



Flexibility and Fidelity in a Drop-in, Open-Door Art Studio Program

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“Hello, and welcome to New Urban Arts! Let me tell you a little bit about this place. We are an afterschool art studio for high school students. We don’t have any attendance requirements, so you can come when you want, stay as long as you want, and return as often as you want. Would you like a tour?”

That is how each young person is greeted on their first visit to the afterschool arts program where I work. Knowing there are competing demands on young people’s time, we immediately remove one barrier to their participation. Open-door, drop-in programming, along with other practices, has allowed us to enroll and retain a large number of high-school-aged youth.

The impact of attending out-of-school time (OST) activities for youth of all ages is widely known and

documented (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). The effects of afterschool programs specifically on high-school-aged youth include improved school attendance and graduation rates (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2016). However, these older participants are harder to attract and keep engaged than younger children, who are a captive audience (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Deschenes, Little, et al., 2010). High school youth can deal with the competing and compelling demands on their time by voting with their feet.

For over 20 years, New Urban Arts has successfully attracted and retained high school participants in our community-based arts studio in Providence, Rhode Island. Over the course of my two-

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year National Afterschool Matters Fellowship, I dove in to better understand how the open-door nature of New Urban Arts supported young people's participation and how that participation, in turn, supported their development and postsecondary paths. A key finding was that, for an open-door program to feel safe and supportive for young people, the providers and other staff need to be particularly attentive to their own consistency in implementing programming. Fidelity of program offerings, social interactions, and access allows young people to be flexible in how, when, and in what ways they engage, allowing them to practice and stretch their own personal agency. Although my research is situated in the context of an arts studio, I believe some of our practices can be applied to other open-door and drop-in spaces that may have high numbers but struggle with deeper engagement.

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About New Urban Arts

Founded in 1997 by a small group of high school and college students, New Urban Arts is now the largest high school afterschool arts program in Rhode Island. New Urban Arts is an independent nonprofit, not affiliated with any larger institution. Our mission is to build a vital community that empowers young people as artists and leaders to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives. Programs are free to participants, sustained by a mix of individual, state, federal, and foundation funding. Since 2007, support from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program has allowed us to significantly invest in our program staff and increase our capacity to meet the demand for afterschool programming.

The long-term goal of our school-year program is that our participants make a permanent place for creativity and imagination in their lives. Our interim goals are that they:

- Develop close, positive relationships with nonparental adult mentors and peers
- Acquire skills and knowledge in the arts
- Begin to develop their unique artistic voice
- Graduate from high school on a path toward postsecondary success

Our participants complete an end-of-year survey each spring. Over the past four years, on average:

- 93 percent of participants reported having built strong and trusting relationships with peers and adults.
- 91.5 percent said they had improved as artists.
- 96 percent said they had developed a way of creating that expresses who they are.
- 84 percent had developed a better idea of what they want to do in the future.
 - 98 percent said they are open to trying new things.
 - 94.5 percent said they had developed more confidence.
 - 94.5 percent said they feel safe and supported. (New Urban Arts, 2018)

During the school year, instruction is offered by part-time staff (resident artist mentors) and volunteers (volunteer artist mentors). All are artists, both emerging and established, who apply for mentoring positions and are chosen by current

program participants through a competitive process. Montgomery et al. (2013) found that young people want to learn from experts. That is why we choose artists who are experts in their craft. Once artist mentors are chosen, full-time staff provide yearlong training and support that cover youth development, community building, reflective practice, and conversations to help artist mentors process their experience and prepare for their mentoring sessions. In 2019, we had four full-time program staff, five part-time resident artist mentors, and 12 volunteer artist mentors. Volunteers serve four hours a week from October to May and receive a stipend.

On any given day during program hours (3:00 to 7:00 pm), someone walking into New Urban Arts might see between 20 and 50 participants in the studio. Average attendance for the past three years has hovered around 70 participants per day, but they are not all in the studio at the same time. The open-door nature of the program means that young people come and go depending on when they get out of school and when they need to be home or elsewhere.

