

The New England Dance Cultural Organizers Convening

November 6-7, 2017



NEW ENGLAND FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

Dear Colleague,

On behalf of the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), the Barr Foundation, and the Boston Foundation, we share this report of the New England Dance Cultural Organizers (NEDCO) convening November 2017 at Jacob's Pillow. We greatly appreciate all the time and thoughtfulness attendees contributed during our two days exploring how the sector can increase connectivity and support for our region's dance artists.

This convening was preceded by a convening produced by Jacob's Pillow for New England-based choreographers; together, the two convenings mark an initial step towards activating greater investment in the region's dance artists.

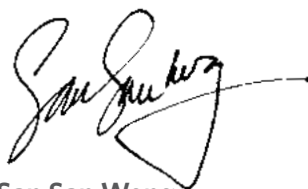
This report, written by Jennifer Calienes, captures highlights from the choreographers' convening and details the region's strengths and challenges in supporting New England dance artists. Importantly, the report makes recommendations of ways to strengthen the artistic practice, capacity, and visibility of dance made in New England.

We look forward to working collectively to build a robust ecology for New England dance.

Sincerely,



Cathy Edwards
New England Foundation
for the Arts



San San Wong
The Barr Foundation



Allyson Esposito
The Boston Foundation

The New England Dance Cultural Organizers Convening

November 6-7, 2017

Jacob's Pillow | Becket, MA

by Jennifer Calienes



Photo: convening attendees at Jacob's Pillow, by Cathy Edwards/NEFA.

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Overview, Key Findings, and Recommended Next Steps

Overview

On November 6-7, 2017, the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) convened New England dance cultural organizers (NEDCO) to brainstorm ways to increase connectivity and support for the region's dance artists. The convening was hosted by Jacob's Pillow and funded by the Barr Foundation and the Boston Foundation.

New dance leadership at major cultural institutions across New England provided an opportune moment for the region to respond to findings from NEFA's recent National Dance Project (NDP) evaluation, *Moving Dance Forward* — which identified that New England dance artists have received only 2.9% of NDP's core artist grants. Only the South and Mid America regions received less support — 1.4% and 1.2%, respectively.

The guiding vision and principle objective of the organizing partners is to understand the conditions necessary for the creation of a robust ecology for dance artists in New England over the next five-seven years; one that is highly visible both inside and outside of the region. The convening provided a platform to begin exploring how the region might achieve this vision.

The three goals of the convening were to:

1. Increase awareness and connectivity between cultural organizers who support dance artists in New England
2. Map regional strengths, challenges, gaps, and opportunities in support of New England dance artists; and
3. Develop strategies for regional cultural organizers to align their work and resources to strengthen pipelines of support for New England dance artists.

Participation was by invitation only and included over 30 dance cultural organizers (refer to Participant List, page 10) in the region who have a strong track record and/or strong potential to support dance

artists and dance makers in the region. Selection took into account geography, gender, cultural and racial equity and included new and established leaders in the field. Participants included organizational leadership from festivals, presenters, residency sites, colleges, universities, and service organizations.

The convening planning committee consisted of Allyson Esposito (Boston Foundation), San San Wong (Barr Foundation) and NEFA staff members Cathy Edwards, Sara Nash, Adrienne Petrillo and Kristin Gregory. Jennifer Calienes served as Project Consultant. Five New England dance cultural organizers were asked to serve as advisors to assist with the planning and implementation of the convening by: participating in individual interviews with our Project Consultant; reviewing the convening agenda and advance materials for participants; and serving as a session/content leader during the convening as appropriate.

Advisors included Sara Coffey (Vermont Performance Lab), Shoshoni Currier (Bates Dance Festival), Peter Dimuro (Dance Complex), and Pamela Tatge (Jacob's Pillow). Sandra Burton (Williams College) was invited but was not able to serve as an advisor. Calienes also conducted advanced planning conversations with Christal Brown (Middlebury College), Debra Cash (Boston Dance Alliance), Deborah Goffe (Scapegoat Garden/Hampshire College), Sam Miller (Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, Wesleyan University) and David White (The Yard).

Convening Structure and Key Takeaways

At the onset of the NEDCO convening, participants shared origin stories and personal histories with dance in New England ranging from 1960 to 2017. Participants then offered a list of individual and organizational strengths to support dance in the region.

