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## Choreographers Make Their Own Kind of Administrative Dance

“Spreadsheets? That’s just the choreography of numbers,” says a participant in a program that envisions an array of approaches to administrative needs.

By Margaret Fuhrer for The New York Times

Published August 26, 2023



Dominic Moore-Dunson, a choreographer, at the National Center for Choreography at the University of Akron. He was part of the first group to participate in the Creative Administration Research program. Credit... Josh Chaney for The New York Times

Nobody becomes a choreographer because they love spreadsheets. The business side of dance — budgeting, marketing, scheduling and fund-raising — can seem very far away from the in-the-body creative work of the studio and the stage.

During the 20th-century dance boom, dance companies often formalized that divide. Relatively plentiful arts funding meant successful choreographers could hand over administrative duties to

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executive directors and their well-staffed teams. Maintaining a church-and-state separation even became a kind of artistic virtue: A working choreographer shouldn't let the practical distract from the creative. Recently, the choreographer Dominic Moore-Dunson asked a mentor, an established dance maker, for marketing advice. The mentor told him not to worry: "Your job is just to make the art."

But that is now no longer feasible, or even desirable, for most choreographers. Today's dance makers are far more likely to operate on a project-to-project basis because of limited resources, the desire for creative flexibility, or both. That means they're often their own administrators — spreadsheets are very much a part of their everyday life. But the dance field's business "best practices" are decades old. And though there are a variety of grants and residencies to bolster choreographers' creative endeavors, for a long time, there was little support for the less-glamorous work of dance administration.

In 2020, the National Center for Choreography at the University of Akron in Ohio began the Creative Administration Research program to address that gap. The initiative challenges the perception of arts administration as a duty to be endured or delegated. Instead, said Christy Bolingbroke, the National Center for Choreography's founding executive and artistic director, it proposes that choreographers use their considerable creative powers to help imagine structures better suited to their needs. "It's expanding artists' creative practice beyond, just, 'I make dances,'" Bolingbroke said.

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Christy Bolingbroke, the National Center for Choreography’s founding and artistic director, with Moore-Dunson. The program, she said, is “expanding artists’ creative practice beyond, just, ‘I make dances.’”Credit...Josh Chaney for The New York Times

So far, the Creative Administration Research program has helped 21 dance artists, including Moore-Dunson, envision an array of different approaches to administration. A newly announced \$1 million grant from the Mellon Foundation means the program will be able to mount a second phase over the next three years.

Most of the big-picture administrative challenges choreographers face, including scarce funding and dwindling audiences after pandemic shutdowns, aren’t unique to dance. But dance artists may be particularly well equipped to handle them.

“There’s no playbook to follow in making a dance, or in dance thinking,” said the choreographer [Silas Riener, who, with his longtime collaborator Rashaun Mitchell](#), participated in the first round of the Akron program. “Which means dance artists, generally, are problem solvers. So there’s a lot of ingenuity in the field, and now you’re seeing that in the administrative practices.”

Like its older peer, Florida State University’s [Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography](#), the National Center for Choreography at the University of Akron offers several artistic programs and

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residencies. But building better infrastructure for dance has been a special focus for the Akron hub since its incorporation in 2015. Instead of following the typical residency model — we'll give you some money and a space, you make a dance — it aims to strengthen the larger dance ecosystem. “We look at the foundations that people get to dance on and figure out how to fill in some of the cracks, so other people can have better footing,” Bolingbroke said.

The Creative Administration Research program pairs choreographers with what it calls thought partners, collaborators who might be business-minded arts administrators, funders or presenters, but who are also often working artists. The composer and educator [Byron Au Yong](#), who has been a thought partner for the choreographers Raja Feather Kelly and Takahiro Yamamoto, said the breadth of that adviser pool sets the initiative apart.

“There are business and marketing consultants out there, but unless you have an embodied, lived experience of working in the arts in the United States, how can you advise a dance artist?” Au Yong said. “There will always be a disconnect.”

