



Proximity and Performing Arts Attendance:

What Leads Audiences to Go the Extra Mile?

Francie Ostrower, Ph.D.
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A brief of the
*Building Audiences for Sustainability:
Research and Evaluation study*

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The University of Texas at Austin
College of Fine Arts



The University of Texas at Austin
Lyndon B. Johnson School
of Public Affairs



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Summary

Does an audience's distance from a performing arts venue have an impact on whether or not they will attend live events? And, what factors might draw people from further away? Those are the questions addressed by this brief. We found that distance was negatively associated with attendance – that is, frequency of attendance is lower for audiences located further from the performance venue. But the relationship was not fixed. Organizational size and production popularity were positively associated with audience distance, with larger organizations and more popular productions attracting audiences from further away. By contrast, audience distance was unrelated to either the organization's artistic discipline or sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., population density) of the venue location. While much remains to be explored, current findings have implications for audience-building efforts. For those seeking to expand their geographical reach, findings suggest the potential usefulness of offsite performance, but caution against expecting offsite attendance to translate into home venue attendance. Likewise, findings are consistent with perspectives highlighting links between community engagement and organizational sustainability since most audiences are likely to come from the local geographical community. Most broadly, our findings indicate that organizations consider, quite literally, ways to reach people where they are.

Introduction

A leader at a performing arts organization seeking to increase attendance recalled, “one of the ideas was to try to develop an audience that was from out of town, basically, a more regional . . . audience.” National statistics have long shown

declining or stagnant attendance at multiple arts organizations (NEA 2015, 2018). As arts organizations try to expand and diversify their audiences, widening their geographical scope might seem to be a natural strategy. Geographical reach can also be an implicit but key consideration in engaging audiences. For instance, a theater hoped to attract more diverse audiences but was located in an area with a relatively homogenous population. Thus, attracting audiences from farther away was an important means to achieving their goal. Said one organizational leader, “[This organization] is not interested in being a theater for a small subset of people who live in a 20-mile geographic, or . . . 5-mile geographic zone. . . . To remain relevant and continue to exist as an art form, it needs to speak to the population.”

But how feasible is it to attract audiences from a wider area to performance venues? In this brief, we analyze data from our study of performing arts organizations in The Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative to offer some insights. The discussion addresses the following questions:

- What is the relationship between audience distance from the performance venue and main season attendance?
- What factors are associated with organizations' ability to attract audiences from further away?

A small but intriguing group of studies have explored the relationship between distance from, and attendance at, arts and cultural venues (Biferale et al. 2024; Brook 2013, 2016; Delrieu and Gibson 2017; Dragin-Jensen et al. 2018; Evans 2016; Houston and Ong 2013). Traditionally, studies of arts attendance have mostly concentrated on associations with individuals' sociodemographic characteristics and social position (Brook 2013; Evans 2016; McCarthy and Jinett 2001). This literature on distance seeks to counterbalance that

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emphasis by calling attention to the importance of the availability and accessibility of arts and cultural institutions (Brook 2013; Delrieu and Gibson 2017; Evans 2016).

While distance studies differ in method and disciplinary focus (e.g., opera, museums, a music festival), they generally find attendance declines as distance from the venue increases. That said, these studies focus mostly on European cities. Still, a white paper that examined American data estimated that at one mile from the arts organization, the likelihood of attendance drops off by 80 percent (Voss, Voss and Park 2017), and a study of school tours and membership at four Los Angeles museums found geographical distance mattered (Houston and Ong 2013). Additionally, a national survey in the United States found that among respondents expressing an interest in attending arts events, difficulty getting to the venue was one of the more commonly self-reported barriers (Blume-Kohut, Leonard and Novak-Leonard 2015).

Taken together, the findings point to the importance of understanding the relationship between distance and attendance more closely in the United States. That includes exploring questions that remain to be answered, notably whether the relationship is subject to variations – that is, under what conditions are audiences willing to travel further. For instance, one of the studies mentioned earlier found that school tours helped overcome geographical distance from museums (Houston and Ong 2013). And a study of libraries identified the presence of nearby facilities, such as shops, had a positive influence on attendance (Delrieu and Gibson 2017). However, as some have noted, key potential sources of variation remain unexamined (Brook 2013; Moldavanova, Meloche and Thompson 2021). In this brief, we explore associations between audience distance and four factors: organizational size, popularity of production programming, organizational discipline, and the sociodemographic composition of the organization's locale.