Working groups assessed regional strengths based on four geographic clusters of activity and potential alignment:

- Boston, Cape Cod, and the Islands
- Connecticut and Rhode Island
- Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont
- Western Massachusetts

Strengths

Overall, the cultural organizers identified New England's strongest assets in dance, on a structural level, as the region's dance cultural organizers (including artists); a robust set of dance presenters; a multitude of training programs and educational infrastructure; dance development sites; and the New England Foundation for the Arts' grantmaking and field-building programs in dance.

» Dance Presenter Leadership

New England is recognized nationally and internationally as being home to a group of strong dance presenters: from large performing arts centers such as the Flynn Center; rural dance organizations like Vermont Performance Lab, academic settings such as the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth; to major dance festivals Jacob's Pillow and Bates Dance Festival; to Boston-based organizations such as World Music/CRASH Arts, Celebrity Series and ICA Boston. Artists from across the globe actively seek to be presented by New England presenters while the region's audiences trust they can see exceptional work and engage with national and international dance artists. Organizational leadership are highly influential individuals on a national level and are

sought-after board members and advisors of national membership organizations, serving as nominators, reviewers and panelists for major funding programs in dance.

» **Dance Training Programs and Educational Infrastructure**

New England is home to exceptional dance training programs, colleges and universities, including Middlebury, UMass Amherst, Williams College, Bennington, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, and Harvard to name a few. Wesleyan is home to Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, in collaboration with NY-based Danspace Project, and is the only curatorial program for performance in the country. In Boston, a small but dedicated group of organizations including the Dance Complex and New Movement Collective provide classes, workshops for professional and artistic development for Boston-area dancers.

» **Residency Centers and Developmental Sites**

Many of the aforementioned organizations are also home to developmental spaces for dance makers. Vermont Performance Lab, Boston Center for the Arts and The Yard have the capacity and a track record of providing developmental residencies to support New England and Boston-based choreographers. MASS MoCA has long served as a production residency site for dance makers across the country, and MacDowell Colony has recently supported interdisciplinary work involving dance makers through their fellowship program.

» **New England Foundation for the Arts**

For over 20 years, NEFA's National Dance Project has been a leader in this country in support of dance creation and touring through private, public and government sources. From the *Moving Dance Forward* report we know: "[NDP] has provided critical and holistic support for dance; made significant investments in both creation and touring; connected audiences and communities to dance; and increased artists' and presenters' connections, knowledge, confidence, and standing. Multiple sources recognized NDP's responsive and holistic approach to field needs and its multiplier effects, such as the ability to leverage additional funding. Beyond the numbers, research findings consistently indicate that creation support has allowed artists to undertake more ambitious and/or higher quality projects. Artists credited NDP as contributing to both the evolution of projects and their development as artists." In addition, NEFA is the primary cultural organizer of performing arts in the region through various grantmaking programs from New England States Touring to Expeditions and the annual Idea Swap event.

The following list of challenges, gaps, and opportunities in support of New England dance artists surfaced throughout NEFA's presentation on the state of dance in the region and through panel and group conversation.

Challenges

- » Currently, there are no clear pipelines of support for New England dance artists. There are many one-off opportunities; however, they are not connected to pathways or intentionally aligned for artists to develop and support their practice over time. Subsequently, artists do not feel networked and "do not know what next steps are."
- » There is an invisibility factor in terms of artists of color in dance, especially for those who don't come from established dance touring lineages. Work needs to be done to "court these artists directly in home communities and meet people where they are". In order to build a community that is more connected regionally and inclusive, this groundwork must be done. As one panelist indicated: "it behooves us to make data a weapon in making inequity visible and use this data to make meaningful interventions, not just reactive ones."

