

## Walnut Street Theatre: Inspiring Teens and Adults to Connect with Theater

[Walnut Street Theatre](#) is the oldest continuously operating theater in the country and is in its 203<sup>rd</sup> season.

### Project

The theatre's project was to engage 100 local high school students and one of their parents, mentors or guardians in a new, comprehensive subscription program for its 2010-2011 Mainstage Season. Theater staff hoped that the program would inspire parents to purchase tickets to the theater after the project ended and plant the seeds in high school students to become regular patrons of the arts as they entered adulthood.

#### *Key Research Into Action Findings Used by Walnut Street Theatre Corporation*

- People become more engaged in arts with the presence of children in the household.
- Adults who report having had mentors both inside and outside their family who introduced them to culture when they were children are more than twice as culturally engaged as those who had no role model (note: Walnut Street Theatre staff also saw teenagers as mentoring their parents).

### Activities

Walnut Street Theatre created a project in which high school students could apply to attend all five of the theater's Mainstage productions in 2010-2011 free of charge along with one parent or guardian. In an effort to go beyond simply providing free tickets, the subscription series included several elements to more deeply engage participating students. Chief among these elements was the expectation that each student would write a review or feature article about each play within a few days after attending. The theater partnered with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, whose editors agreed to run one or two student-written reviews or articles on each play. The theater posted selected reviews on its website as well.

Advertising through the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, high school announcements and Facebook, the program selected 100 high school students from 11 counties in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. Selected students and one of their parents received all the benefits of subscription tickets including the ability to change the dates they attended the play and receive discounted parking and restaurant meals as well as reduced cost theater classes.

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* provided a kickoff training for students on writing theater reviews. An educational consultant and Walnut staff developed a "junior press kit" for students for each play to provide them with facts about the show, interviews with cast members and the creative team and suggested topics for discussion and writing. The theater also created a blog where students could

post their thoughts on the plays as well as a public page that included select student reviews. The theater provided a mid-year and culminating event at the theater for students as well.

*On an early Saturday morning, high school students from around Philadelphia gathered at the Walnut Street Theatre to get an inside glimpse at the theater's current production of "Amadeus." As students and their parents partook of bagels and orange juice in the lobby, they spoke about their impressions of the program so far.*

*One young woman gave a comment typical of her peers: "This program opens up our generation to classical theatre, not just movies like 'Twilight.' We have been doing a lot of writing [in this program], not just going to the theater, which is pushing us to understand how the actors develop and what's going on behind the scenes. That's exciting!"*

*One mother said that the free tickets gave her and her daughter an excuse to go the theater, which they normally would not do in their busy lives. Another mother said that they had season tickets to Walnut but had not been attending much until this program.*

*The conversations were interrupted by a signal that the formal program was about to begin. For the next hour, attendees listened to and asked questions of the theater's Artistic Director and the lead actor who played "Amadeus." They also went on a backstage tour in which staff demonstrated, among other things, how they quickly changed sets during performances.*

## Results

- **Both students and parents indicated that participating in the program gave them a greater awareness of the art form of theatre.** It also brought many people who hadn't previously been to the Walnut to see productions, according to theater staff. Students said that the program helped improve their critical writing skills and that they used the suggested talking points in the study guides to converse with their parents or adult companion on the ride home. About half of the parents said that prior to the program were not engaged in the theatre. Some 80 percent indicated that they would have still participated in the program even if they had to purchase the subscription tickets.
- **Some 10 percent of the families who participated in the program purchased their subscriptions for their family in the 2011-2012 season for a total of 20 individual subscriptions.**

## Challenges

Students and parents spoke about a few areas that they thought could improve the program. The first was having more edgy plays that appealed to teenagers. One mother described the plays at Walnut Street as "old-fashioned and corny." Students also said that they wished they had more opportunity to interact with other students and see the development of plays at every stage.

Rob Weinstein, who oversaw the project, said that a few participants criticized the staff for only posting positive reviews of plays. Weinstein also said that the student blog was not nearly as active as staff had hoped, with only a few students regularly making posts to it.

### Lessons Learned

- **Create a partnership with a local media resource, such as a newspaper.** The opportunity to have their writing published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* appeared to be a strong incentive for continuing student engagement in the project. During the project, between 98 and 90 percent of students submitted articles or reviews for each play. Project director Rob Weinstein believes that the project would not have had such high student participation if the only outlet for their writing was the theater's website.
- **Provide a subscription program, rather than just free tickets, so that participants can experience the benefits of buying subscriptions.** "I think it's less likely that parents would buy subscriptions if they don't know the benefit of subscriptions," Weinstein said. "You don't really know the benefits until you experience them."
- **Create many opportunities for students to learn about the creation of art and interact with one another.** Students crave the chance to be with their peers and to learn more about the creation of art. In their feedback, students wanted more behind-the-scenes programs to learn about the creation and production of plays and more opportunities to meet with and interact with other students.
- **Provide a chance for parents to interact with their teenagers as a way to engage the parents in an arts organization.** The project challenged the idea that teens will not go anywhere with their parents. While the program was targeted to the students, parents relished the opportunity to play even a marginal role in the activities.
- **Maintain strong communication with the parents of each participant throughout a project.** While students are the main focus of such an effort, it is important to make sure that the dialogue with parents remains strong throughout the program as it is the parents who will be the ticket buyers once the program ends.

### Next Steps

With the support of its Artistic Director, the Walnut Street Theatre is using its own funds to continue the program on a smaller scale during the 2011-2012 season. The theater is providing tickets to 35 students and one parent to the dress rehearsal of each play. It is continuing to partner with *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and provide students with junior press kits and the opportunity to get feature articles published in the newspaper. Theater staff are applying for larger funding to enable them to provide the full program, with subscription benefits, in the 2012-2013 season.

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