During a series of online retreats, each team reflects on how the choreographer makes work and what kind of structure might best support their process. The program has also hosted two summits, bringing several dozen artists and leaders to the center's University of Akron home to share their insights into creative administration. (And to dance together — or to “[physicalize their administrative thinking and dreaming](#),” as a news release said.)

For some participating choreographers, the initiative has prompted dramatic change. Banning Bouldin formerly ran her Nashville organization, [New Dialect](#), as a conventional dance company, though her goal was to create a dance hub for the city. A thought partner, John Michael Schert, helped Bouldin recognize that the company model “only fit maybe 40 percent of what we were doing,” Bouldin said, and that it was hampering the organization's community organizing and engagement efforts. Now, rather than employing a small roster of full-time dancers, New Dialect dedicates more resources to professional development workshops, residencies and performance production.

“Philosophically, we made a really meaningful shift,” Bouldin said. “We're serving more artists and more of the community in a way that's financially sustainable.”

Rosie Herrera, the director of [Rosie Herrera Dance Theater](#), found that Creative Administration Research affirmed many of her existing ways of working. Through conversations with thought partners and other artists in the program, she said, she realized that “as a Latina in Miami, who started out just making work with her friends,” she had intuitively avoided many “best practice” traps.

“There was no hierarchy in the company, and we'd always done things like bartering — you know, ‘I'll dance in your drag show, you do costumes for my show,’” Herrera said. The program allowed her to “choreograph time for reflection,” to articulate how those practices had grown out of the inclusive values that also shape her artistic process.

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Moore-Dunson said that spreadsheets “tell a story, the same way the dance I’m going to rehearse later tells a story.” Credit...Josh Chaney for The New York Times

Administrative insights sometimes seep back into creative work, too. Bouldin found that letting go of the company director role altered her perspective on studio practice; though she still choreographs, she now feels she’s a facilitator more than a leader. “I’ve gone from a sort of outside or in-front-of relationship to the artists that we’re working with to being inside of these teams and the groups, part of the community,” she said.

In Creative Administration Research’s first phase, the National Center for Choreography team invited most of the choreographers. The second round of the program will feature open application periods, the first beginning Sept. 5. In addition to creating thought partner-choreographer teams, the 2.0 edition will also “seed administrative experiments,” Bolingbroke said, allowing artists to propose specific short-term projects — renting a dedicated operational space, making a temporary administrative hire — which the program will both fund and facilitate. Between large national summits in Akron, the program will host smaller gatherings of artists and administrators in other cities around the country. And a book of essays on the program’s findings is in the works.

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Bolingbroke hopes these expanded efforts will help spread the gospel of creative administration not just outward, but also upward to larger arts institutions. There is only so much individual artists can do to fix administrative problems that are often systemic, especially in the wake of pandemic shutdowns.

“We’re in a scary place right now, with a lot of arts organizations cutting back or closing,” Bolingbroke said. “I think as a whole field, we’re going to have to reimagine our way forward together.”

Dance residency centers have not fared well in the post-shutdown reckoning. In January the American Dance Institute announced it was selling its Lumberyard campus, formerly an important dance incubator; in June the choreographer Stephen Petronio decided to shutter his residency center, which had been a haven for dance artists. The center in Akron has survived partly by applying the creative administration principles championed by its own programming.

During its eight years of existence, the center has tested out and rethought several administrative positions, seeking the right balance of stability and flexibility. (For a while, Bolingbroke was its only full-time employee.) That adaptive approach has helped the center weather an uncertain climate. In the past year, it has not contracted but expanded, adding more staff and programming.

As a young organization, “we don’t have too many ‘We’ve always done it that way’ habits that we have to let go of,” Bolingbroke said. “We’re evolving alongside our artists.”

Few choreographers emerge from the program with solutions to every administrative problem. But those problems feel less daunting, Moore-Dunson said, now that he thinks of administration as part of his art.

Before Creative Administration Research, “there was admin over here and artistry over there, and I tried to spend as much of my time as possible on the artistic side,” Moore-Dunson said. “Now I’ve started to see them as one and the same. Spreadsheets? That’s just the choreography of numbers. They tell a story, the same way the dance I’m going to rehearse later tells a story.”