Dance/USA

Forward Stance

Sketching Out a New Strategic Direction for Dance/USA

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Dance/USA

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Dear Dance Community,

As Dance/USA's new Executive Director, I have inherited a set of organizational paradigms. Some are structural, some are programmatic, some are financial, and some are relational. The field has been asking, reasonably, *what*—and *who*—Dance/USA is for.

This question is decades old, and stretches back to the 1980s, when Black dance leaders departed Dance/USA and formed the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) in response to the organization's failure to serve and represent them. Questions about the organization's inclusivity continued well into the 2010s, when community responses to the 2012 conference prompted Dance/USA to begin an intentional journey to learn and practice equity as a core value.

As our long-time members know, my predecessors Amy Fitterer and Kellee Edusei embarked on deep work to reevaluate the organization's practices and center equity in how Dance/USA operates and who it serves. Their efforts resulted in tangible shifts in Dance/USA's conferences, year-round programming, member services, operational practices, and governance structures.

Most recently, under Kellee's leadership, Dance/USA updated its bylaws in 2023, and the following year, the organization embarked on a Strategic Reframing Process, which sought a better understanding of what a "dance service organization" can do for the field.

Dance/USA staff and trustees have danced around, within, through, and in spite of complicated and outdated structures for over a decade before my tenure began in April 2026. Much of this labor—choreographed and improvised—has been largely invisible to the field. The dance continues, and we seek to lay bare where we are in our process.

Importantly, we are here to say that we are moving in a new direction.

Every step forward requires a weight-shift, and in several martial arts traditions, a "forward stance" is about readying the body for action. As Dance/USA assumes a forward stance this year, we are ready to transform our organization in form, focus, and vision.

As we shed the structures we've inherited, we ask that you—members of the dance community—be open to shedding them from your understanding of who we are. We hope that as we move towards you, you move towards us, too. In order to see the labor, the breath and sweat, involved in this movement, we must get close.

We are ready to rebuild with a new vision, strategic direction, and organizational model—one that is responsive to persistent and emergent needs in the field, capable of building field capacity for adaptive leadership and collective action, and operates as a catalyst for the work it will take to imagine, create, and implement systemic change.

This is, in essence, a rebirth of Dance/USA. And rebirths require labor. This document is a series of gestures towards what that labor might look like, and what we hope it produces.

Sincerely,

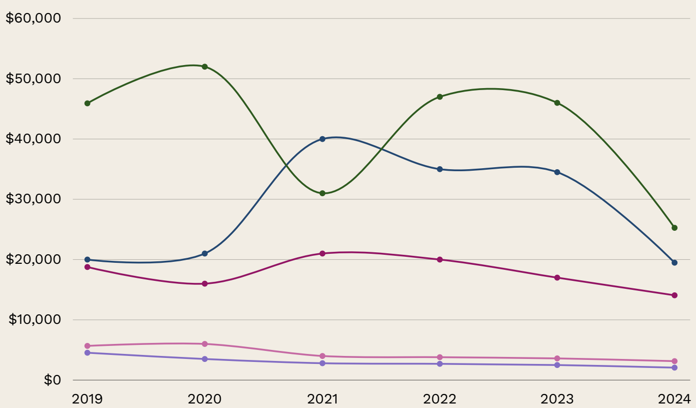
Michele Kumi Baer
Executive Director,
Dance/USA

Facts & Figures

The data here shows Dance/USA's actual expenses, contributed revenue, and staffing in relation to median values for dance organizations nationally. We've aimed to show this plainly, providing an accurate picture of where Dance/USA stands, including where it differs from the field it serves.