Better understanding the relationship between distance and attendance can help organizations who are considering *how* to expand their geographical scope. Strategies around offsite performances are a case in point. Performing arts organizations have seen some success performing in community venues outside of their home sites (Ostrower 2023; Reidy 2014; Walker and Sherwood 2003). However, findings from the larger study of the Building Audience for Sustainability initiative found that efforts to use offsite performance as a gateway to attract audiences to their home venue were unsuccessful (Ostrower 2023). Studies of distance speak directly to questions about whether it is realistic to expect that people will travel to the home venue – or whether organizations will need to travel offsite to literally “meet people where they are” to expand their geographical scope for live audiences. Likewise, understanding where audiences are geographically located also contributes to current discussions about community engagement and organizational sustainability.

We turn now to summarize our process and then to present our findings.

What We Examined

Between 2015 and 2019, The Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative (BAS) awarded grants to 25 nonprofit performing arts organizations to explore audience-building challenges and the relationship between audience building and financial health (see sidebar).

The Foundation then awarded a grant to The University of Texas at Austin to conduct an independent research study of project implementation and outcomes. We compiled qualitative data on all participants, and quantitative data for a subset of 15, which is the focus of this discussion. While neither the initiative nor the study focused on distance per se, the data offer a rich source of information to explore this aspect of audience building. Here, we draw on main season ticketing data for the 2015 and 2019 seasons at the 15 organizations, comprising over 250,000 anonymized individual and household “bookers” (i.e., those who obtained tickets) for each season.¹ The majority of bookers obtained tickets by buying them, though some obtained complimentary tickets. Hereafter, we use the terms “bookers,” and “ticket purchasers” or “ticket buyers” interchangeably.

Using these data, we examined whether distance (measured as the distance of the booker's zip code from the zip code of the organization's performance venue) was associated with:

- Frequency of attendance (the number of productions the booker attended that season)
- Organizational size (measured in annual operating expenses)

The Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative

Between 2015 and 2019, The Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative (BAS) awarded grants to 25 nonprofit performing arts organizations to explore audience-building challenges and the relationship between audience building and financial health. The organizations included eight theater companies, six performing arts presenters, four opera companies, four symphony orchestras, and three dance companies. All had operating expenses over \$1 million, and over half had operating expenses over \$10 million. The average organizational age was 67 years, with a median age of 51.

As part of the initiative, organizations focused their audience-building activities on a particular target audience. The majority defined that audience demographically, usually by age (primarily millennials), some by race/ethnicity, and in a few cases by a combination of the two. The others chose a variety of non-demographic definitions, such as adventurousness, infrequent attendees, or sought to attract audiences to a particular type of work.

- The organization’s artistic discipline (e.g., dance, theater, etc.)
- Production popularity (measured as the number of people attending a production)
- Sociodemographic characteristics of the organization’s surrounding locale (e.g., population density, percent of the population with a college degree, etc.)

We assessed whether there was a statistically significant relationship between each of these factors and audience distance.² We employed mixed models (a statistical approach) to take into account that our data were drawn from different organizations rather than from a single source.³ Our analyses benefit from the large numbers of bookers in our sample. Still, these data have limitations. In particular, since all the organizations in this study had over \$1 million in operating expenses and were located in cities, we cannot assume that the findings apply to smaller organizations, and potential differences remain to be examined among organizations in urban, rural, and suburban settings.

What We Found

Organizations drew their audiences from a median distance of 10.5 and 9.5 miles in 2015 and 2019 respectively. Mixed model results show that distance was negatively and significantly associated with frequency of attendance in both the 2015 and 2019 seasons. In short, ticket purchasers who live further away from the performance venue attended fewer productions. However, both organizational size and the popularity of production programming had positive and significant relationships with the distance traveled.

As Figure 1 illustrates, larger organizations overall drew attendees from further away. Our mixed models compared audience distances at the largest organizations (annual

operating expenses over 20 million dollars) and the medium-sized organizations (annual operating expenses between five and 20 million dollars) with the smallest organizations (annual operating expenses under 5 million dollars). In 2015, the largest organizations were more likely to attract audiences from further away when compared with the smallest organizations. But medium-sized organizations, when compared with the smallest ones, showed no significant difference. In 2019, both the largest and midsize organizations were significantly more likely to attract audiences from further away than smaller organizations. Keep in mind however that all organizations in the initiative had at least one million dollars in annual operating expenses, and additional differences might emerge among organizations smaller than those who participated in the initiative.

