Admission Fees As Barrier To Entry: Joslyn Art Museum
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Arts organizations are assets to their local communities and offer opportunities to educate the population and encourage participation in fine and performing arts as an enrichment to daily life, but barriers to these goals can exist. If local community members do not take advantage of and visit their museums, then the museums are not able to fulfill their missions to “[foster] appreciation and enjoyment of art” (Joslyn Art Museum home page). This paper examines why the Joslyn Art Museum removed admission fees charged to patrons after five decades. To accomplish this, I read articles in journals, trade publications, the Museum’s annual reports, and financial information to evaluate the Museum’s financial health in more recent decades, including before the economic recession of the early twenty-first century and continuing into the recovery period. When Joslyn Art Museum first opened its doors in the 1930’s, they did not charge admission. Trends later in the century caused them to implement ticket prices charged to patrons. This entrance fee did not cause a barrier to arts participation during the economically profitable decades in the second half of the twentieth century. Once the economic recession happened in 2008, the Museum felt the impact on their patronage and performed financial analysis leading them to eliminate admission charges. I will show that more American museums should follow the Joslyn Art Museum’s bold example in removing barriers to arts participation in their communities.

In 1931, the Joslyn Art Museum opened as a gift from Sarah H. Joslyn to the city of Omaha, Nebraska as a way to memorialize her late husband, George A. Joslyn. Mr. Joslyn had been a successful newspaper businessman in Omaha, and dedicated himself to the city that had helped him become the richest man in the entire state. Likewise, Mrs. Joslyn served as benefactor to many charitable and cultural organizations in Omaha. They both shared interests in the visual and musical arts. Their only biological child died in infancy, and they adopted and raised a young daughter, Violet, who later married and moved away from Omaha. The Joslyns appreciated the many opportunities they had enjoyed in the city and felt strongly about giving back.

Sarah Joslyn’s original vision for the Joslyn Memorial, as it was originally called, was that the facility would be accessible to all people wanting to attend musical performances and
enjoy the art galleries. At opening, the building contained performance space for musicians as well as galleries for the collections of paintings, sculptures, and other treasures. John McDonald designed the museum in the Art Deco style, and it opened on November 29, 1931. Annette Le Cuyer describes the original building in an article written for *The Architectural Review* after an expansion in the 1990’s:

> Designed as a concert hall with a fountain-court foyer and adjoining art galleries, the multi-use building has historically been a social centre for the citizens of Omaha, hosting not only theatrical and musical events, but also banquets, bar mitzvahs, wedding receptions, and celebrations of all kinds. Unlike many museums, it has therefore enjoyed the support of a broad constituency in the community.

Having grown up in Omaha and visited the museum myself, I can attest that everyone in the city was familiar with “the Joslyn” and considered it a treasured civic jewel.

As the only art museum in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, the Joslyn enjoys the benefit of very little competition. One might think that this allows the museum to take the lazy way out when it comes to promotion and marketing. However, nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to their current mission and vision. The museum’s vision statement as listed on Joslyn.org is “To be cherished and respected as a premier art museum” (“About”). To achieve this vision, the same website lists their mission statement as “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” (“About”). This is evident in the types of pieces contained in their collection, which are well-known in the art world and are popular
among visitors. One of the most well-known pieces in their collection is the sculpture *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old* by Edgar Degas. This piece is described on the Joslyn website as the “only sculpture exhibited by Degas in his lifetime,” and was used in creating approximately two dozen bronze castings (“European”). Another well-known piece is Jackson Pollock’s *Galaxy*, one of the earlier works in his hallmark “drip” style. A more recent acquisition at the museum is the glass sculpture *Chihuly - Inside & Out* by well-known sculptor Dale Chihuly, installed in the atrium of the building’s 1994 addition. The Joslyn is also well-known for their collections of American West art. These collections hold a special significance for the residents of the region, since they include works that tell the history of the central plains states through maps, watercolors, paintings, and more. These are just a few of the many pieces in the museum’s overall collection that draw in patrons.

At the time the museum opened in 1931, no admission or ticket fee was charged to visitors and for several decades, entrance to the museum continued to be free of charge to all visitors for all exhibits. This practice changed in 1965, when a 25-cent charge was instituted for entry to the museum. This admission price continued to increase over the years until in 2010 when it reached the peak rate of $8 per adult, with the fee for children at a lower rate. The justification given by museum leadership for instituting the admission fee charges was that it was necessary in order to cover the operational costs of the museum. Museum leadership felt justified in continuing to raise the admission fees as operational costs continued to climb (Rummel).

In reality, the revenue generated from these fees averaged only about 2-4 percent or less of the overall annual operating budgets. The table below illustrates how small the portion of
admissions revenue obtained was for the three years leading up to elimination of these ticket prices.

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

This experience is fairly common among art museums and has been for many years, especially those in areas less driven by tourism or reliant on government funding. Financial surveys conducted between 1985-1989 by the Association of Art Museum Directors and analyzed by Richard N. Rosett show that around half of the museums who responded charge an admission price, while the remainder do not.

Interestingly, even among museums that charge an entrance fee, a majority do have time periods with free admission. Rosett states, “According to the survey, more than two-thirds of the museums that charge admission provide free access for at least some portion of one day of the week, with more than half of these sponsored by a donor (in effect, a gift conditioned on the granting of some free access)” (146). This is true even for organizations that rely more heavily on admissions revenue, since Rosett also says that “Even museums whose admissions charges make up a substantial portion of revenue often provide free or very inexpensive access to their collections on certain days of the week and to specific groups” (144). This practice demonstrates that most museums realize that not all patrons are willing or able to pay an entrance fee and will
take advantage of opportunities to visit a museum at a time when the cost is significantly reduced or even eliminated.