Contributed Revenue by Source

Median Values for Dance Organizations (2019-2024)

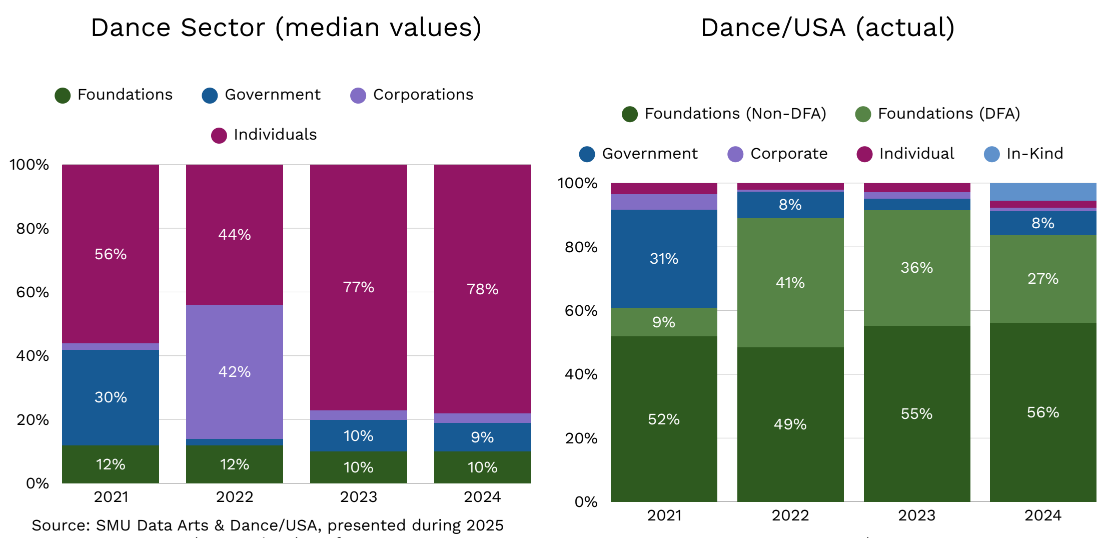


Source: SMU Data Arts

	Movement since 2019	
Type of Support	Dance Orgs (median)	Dance/USA (actual)
Foundation	-45%	-49%
Individual	-25%	-55%
Government	-3%	+13%
Trustee	-45%	*included in individual giving*
Corporate	-54%	-70%

Dance/USA's contributed revenue has moved in the same direction (downward) as the dance sector in most categories; in fact, it's fallen further from a 2019 benchmark. Dance/USA has also relied more heavily on Foundation support compared to the rest of the sector. Even when considering the difference between Foundation support for programs & operations and regranting dollars for the Dance/USA Fellowships to Artists (DFA) program, Foundation support unrelated to DFA has accounted for 49-56% of Dance/USA's contributed revenue, far above the sector's 10-12% median.

Shifting Support



Source: SMU Data Arts & Dance/USA, presented during 2025 Dance/USA National Conference

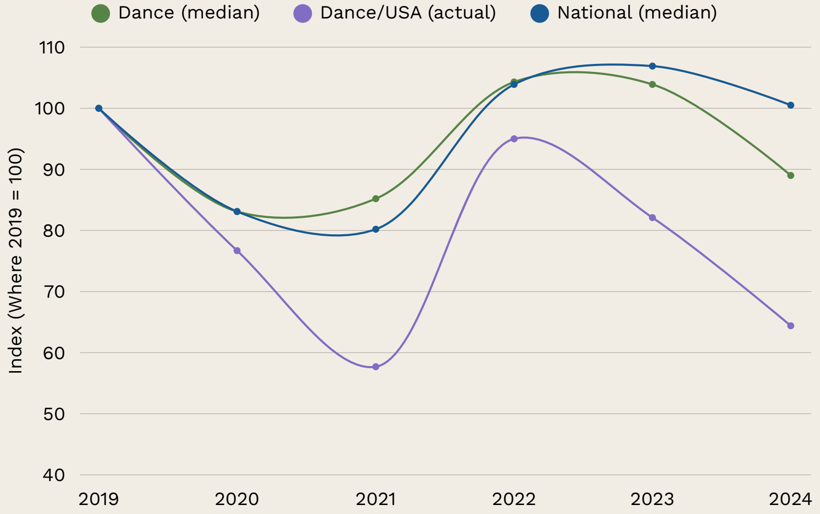
Source: Dance/USA

Individual giving makes up 44-78% of contributed revenue sector-wide, compared to just 2-3% for Dance/USA.

Government funding dropped precipitously from 2021 to 2024 for all.