Results also show that programming matters. Productions that attracted more people also drew audiences from further away in both the 2015 and 2019 seasons. Apparently, people will travel longer distances to the same arts venue depending on how appealing the programming is. There is no ready way to visually convey the raw numbers across hundreds of productions and 15 organizations, but a few examples help to illustrate. For instance, at one organization, the audience for the most well-attended production of 2019 came from a median of 12.5 miles away, as compared with a combined median of 9.7 miles for the season’s other productions. At another organization, the median audience distance for the most well-attended 2019 production was 11.2 miles as compared with a combined median of 9.5 miles for other season productions.

Figure 2 is based on the results from the mixed models and further illustrates how expected audience distance increases for more popular productions. It presents the expected median audience distance for productions that are low, medium, and high in attendance (i.e., productions in the 10th, 50th, and 90th attendance percentiles). As we can see, in both 2015 and 2019 the median audience distance rises as we move from productions with the lowest, to the medium, and then to the highest attendance levels. For instance, in 2019 the predicted median audience distance rises from 6.1 miles for productions in the low attendance category, to 7.7 miles for productions in the medium attendance group, to 8.8 miles for the most popular productions.⁴

By contrast with organizational size and production popularity, we found no significant differences in audience distance associated with either organizational discipline or the sociodemographic composition of the organization’s locale. When aggregated across organizations, our initial results suggested that the opera companies attracted audiences from further away. However, when entered into mixed models, the relationship did not prove to be significant. Since we have few organizations in some of the disciplinary categories, it is possible that differences might emerge in larger samples, or with information on the relative numbers of organizations from different disciplines within a locale. For now, however, our findings indicate that distance presents a crosscutting challenge to organizations in many performing arts forms.

Likewise, we found no significant differences in audience distance associated with sociodemographic

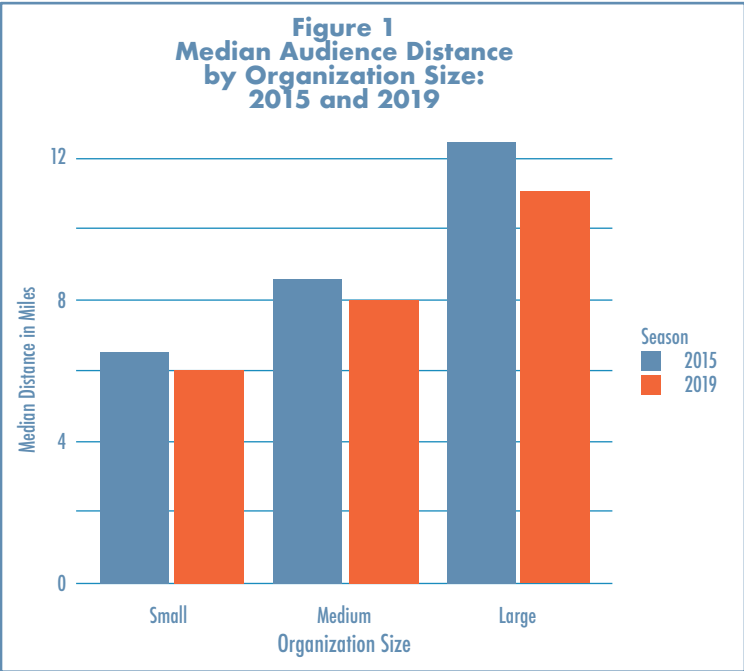
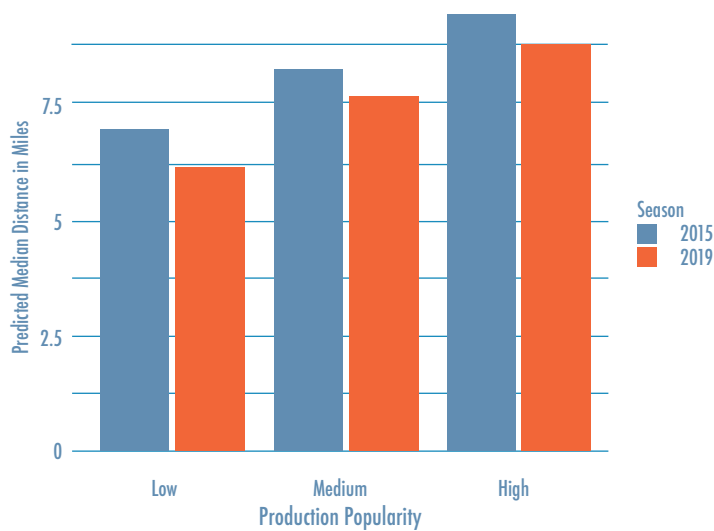


Figure 2
Predicted Median Distance
by Production Popularity:
2015 and 2019



Note: Read as follows: For the 2019 season, the mixed model predicts that the median audience distance from the performance venue for productions with low, medium, and high popularity will be 6.1 miles, 7.7 miles, and 8.8 miles respectively.

characteristics of the population in the organization's surrounding neighborhood. For instance, organizations in densely populated areas did not differ from those in more sparsely populated areas in terms of median audience distance, nor did the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree have any impact.⁵ The lack of differences also reinforce the idea that organizations in a wide variety of locales largely depend on audiences in closer geographical proximity.