Concerns about charging attendance fees at the Joslyn were felt as soon after implementation as the 1970’s and very early 1980’s, as evidenced by a survey conducted by The Center for Applied Urban Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1981. The purpose of this study was “to gain input from the community regarding Joslyn Museum’s strengths, weaknesses, goals, and needs” (Frost 1). Dr. Frost’s research study included interviews with stakeholders of the museum to ask a consistent set of questions in the areas of “the Joslyn permanent collection, programs, finances, capital improvements, and administration/staff” (1).

Attendance was clearly perceived as a problem among the majority of the study participants:

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)

I agree that concerns about admission prices discouraging visitors are legitimate, as this issue was a factor in the recent demise of the Washington, D.C.-based Corcoran Art Gallery. The Corcoran was dissolved after a history of mismanagement and financial and fundraising missteps caused the museum to reach the point where it could not recover a stable situation. The Corcoran’s educational programs were transferred to George Washington University, and their collection was provided to the National Gallery of Art for evaluation and disbursement to varied
institutions (American History). Many families, like mine, visit D.C. and go to free museums like the Smithsonian Institution instead of facilities like the Corcoran, where they have to pay additional fees on top of vacation costs like travel, lodging, and food.

Because the Joslyn was not overly dependent on revenue from admissions to cover expenses, the museum relied significantly on fundraising to generate income. One large source of donated funds from the late 1960’s into the 1980’s was the Internorth Art Foundation, later named the Enron Art Foundation after a series of corporate mergers that birthed Enron Corporation. This foundation provided financial support as well as collections, including three large collections of well-respected works about American West history. An unexpected change to Enron’s support happened in the mid-1980’s when Enron moved their international headquarters from Omaha down to Houston. This relocation caused corporate leadership to sever ties in Omaha and reduce the financial support they offered to various local organizations, such as the Joslyn. Out of three collections on permanent loan to the museum, one was gifted to the Joslyn, while the other two were put up for private auction to the highest bidders (Museum News). The Joslyn raised enough money to purchase one of these two collections but the third was lost to the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum in California (“Art”).

The Joslyn was clearly willing to take a risk and it paid off. Despite additional financial challenges in the 1980’s, including the discovery of back taxes owed to the state of Nebraska (Walker), the museum undertook an aggressive and successful effort in the 1990’s to build an expansion and further grow their collection. This included a fairly large $20 million municipal revenue bond issue as well as ongoing fundraising efforts (Carvlin). In 1994, a 58,000 square foot addition costing almost $16 million opened to the public. John Welsh noted in his January
1995 article, “Art of Stone,” that “[a] law of expansion, almost Darwinian in character, appears to exist for US museums whereby only those that grow, survive” (32). Even with the admissions charge continuing to increase during this period of time, “attendance after the renovation jumped about 33%” (Carvlin). This revitalization started a new trend for the museum where attendance numbers and museum memberships grew. Educational and outreach programs were developed and expanded.

Museum leadership knew they could do even better, and analysis of visitor data showed that patrons came in larger numbers during the free admission hours each week. The Joslyn “maintained one admission-free time in the course of the week, from 10:00 a.m. to noon on Saturdays, and more than 40 percent of all the museum’s weekly visitors showed up then. That revealed the public’s desire for admission to the institution to be free” (Grant, 28). Because a big risk in expansion had already succeeded, I agree with their logic in believing that additional risks would also flourish and benefit the museum.

In 2013, museum leadership finally committed to eliminating the admission fees. They had analyzed the financial situation and received a grant from the Sherwood Foundation “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 Sarah Joslyn’s original goal for the museum, and shared that the museum’s overarching aim “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).

Not every museum should consider eliminating admissions fees. One segment of the industry that should continue charging these fees includes large, famous museums in popular
tourist destinations. Cities like New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago all have museums which experience consistent visitor traffic even with admission prices as high as triple the Joslyn’s final rate (Wolgamott). As Daniel Grant points out, “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 affects the volume of demand” (29). In this vein, it is clear that admissions fees do not prevent visitors from patronizing well-known museums, perhaps due to the prestige of being able to say, “I was there.” These charges may also help control crowd size by causing visitors with less disposable income to carefully evaluate whether their desire to visit a museum is high enough to pay a price to get in the door.

Another segment includes museums that rely on admission charges to cover more than the usual 2-4% of their budget. These institutions should carefully consider whether it is wise to eliminate entrance fees. Any museum in this situation would be wise to develop a financial development plan to build up their endowment to the point where interest generated from investments would equate or surpass revenue from admissions.

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). A large portion of the Joslyn’s income over the years has typically come from other institutions, including corporations and foundations that provide large gifts to help underwrite the operating budget. Other significant sources of revenue for the museum as noted on several years’ worth of annual reports include interest from investments, facility rentals, and cafe and gift shop purchases (2010-2013 Annual Reports). Even museum memberships over the years have generated more income than admission fees. In his article, L. Kent Wolgamott
reminds readers that “For the first three years, Joslyn likely will not see a revenue loss” due to
the grant monies received from the Sherwood Foundation.

The bottom line is that more museums should consider following the lead of the Joslyn
and others who have eliminated admissions charges, such as the Dallas Museum of Art and the
Baltimore Museum of Art (Grant 28, 31). The resulting increased access to arts and culture for
all Americans will only advance society and help create more educated and open-minded
citizens. This outcome will benefit all of humanity.
Works Cited


Wolgamott, L. Kent. “Wolgamott: Joslyn to have free admission beginning May 25.”

Works Consulted


I have neither given or received nor have I tolerated others’ use of unauthorized aid.

Rebecca L Klein