Dance/USA Expenses vs. Sector Medians

Each line shows percent change from its own 2019 starting point



Sources: SMU Data Arts & Dance/USA

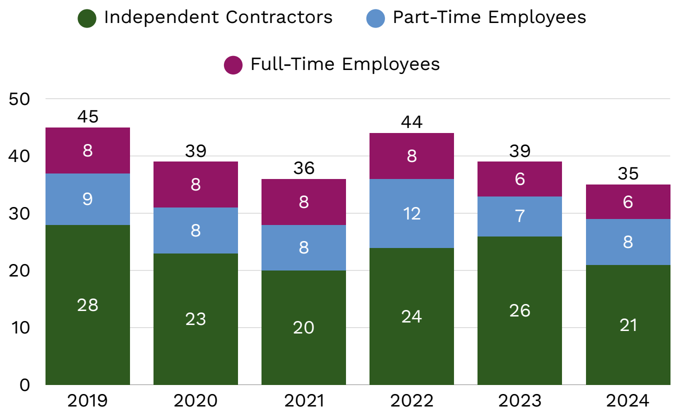
Dance/USA reflects actual expenses; National and Dance reflect sector median expenses (SMU DataArts)

Dance/USA moved through the same downturn-and-partial-recovery cycle the sector experienced broadly: expenses fell through 2021 due to closures and adjustments related to the pandemic, and climbed back part of the way in 2022 and 2023, before pulling back again by 2024. That shape matches what national and dance organizations went through, but amplified. National orgs have landed at roughly 0% change from 2019 to 2024, whereas dance orgs have cut expenses 11%. Dance/USA's expenses dropped 35.6%, experiencing sharper swings year to year.

As a national service organization, we're riding the same budget pressures as the field we serve.

Workforce Dynamics

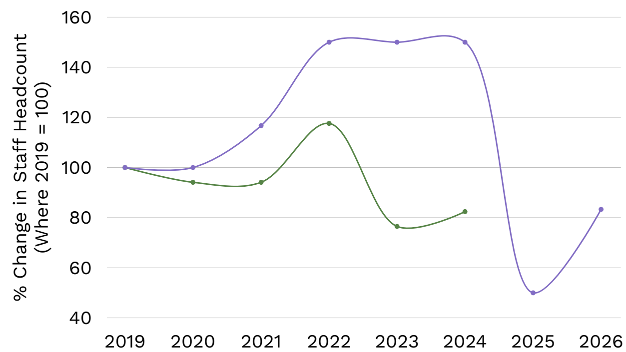
Dance Organizations



Source: SMU Data Arts & Dance/USA, presented during 2025 Dance/USA National Conference

Staffing Levels

Each line shows percent change from 2019



Sources: SMU Data Arts & Dance/USA

Sector figure here includes full-time + part-time employees only, independent contractors excluded

A familiar story appears in the data here as well. Decreased contributed income leads to stricter spending which leads to reduced capacity. Workforce counts showed a reduction in capacity across the dance sector from 2019 to 2024. Dance/USA saw a steeper version of that reduction two years after the sector at large, dropping from nine staff to three in 2025. At Dance/USA, this dip coincided with two major full-time roles being restructured into contracted agency relationships. Recent hiring in the last three months brought our staff headcount up to five, moving Dance/USA from 50% to 83.3% of its own 2019 staffing benchmark.

Dance/USA currently has six consultant contracts supporting its work alongside five staff, one of whom is part-time. Looked at as a share of total team capacity rather than raw headcount, the sector's reliance on contract labor has held fairly steady, in a 54-67% range from 2019 to 2024, even as the raw contractor count declined. Dance/USA's current mix puts contractors at 50% of total capacity, close to that same range.

A New Model

Under our new model, Dance/USA seeks to make possible a world where dance is respected and celebrated as a cultural, economic, political, social, spiritual, and physiological force.

Dance/USA exists to be a field catalyst for dance.

What is a field catalyst?

Coined by The Bridgespan Group[1], “field catalyst” is a term for organizations that help stakeholders gather enough collective force to push a field past a tipping point toward large-scale change.

Bridgespan’s research began with a question posed by the James Irvine Foundation: what does it take to galvanize the systems-change efforts of disparate stakeholders working on the same problem?

