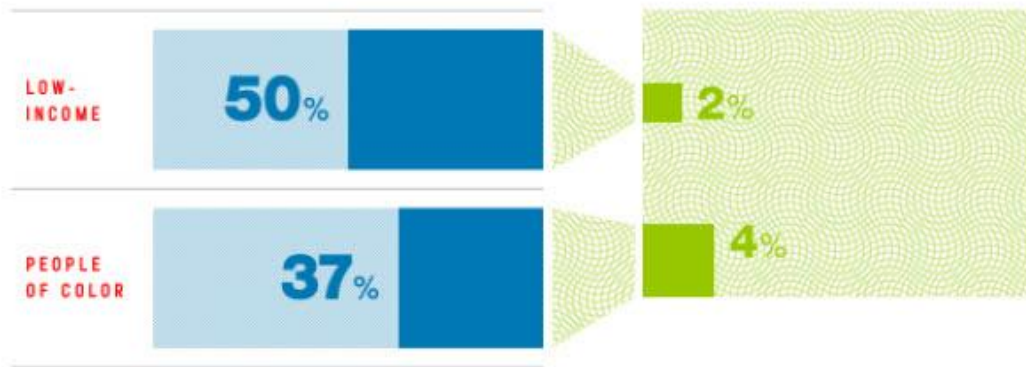


Figure 15

April 27, 2023

SigSocial @ SigSpace: 5:00 - 7:00 PM
Theme: BIPOC Mixer

Attention all BIPOC artists and administrators in the theater industry! You are invited to join us for a special edition of SigSocial, a monthly industry networking event, on **Thursday, April 27th** from 5:00pm to 7:30pm. This month's SigSocial is a BIPOC Theatre Mixer - a chance to connect with other Black, Indigenous, and People of Color professionals in the performing arts community. Join us for an evening of community building, sharing resources and ideas, and strengthening your professional network with like-minded colleagues. Don't miss out on this opportunity to network and connect with others in the BIPOC theater community. Register now at sigspace.net and join us for an evening of networking, community, and connection! Cash bar available.

Figure 16

May2K Millenium Mixer: 5:00 - 10:30 PM

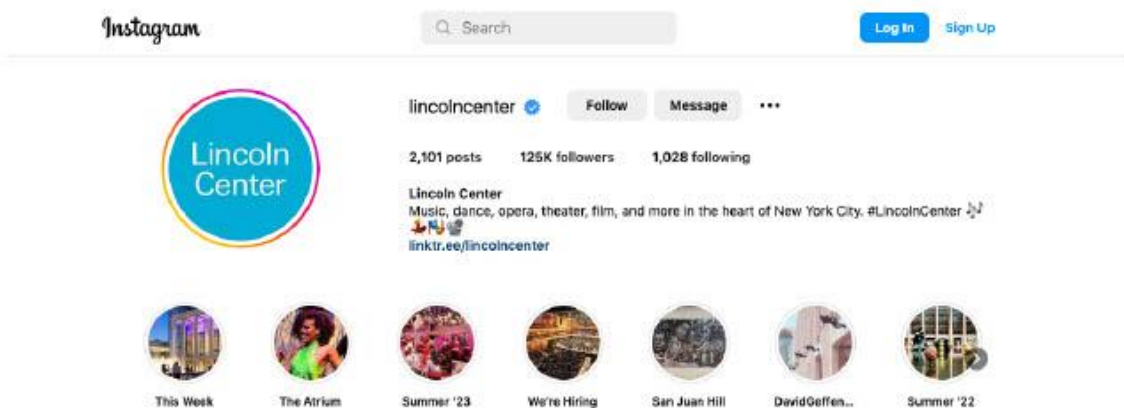
Get ready to party like it's the 2000s at SigSpace with May2K - the ultimate Millennial Mixer! On Monday, May 1st from 5:00pm to 10:30pm, we're bringing back all the best parts of the early 2000s for an unforgettable night of fun, laughter, and of course, 2000s pop culture references.

Whether you're a die-hard fan of boy bands like *NSYNC and Backstreet Boys, or you can't get enough of early 2000s fashion like low-rise jeans and Juicy Couture tracksuits, May2K has got you covered. We've got everything from retro arcade games to classic hip hop beats, and maybe a surprise visit your favorite early 2000s pop culture icons.

But wait, there's more! We'll also be hosting a raffle with amazing prizes, including free tickets to see *THE COMEUPPANCE* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins - a hilarious play that captures the struggles and triumphs of millennials.

So whether you're a millennial looking to relive the glory days, or you're just a fan of 2000s pop culture, May2K is the event for you. Don't miss your chance to party like it's 2000 all over again - see you there!

Figure 17



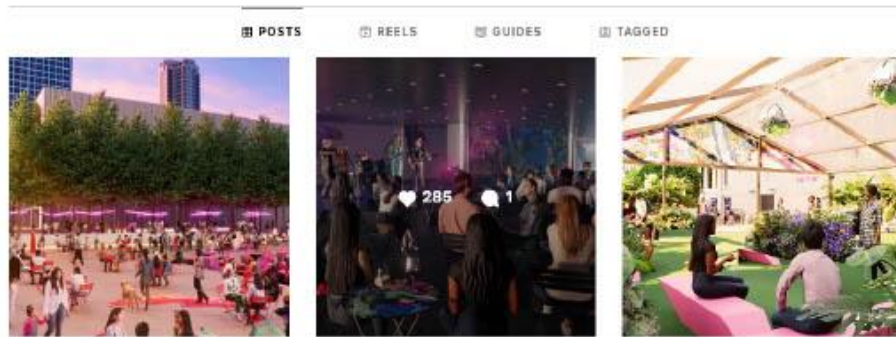


Figure 18