Conclusions and Implications

The frequency of attendance at performing arts venues decreases with audience distance, but this relationship is subject to variation, with larger organizations and more popular productions attracting people from further distances. Much remains to be explored to understand other factors, as well as the underlying mechanisms accounting for organizational differences observed here (such as whether larger organizations' ability to attract audiences from further away has to do with marketing, production mix or other factors). The present findings, which underscore both variation and the widespread challenges of overcoming distance, speak to the relevance of continuing this line of inquiry.

The current findings have practical implications for organizations considering audience-building strategies to expand their geographical scope. Broadly, they underscore the importance of considering ways to "meet people where they are" quite literally. Offsite performances are one key case in point. Our findings support the idea that performing at offsite venues (geographically near the audiences the organization seeks to reach) is a potentially effective strategy, but caution

against expecting this strategy to bring those audiences to the home venues.

With respect to attracting audiences to the home venue, we find that programming matters. As we have seen, audiences were willing to travel longer distances to the same venue to see productions more appealing to them. Although we believe that transportation options are important to study, this finding should also serve as a caution against too easily attributing reticence to travel to the venue as a function of only logistical factors.

Recent years have seen growing emphasis on the importance of arts organizations building meaningful connections with their local communities. Doug Borwick (2012) has long contended that building community engagement is not only an obligation of nonprofit status but is also a prerequisite for expanding audiences. Likewise, a recent study identified a community orientation as a key element of high-performing arts organizations (Voss and Voss 2020). Our findings are consistent with this perspective because they indicate that the preponderance of the live audience will likely remain within an organization's geographical locale – even for the largest arts organizations. And indeed, interviews with BAS participants indicate that many of them were coming to see a stronger community orientation as key to their continued importance (Ostrower 2021).

In closing, we return to the case of the BAS organization mentioned at the opening – the theater that sought to expand its geographical reach to connect with more varied audiences. Offsite performances were among their strategies, which they initially hoped would lead audiences to then come to their theater. Although they concluded offsite performances would not serve as a gateway to their home venue, they came to value the connections they did facilitate. Interviewees variously said these performances were, "very much about increasing our audience that is younger and more diverse and not just part of [this] zip code," and "have really been effective in building that audience base, that community outreach base."

One interviewee in the larger study commented with frustration on a perceived "mentality in the arts that if we build it, they will come" (Ostrower 2023). Maybe—but among other things, our findings suggest that it depends on just how far you expect them to come.

Endnotes

1. For 2015 there were 261,075 individual and household bookers with zip code data and in the 2019 season, there were 270,113. We excluded those coded as organizational bookers since there was no way to know the zip code of the actual people using the tickets.
2. Findings are considered statistically significant if p-values are below .05, meaning there is less than a 5 percent chance that the observed difference is due to chance (i.e., we can be 95 percent confident that the observed difference exists in the population).
3. Since the data were drawn from different organizations, they were clustered (i.e., observations within an organization are potentially more similar to one another than to data in other organizations). Mixed models account for this by adjusting standard errors for correlated responses. For additional details on the variables, models and results of the statistical analyses that are summarized in this brief, please see Ostrower and Marti (2025).

4. In the model, the measure of distance was log-transformed to reduce the potentially distorting influence of outliers at the right side of the distribution (i.e., those who traveled atypically long distances). To better approximate real-world values for Figure 2, we convert the logged values back to their original unit by exponentiating them from the log scale.

5. We examined correlations between median audience distance and the organization's: census land area in square miles, total population, persons per square mile, percentage non-Hispanic White, percentage bachelor's degree or higher, percentage of population 18 years old or older, and the median family income. Note that in this analysis we included data from zip codes in the area five miles around the organization as comprising the organization's neighborhood.

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About the Authors

Francie Ostrower, Ph.D., Professor in the LBJ School of Public Affairs and College of Fine Arts at The University of Texas at Austin is Principal Investigator of the *Building Audiences for Sustainability: Research and Evaluation* study. C. Nathan Marti, Ph.D., is Database Consultant with the *Building Audiences for Sustainability: Research and Evaluation* study.

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