Their research identified “field catalysts” as significant intermediaries.

One example of a field catalyst is Freedom to Marry, an organization that played a key role in achieving marriage equality nationwide. FTM helped convene leaders from 10 LGBT organizations to develop a strategic road map for achieving a transformative, measurable goal within 15 to 25 years: nationwide marriage for same-sex couples.

Field catalysts like Dance/USA operate in distinct ways within their sectors. For Dance/USA, this looks like:

Capacity building - developing and strengthening the capacity of individuals and groups to imagine, create, and implement institutional and sectoral change

Field serving - addressing needs that exist in patterns across the field, thereby shifting the material conditions of individuals and groups within it

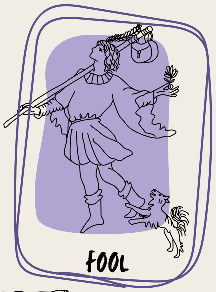
Field building - actualizing ecosystem development and collective action in service of structural changes to policies and systems that impact artists, organizations, and communities

Our purpose is to support a thriving future for the dance ecosystem, which includes both individuals and organizations.

We also understand that many dance workers operate multidisciplinarily, so our work must take a “dance plus” approach. Practices and systems in dance are interdependent with practices and systems in theater, music, literary arts, and visual arts, and we will work collaboratively with those and other fields to support large-scale change.

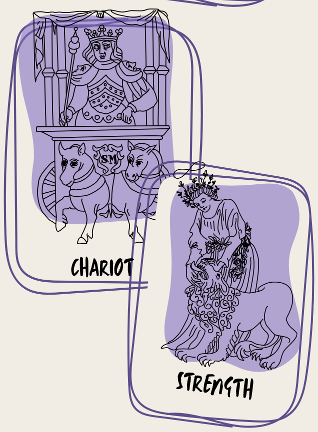
[1]Bill Breen, Taz Hussein, and Matt Plummer, "**How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change**," Stanford Social Innovation Review 16, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 48-54

We are anchored by the following core values in this transitional moment.



Courage
We'll have the courage to think and act differently

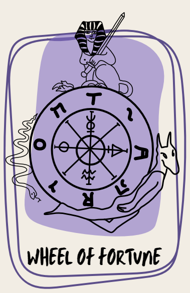
Like in any beginning, we don't have all the answers yet. We're charting a new path and choosing courage over certainty.



Transparency
We're willing to lay things bare

This report is not a finished strategic plan, but a representation of where we are right now, mid-shapeshift.

Mutuality
We depend on the community that depends on us



Dance/USA is not a large, self-sufficient institution. We're a small organization having to adapt in nimble ways and creatively deploy our limited resources. We depend on a wide range of partners, members, and revenue sources just as those partners depend on us.

Candor
We will be clear about how you can engage with us

We endeavor to close the gap between how the field perceives Dance/USA and who we truly are. We're committed to being clear about where we're asking you to participate and how we'll move together.

We are inspired by cards from the traditional tarot as avatars for how we are moving through transformation and showing up in community.

What will Dance/USA do as a Field Catalyst?

The following section details actions Dance/USA is preparing to take and programming we're preparing to activate as part of our strategic priorities for 2027-2030. This list is neither exhaustive nor final.

Build an operating model that cultivates and sustains:

- A team with the capacity to deliver core programming and strategic initiatives
- A diversified revenue model, of both earned and contributed income
- Systems and practices that enable the organization to function strategically, adaptively, and consistently

Convene dance workers and their allies to ideate and implement efforts toward institutional and sectoral change

Generate and disseminate information and resources that support the field's understanding of and capacity for institutional and sectoral change

Advocate for policies, programs, and systems that generate more equity, access, and sustainability within and for the field

Activate strategic programming and initiatives that advance solutions to persistent and emergent needs in the field

Incubate opportunities for dance workers to strengthen their capacity for adaptive leadership, organizational development, advocacy, and systems change

Future Focus

The following topics have been identified based on data collected from our Strategic Reframing Process, recent member-facing and public programming, and 2026 Forward Stance tour. They will be under consideration for the internal team to assess and prioritize. Please note that this list is not a promise but a peek into the process →

Public Support

Health and Wellness

Archiving

Touring and Presenting

Narrative Strategy

Technology

Business and Organizational Development

Real Estate

Leadership

Labor Rights and Structures

Workforce Development

Education

Membership at Dance/USA

Membership Going Forward: A Symbiotic Relationship

Going forward, Dance/USA will treat membership as *field engagement*.