- » Dance alone is not necessarily a sustainable career. “People who are practicing now are pulling together a bunch of different economic streams to make things possible,” stated one participant. Regional grant programs have prioritized presentation. How can new support models and platforms encourage hybrid models, socially engaged practice, cultural entrepreneurship and community building too?
- » Dance artists and their creative teams lack administrative capacity and need professional development to boost administrative skills such as budgeting and grant writing.
- » There is energy of distrust around perceived quality of work from funders and among artists. While one participant noted a desire for “quality” not to be a dirty word, participants generally struggled to discuss the topic. Lots of questions were raised around how NEDCO could engage with choreographers to support them to go deeper into their practice; how to invest in quality; how to re-assess perceptions of quality with regard to cultural, racial, and aesthetic bias and acknowledge that quality and quantity of opportunities can go hand in hand.
- » New England is not retaining the dance practitioners its institutions train pre-professionally and New England choreographers struggle to keep talented dancers in the region. New England Choreographers’ referred to this as a dance ‘brain drain’ from the region. Choreographers and dancers are being drawn to New York and other major cities where the density of practice provides more visible opportunities for advancement.
- » Key life needs such as affordable health care and housing, earned income, retirement and savings plans as well as affordable studio and rehearsal space are important resources needed to advance one’s career. As one participant reflected “the collapse of the National Endowment for the Arts and Massachusetts Cultural Council budget in particular in the 1990s destroyed the local dance scene and it has taken decades for it to recover. Touring has never returned to its peak in the 1980s when companies also provided salaries and healthcare to dancers.” “In Boston - no one can afford to produce solo shows any more.”
- » The geography of rural New England (and weather) can make it challenging for peers (artists and cultural organizers) to connect, strategize, and see work.
- » Communities in rural New England are very different than Boston proper. As one participant noted “the vast majority of this New England land is rural. Dance populations don’t occur naturally. The bar of experience is low and communities may not necessarily be hospitable to contemporary dance.” Approaches to working in rural communities and attracting and engaging audiences through place-specific strategies warrant further investigation and investment.
- » While the Barr Foundation and Boston Foundation have proven to be substantial investors in dance in greater Boston in particular, there appears to be a lack of counterparts outside of Boston to match their investment beyond NEFA.



Photo: by Adrienne Petrillo/NEFA

Gaps

In addition to the above challenges, several gaps were raised including:

- » New England dance cultural organizers are not consistently championing New England dance artists.
- » Inconsistent use of cultural resource directories such as CreativeGround.org, which several participants felt could be useful in making the skill sets of artists and organizations whose work stems from global traditional dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Western African dance visible and accessible to one another.
- » Data is lacking on the growing dance audiences in Boston, which could be useful in understanding influencing factors for future growth.
- » New England is not home to a subset of independent dance managers, agents or producers and thus the capacity of regional dance makers is limited.

Opportunities

- » Boston is experiencing a “renaissance” in dance with a new generation of dance makers. As one presenter shared, “Through National Dance Project we started presenting new dance companies and diverse companies in Boston. Our fastest growing audiences are in dance. Dance audiences are 40% stronger than any of the other presented forms.”
- » Entry-level support for dance makers has been bolstered through New England Dance Fund, Next Steps, and Live Arts Boston. Expanded support for dance makers is available through National Dance Project. There is an opportunity to bolster support for mid-career artists to bridge these programs.
- » New England dance artists were praised on multiple accounts for being highly responsive to opportunities. This will be advantageous for any future next steps.
- » There is a desire to connect regional strengths to maximize impact by being intentional and strategic in support of New England dance makers. There is also a desire to think more creatively beyond presentation only as a result of creation to include socially engaged practice, and long-term community projects. This provides an opportunity to think expansively about organizational partners to grow public will for dance.
- » Between the series of convenings and enthusiasm of new leadership at key dance institutions, we have the opportunity to build a movement.

New England Choreographers Retreat

Calienes presented an overview of findings from the September 30-October 1, 2017 Jacob's Pillow New England Choreographers' Retreat, wherein 33 New England choreographers identified and prioritized requests for areas of support from NEDCO convening participants. Choreographers felt that these requests, if fulfilled, would advance and amplify the work of New England dance artists yielding a more robust ecology for dance in the region. They include (ranked by priority):

1. Efforts to Identify, Shape and Bolster New England Trade Routes/Pathways/Pipelines
2. Peer Convening and Learning Opportunities
3. Short- and Long-Term Mentorship (1:1) Opportunities — both artistic and administrative
4. Initiatives to Explore and Amplify the Value of Dance Practitioners' Work and Skill Sets to Other Sectors Including Social Justice Orgs, Medical Providers, Science, Youth Development Orgs, etc. — dance artists as civic actors working in community (medicine, health) raising visibility that this is happening beyond traditional presentation
5. Efforts to Address the NE Dance (Brain) Drain — How would our overall economy change if all of the people who came through New England to train, teach and perform actually stayed in the region?
6. Training Opportunities for Emerging Arts Administrators - for themselves or those with whom they were working (requests ranging from budgeting to grant writing, human resources to visa processing)

Chicago as Case Study

Participants examined the conditions and infrastructure in place that led to the success of the National Dance Project's multi-year Regional Dance Development Initiative to connect and strengthen Chicago dance makers, culminating in the "Elevate Chicago Dance" event. The October 2017 Festival attracted presenters from across the country with public performances and studio showings at nine creative spaces around the city featuring close to forty Chicago choreographers and dance companies. While panelists acknowledged that Chicago is not Boston or New England, the case study surfaced key attributes of a dance economy that would inform thinking about how to enhance regional support in New England:

