Admission Fees As Barrier To Entry: Joslyn Art Museum
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Built 1928-1931 as a gift from Sarah Joslyn to the city of Omaha as a memorial of her late husband, George Joslyn (“History”).

Original vision: for the museum to be accessible to all people for the purpose of enjoying music and fine art.

Designed in Art Deco style by John McDonald, the building included a concert hall, courtyard with fountain, galleries, and a Founder’s Room.
VISION

“To be cherished and respected as a premier art museum.”

MISSION STATEMENT

“Joslyn Art Museum collects, preserves, and interprets the visual arts of the highest quality, fostering appreciation and enjoyment of art for the benefit of a diverse audience.”
The only art museum in Omaha, Nebraska.

“Unlike many museums, it has therefore enjoyed the support of a broad constituency in the community” (Le Cuyer).

Well-known pieces in the collection:
- Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old*
- Jackson Pollock, *Galaxy*
- Dale Chihuly, *Chihuly: Inside & Out* (joslyn.org)

Also known for their collections of American West art, with pieces by Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin, Frederic Remington, and many others (“Art of the American West”).
At opening, no admission fee was charged.

Jan. 1965: a 25-cent fee was instituted. The justification was that it was necessary in order to cover operating costs.

1987: adult admission rate was $2, seniors and children $1.

1991 forward: admission raised by $1 every 3-5 years.

2010: adult admission at $8.

(Rummel)
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Revenue generated by admission fees only amounted to 2-4% of the total annual operating budget. This is common among museums (Grant 29).

Table 1
Admissions revenue compared with total annual expenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fiscal year</th>
<th>total expenses ($)</th>
<th>admissions ($)</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5,848,233</td>
<td>130,104</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>5,635,090</td>
<td>132,361</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,919,813</td>
<td>188,205</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Joslyn Art Museum Annual Reports, 2010-2012
Around 1989-1990, approximately half of all museums charged an admission fee (Rosett 144).

By 2008, that number had dropped to a little over one-third of museums (Grant 29).

Even for those museums who do charge admission, the majority have a timeframe each week when admission is free (Grant 30). These museums often see the bulk of their visitors during these timeframes.
Concerns about charging admission at the Joslyn were felt beginning in the 1970’s. A 1981 research study conducted by The Center for Applied Urban Research at University of Nebraska at Omaha showed this:

“Other suggestions for increasing participation in Joslyn included the extension of visiting hours and elimination of entrance fees. People would visit the museum more frequently if they did not have to pay admission, many respondents felt. This increased usage might result in increased community support for the museum. As some respondents pointed out, people will not support the museum if they do not use it and perceive it as a country club for an elite group.” (Frost 13)
Because admission revenue did not cover operating costs, the Joslyn was heavily dependent on fundraising from individuals, corporations, and foundations.

1960’s through mid-1980’s: heavy support from Internorth Art Foundation, later Enron Art Foundation, both financial and collections.

Mid-1980’s: Enron moved out of Omaha and reduced their support, and the museum lost one of three major collections that had been on permanent loan.

It was also discovered around this time that the Joslyn owed the state of Nebraska due to confusion around their tax obligations (Walker).
1993: the Joslyn issued a $20 million cultural bond (Carvlin).
1994: 58,000 sq ft expansion, Walter and Suzanne Scott Pavilion, opens (joslyn.org). New works were acquired. Admission charge was still in place (Rummel).

Attendance grew by 33% due to the expansion (Carvlin). The museum worked to continue developing educational and outreach programs.

2001: second bond issue

However, attendance figures indicated that at least 40% of visitors came in during the weekly free admission hours (Grant 28).
2013: admission charges eliminated. The Sherwood Foundation awarded a grant “to help defray costs associated with the waiver of general entrance fees” (Rummel).

Museum CEO and executive director, Jack Becker, was enthusiastic about returning to the museum’s original vision which “is accessibility; to never deny the opportunity to view original works of art in our collection to anyone because of an inability to pay” (Rummel).

Additional sources of revenue: facility rentals, special events, museum cafe, gift shop, endowment, memberships (2010-2013 Annual Reports).
Eliminating the admissions fee has not yet caused financial hardship for the Joslyn, and the data show that attendance and participation at the museum continues to grow (2013-2014 Annual Reports).

Recent and current sources of revenue:
- corporations & foundations,
- interest from investments,
- facility rentals,
- cafe and gift shop purchases, and
- museum memberships (2010-2013 Annual Reports).
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Not all museums should eliminate admission fees.

- Large, famous museums in popular tourist destinations: “The willingness of visitors to keep coming even with admissions fees rising may be attributable to what economists call the ‘elasticity of demand’--the degree to which price effects the volume of demand” (Grant 29).

- Museums that rely on admission charges to cover more than the usual 2-4% of their budget.
Works Cited