Dues will not only be paid for individual benefit, but for participation in programs and activities *in service to the field at-large.* Membership will provide access to a network of leaders who are *advancing institutional and sectoral change* in the dance ecosystem.

That means membership is an investment in Dance/USA's work as a field catalyst and in a thriving future for dance. Dues help fund systems change work, and in turn, members become part of a community, network and base with real power and impact.

Bees have a symbiotic relationship with flowers, and this mutualism plays a critical role in maintaining biodiversity. Flowers are pollinated, and bees receive nectar as food for their colonies.

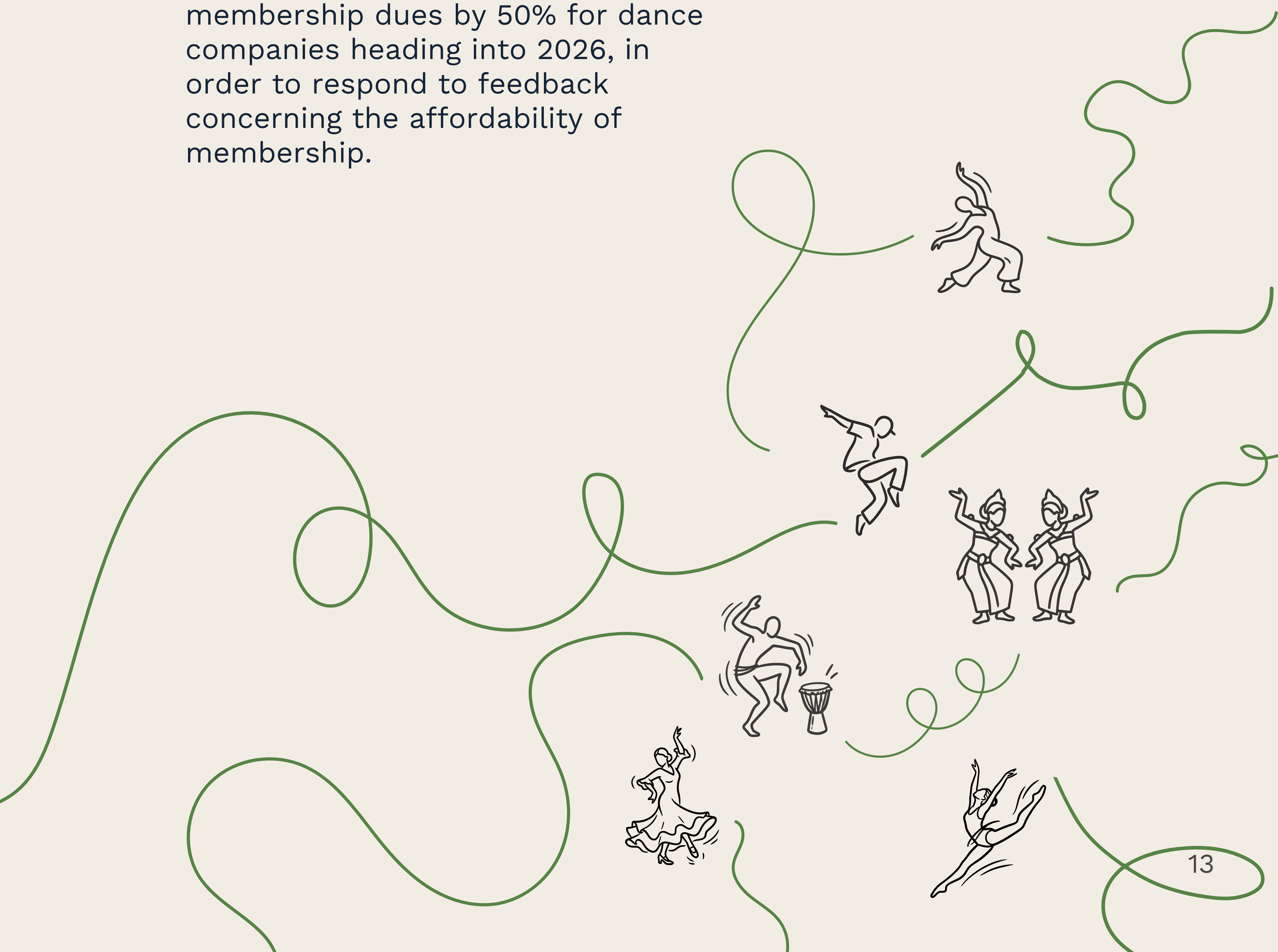
Dance/USA's membership revenue has declined by 50% since 2018. There was a drop in 2020, slight recovery from FY21-23, and then a consistent decline since.