- » Visible scaffolding of support for Chicago dance artists that artists generally know how to navigate
- » Value for experimentation and funding programs with risk capital
- » Infrastructure for free public programming in public spaces that compensate artists
- » Strong leaders and curators who serve as accessible points of reference for the local dance community
- » Collaboration and networking is a serious business and expected way of working, resulting in shared investment and trust

While day one of the convening focused on networking and understanding one another's entry into, observation of, and current role in supporting dance within our region, day two focused on blue

sky visioning around how participants might build a more robust ecology for dance artists in New England over the next five-seven years. Participants used the recommendations from New England Choreographers' Retreat, findings from Chicago and analysis of regional strengths, challenges and opportunities to dive into specific recommendations for improvement. The convening concluded with individual commitment statements and the promise to continue the work moving forward.

Blue Sky Visioning / Recommendations for Improvement

1. Create and circulate a public commitment statement to New England dance artists

First and foremost, it was suggested that New England dance cultural organizers develop a shared commitment statement in support of New England dance artists. This would be used as a public response to the New England Choreographers' Retreat participants and would be a way to hold one another accountable for working together moving forward. A starting point may be as simple as the following language made highly visible through participation (signatures and distribution).

It is our responsibility to get to know the dance artists in our region. We will strive to be accessible points of reference for our local dance communities. We commit to support and champion New England dance artists inside and outside our region.

The remaining three recommendations all hold a set of common core values that must be considered and imbedded throughout activities moving forward. These include direct support to New England artists, equity and inclusion, and adaptation to place.

2. Design a New England Dance Initiative

The most viable way to achieve the original vision outlined by the organizing partners and requested by New England Choreographers would be by designing a robust New England dance initiative. The design of the initiative would be informed by a culmination of best practices from National Dance Project, the former New England Dance Project (the immediate predecessor to NDP), Regional Dance Development Initiatives, National Performance Network and New York State Dance Force to create a visionary program for New England artists. This three-six year initiative would support the creation of work with direct resources to dance makers, deep residency opportunity/s and a final creative output such as a presentation, touring or community engaged project. The program warrants strong leadership and substantial funding to move forward. The program would incentivize regional presenters to substantially engage with New England dance artists and build regional audiences. The program would be a stepping-stone for New England dance makers to existing national systems and funding mechanism including National Dance Project and National Performance Network. A working group suggested staggered multi-year funding totaling \$50K per artist over three artists/year with projected overall costs of \$1.25-5 million over five years. The program aims to garner sustained support for select New England artists.

3. Invest in ongoing convening opportunities to build knowledge and partnerships and grow a movement to support New England dance artists

It is imperative that New England dance artists and dance cultural organizers have more opportunities to convene, develop, and learn alongside one another. Multiple networks must circle

and feed off one another to generate momentum and strengthen potential pathways of support.

Existing annual and ongoing convenings, including New England Presenters, Arts Presenters of Northern New England and NEFA's Idea Swap, need to find ways to focus attention on the development of New England dance artists.

New convening opportunities are warranted — along with resources and leadership — to continue moving forward with the ideas discussed in both NEDCO convening and New England Choreographers' Retreat. These include:

- » Focused regional convenings that build upon the four working groups initiated at the convening along with additional participants, partners and potential resources that include municipalities and community foundations where appropriate.
- » Artists and presenter convenings with opportunities to see work and get to know one another better (Regional Dance Development Initiative model).
- » Convenings for artists that provide opportunities to network and learn from one another and provide concrete takeaways (such as the Jacob's Pillow retreat wherein all artists learned Critical Response Process from Liz Lerman). Takeaways could focus on professional development such as cultural entrepreneurship or training to build capacity for touring and/or artistic development such as devised theatre or dramaturgical practice in dance.
- » Thematic convenings for artists and presenters to explore socially engaged practice (such as Vermont Performance Lab's Confluence Project examining creative avenues for community participation around the study and protection of Vermont's watersheds).
- » Dance educator convening to discuss best practice in imbedding administrative skills into existing dance programs to ensure all dance-training programs provide baseline skills necessary to make dance a more sustainable career.

