

Spring 4-21-2016

Admission Fees As Barrier To Entry: Joslyn Art Museum

Rebecca L. Klein

Valparaiso University, becky.klein@valpo.edu

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Recommended Citation

Klein, Rebecca L., "Admission Fees As Barrier To Entry: Joslyn Art Museum" (2016). *Graduate Academic Symposium*. 21.
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Becky Klein

Professor: Dr. Kari-Anne Innes

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.