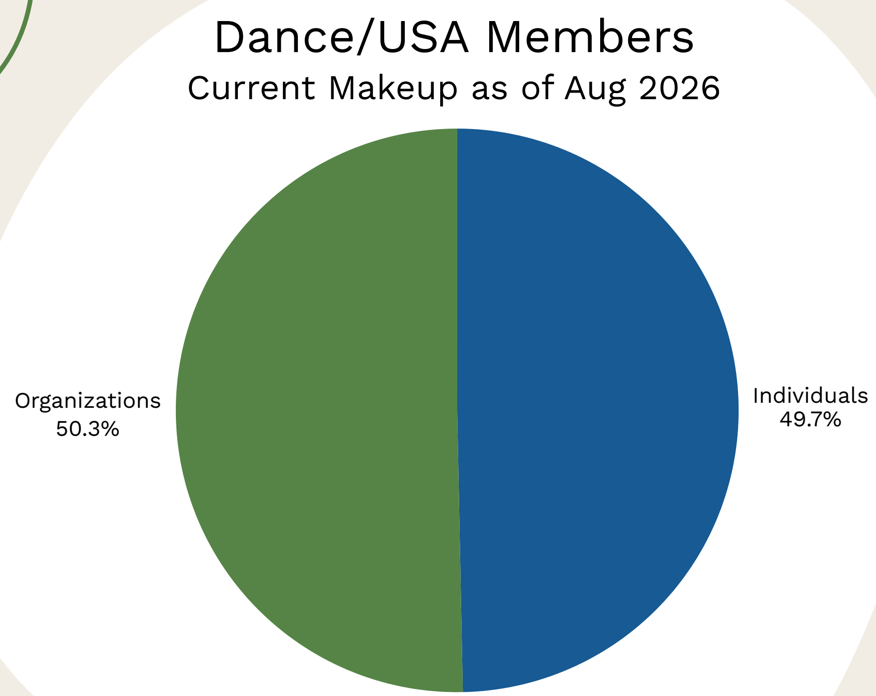
We understand the main reasons for this decline to be:

1. the economic conditions of our field;

2. ongoing inconsistencies in our Member Services department since 2021, which has impacted member communications and overall satisfaction; and

3. Dance/USA's decision to reduce membership dues by 50% for dance companies heading into 2026, in order to respond to feedback concerning the affordability of membership.