4. Invest in responsive programming based on ideas that surfaced through the NEDCO convening and New England Choreographers' Retreat

Incentivize leadership to think creatively about how to address challenges using the core value set — direct support to New England artists, equity and inclusion, and adaptation to place — to anchor projects and closely monitor projects to determine which yield the greatest impact. Ideas generated during the convening include:

- » Institutional alignments and collaborative projects such as the BCA/BDA residency or a Flynn/VPL partnership that model pipelines of support.
- » Multi-year fellowships for artists to engage in socially engaged practice with host institutional partner/s.
- » Data collection and tracking to guide interventions; to build audiences; quantify the perception of "brain" drain; and/or to make inequities visible.
- » Short- and long-term artistic mentorship opportunities and meaningful engagement with non-NE artists and resource providers arts administrators and dance practitioners to strengthen capacity of NE artists.
- » Building public will for dance (demand side of resource building) through free public events focused on social and traditional dance forms.
- » Platforms for New England dance makers to show work and engage with community and presenters.
- » Investment in a cultural resource directory such as CreativeGround.org to spotlight the

region's dance assets.

- » Scholarship and writing on the history of dance in New England.

New England dance cultural organizers (inclusive of funders) seek to:

- » Support individual artists through New England Dance Fund, Next Steps and Live Arts Boston in particular as these programs are relatively new and provide potentially catalytic direct emergent artist support.
- » Bolster the work of dance leadership organizations in the region. Expanding networks are only as strong as the leaders in them.
- » Support the import of dance in the region and incentivize or even mandate that local and regional dance makers are offered engagement opportunities with all visiting dance makers.
- » Take advantage of existing programs to support regional dance makers. Expeditions and NEST in particular can provide sustaining opportunities for artists. The Idea Swap has a particular emphasis on artist-presenter relationships and may heighten focus on regional dance.
- » Utilize data effectively in prioritizing, identifying gaps, making the case, and tracking success
- » Keep including dance artists in advocacy efforts for all artists in relationship to affordable housing, transportation, cost of living and healthcare.

In order for the above recommendations to be successful, regional stakeholders in dance will need to collectively and intentionally invest in New England's dance artists through holistic, multi-year programs to increase the artistic practice, capacity, and visibility of dance made in New England.

Photo: by Adrienne Petrillo/NEFA



Appendix: Participant List

- John Address, Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, MA)
- Maure Aronson, World Music / Crash Arts (Boston, MA)
- Andrea Blesso Albuquerque, Boston Center for the Arts (Boston, MA)
- Ariana Brawley, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (Becket, MA)
- Christal Brown, InSprit Dance/Middlebury College (Middlebury, VT)
- Sandra Burton, Williams College (Williamstown, MA)
- Jennifer Calienes, Consultant (Marblehead, MA)
- Deborah Cash, Boston Dance Alliance (Boston, MA)
- Sara Coffey, Vermont Performance Lab (Guilford, VT)
- Sarah Curran, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT)
- Shoni Currier, Bates Dance Festival (Lewiston, ME)
- Ranjanaa Devi, UMass Amherst (Amherst, MA)
- Peter DiMuro, The Dance Complex (Boston, MA)
- Cathy Edwards, New England Foundation for the Arts (Boston, MA)
- Allyson Esposito, Boston Foundation (Boston, MA)
- Sharon Fantl, RedFern Arts Center, Keene State (Keene, NH)
- Randy Fippinger, Williams 62 Center (Williamstown, MA)
- Scott Fraser, Jose Mateo Ballet Theater (Cambridge, MA)
- Sara Mae Gibbons, New Movement Collective (Boston, MA)
- Deborah Goffe, Hampshire College (Amherst, MA) / Scapegoat Garden (Hartford, CT)
- Kristin Gregory, New England Foundation for the Arts (Boston, MA)
- Sue Killam, MASS MoCA (North Adams, MA)
- Amy Lam, Celebrity Series (Boston, MA)
- Margaret Lawrence, Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH)
- Steve MacQueen, Flynn Center (Burlington, VT)
- Sam Miller, Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, Wesleyan University (CT)
- Sara Nash, New England Foundation for the Arts (Boston, MA)
- Adrienne Petrillo, New England Foundation for the Arts (Boston, MA)
- Aimée Petrin, Portland Ovarions (Portland, ME)
- yon Tande, Southside Cultural Center of Rhode Island (Providence, RI)
- Pam Tatge, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (Becket, MA)
- Lexie Thrash, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (Becket, MA) / Consultant (New York, NY)
- David White, The Yard (West Tisbury, MA)
- Sarah Wilbur, Brown University (Providence, RI)
- San San Wong, Barr Foundation (Boston, MA)



The New England Dance Organizers Convening was an initiative of the New England Foundation for the Arts with support from Barr Foundation and the Boston Foundation.

Thank you Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival for generously hosting the event.



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and the Wampanoag Peoples*

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