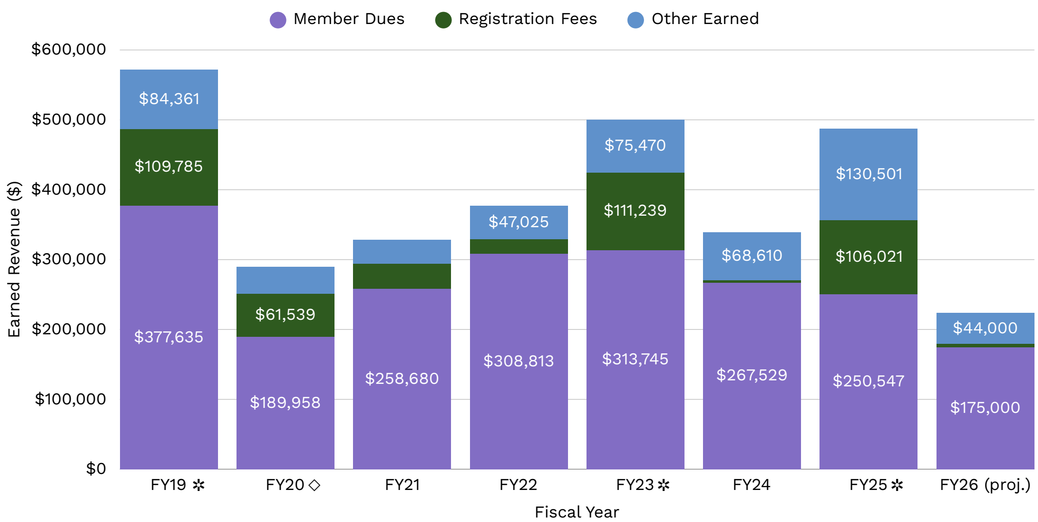


Our Current Member Base

At present, Dance/USA's member base is evenly split between those registered as individuals and those who have joined representing a company or organization.

This is encouraging, because we know a thriving future for the dance field listens to, learns from, supports, and uplifts individual dance workers *and* the dance organizations that commission and employ them.

Dance/USA Earned Revenue by Source



Source: Dance/USA

✲Denotes National Conference Year (In-Person); ◇Denotes National Conference Year (Virtual Only)

FY26 figures are projected and are shown at reduced opacity to distinguish them from FY19–FY25 actuals

On Membership as a Sustainable Model

According to ADC Consulting and RILA Group's first national scan of Arts Service Organizations in 2024,[1] of 3,241 entities serving the performing arts, only 7.5% offer services as part of a paid membership. It seems the majority of ASOs in the U.S. do NOT have membership services, across all artistic disciplines.

Dance/USA's earned revenue over the past eight years hasn't moved in one steady direction; rather, it has cycled through two separate waves of decline and recovery, with a third decline now projected for FY26.

Member Dues, the largest and most consistent piece of the total, drives most of that pattern on its own. A projected FY26 figure sees member dues at its lowest across this entire period.

Registration Fees add volatility, swinging between six figures in Conference years and less than $5,000 in adjacent years.

As the organization sees a growing base of members that identify as individuals (who pay lower rates), we predict overall Member Dues to remain a smaller piece of our earned revenue in the next few years while we reshape our programming.

[1] *"Understanding Arts Service Organizations in a Changing Arts Ecosystem,"* ADC Consulting and RILA Group: see this filtered dashboard view of their National ASO List and Data Tool

Timeline

1

PHASE ONE: INITIATION
Estimated: Summer 2026–Winter 2028

Any dancer knows initiation is an active state. Dance/USA is actively warming up for change, beginning to strengthen our operating capacity and infrastructure, with attention to operations, HR, technology, fundraising, programs, and communications.

What's in progress:

- Planning revised membership operations and staffing
- Shifting core public programming
- Securing financial resources to support this multi-year pivot
- Writing our new vision and mission to guide the work ahead
- Recruiting and vetting new Trustees

What's already happened:

- New leadership in Michele Kumi Baer
- Hiring of operations staff member and engagement/extension/revision of key consultant contracts
- Public meetings with the field in our Forward Stance tour
- Infrastructural improvements in internal technology systems, HR, and operations

2

PHASE TWO: EMBODIMENT

Estimated: Winter 2028–Spring 2029

This will be a phase of creating, shaping, and making as-we-move adjustments. We'll continue to strengthen internal operations and team culture, explore and implement resource-sharing models with external partners, birth a new organizational identity, design and launch new programs, and further test new and diversified revenue streams.

3

PHASE THREE: CONDITIONING

Estimated: Spring–Winter 2029

Here, our practice will center consistency. We'll solidify the organization's new operating model and revenue streams, and work to refine design and delivery of capacity building, field serving, and field building programs.

Dance/USA

Stay in the Loop

Sign up for Dance/USA emails for upcoming news and announcements and opportunities to get involved

Contact Us

Send questions & feedback to info@danceusa.org

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Grant Writing: Sarah Wood Torrey
Finance: ArtsFMS
Marketing & Communications: Grounded Growth Marketing
Membership Services: Mark Travis Rivera & Melissa Breault
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