On that average day, there might be a group of young people sitting around a table up front working

on a mix of projects such as paintings, illustrations, or sketchbooks, while mentors sit with them or move between them and other participants. There is almost always a group of teens at another table starting up a game of Uno, while two kids sit at the upright piano in the front window pecking out the melody to whatever pop hit is on their minds these days. In the back of the studio, our screen printing mentor is setting up projects in various stages of development with three or four young artists at a time. In the lower level, there is usually a large group playing music together in the recording studio; some are jamming with a mentor, while others are editing recorded music with another mentor. Some participants are at sewing machines or working on hand-sewing projects. In other corners, participants are meeting with our A Life After School coordinator or working on homework, either alone or with a studio study buddy. We have a set of computers with design and music software, so teens are often gathered around the computers working on design projects, listening to music together, or writing papers.

Over the past four years, New Urban Arts has enrolled, on average, 620 young people each year. An average of 20 percent of those young people attended programming for 30 or more days that year (New Urban Arts, 2018). Among our participants, 81 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; the percentage is higher for teens who attend at least once a week, at 88 percent (New Urban Arts, 2018).

The biggest impact of having a free open-door, drop-in program is that we are able to reach young people who otherwise would not participate in afterschool programs or arts programs, especially low-income youth of color. Research shows that these young people do not have as many opportunities as more affluent youth to engage in the arts (Montgomery et al., 2013; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011) and have less access to safe, neutral spaces (Bryant et al., 2013). Initial findings from my action research at New Urban Arts support the idea that programming that is flexible in its attendance and participation requirements, is

focused in its offerings, and provides a high level of choice in how young people engage can increase the participation of high-school-aged youth in OST programming.

What Makes High School Programming Successful

High school programs face challenges that elementary and middle school programs don't. Most importantly, high school participants have more agency than younger children in how and when they participate. Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities they assume compete with OST opportunities.

A number of studies have found key attributes of programs that successfully attract and retain older youth. The particular success of New Urban Arts lies in how we combine these characteristics of successful afterschool programming for older youth.

Programming is based in the community and not in a high school building (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al., 2010). Programming based in the community rather than in the school has been shown to better attract and retain older youth for a number

of reasons. One is that it gives participants opportunities to socialize with community members and peers who don't attend the same school. For young people who feel disconnected from their school, community-based programming allows them to engage in learning on their own terms. As an independent nonprofit organization, New Urban Arts is not housed in a school; we are located within close proximity of three high schools on a major public bus route. Location has been critical for us. We are separate from school but are close enough that young people can easily walk or take public transit.

Professional experts offer instruction using professional materials and equipment (Deschenes, Little, et al. 2010; Montgomery et al., 2013). Older youth want to learn from experts who have real-world experience. At New Urban Arts, our core teaching staff are practicing artists. As part of the hiring process, applicants submit samples of their work. During their

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interviews, participants ask them questions about their creative practice. Furthermore, participants have access to professional materials and equipment, such as a screen print studio, a black-and-white darkroom, a music recording studio, computers with digital design software, and professional-grade sewing and serger machines.

The program offers leadership opportunities (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al. 2010; Holstead et al., 2015; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2016). Research finds that, for both middle- and high-school-aged youth, opportunities for leadership and voice are key for long-term retention. At New Urban Arts, youth leadership takes many forms. At the most basic level, youth take the lead on their creative projects; mentors don't set projects for all participants to complete. If a young person wants to make something, they take the lead, and the mentors are there to provide guidance and technical support as participants make their vision a reality. Participants who want to take on more leadership can join the Studio Team Advisory Board (STAB, a name created by participants). This youth advisory board, which meets twice a month, is the central group that helps with mentor hiring. STAB members provide guidance to the organization and program staff, help to host events and activities, and play a key role in orienting new participants to the studio.

Participants have access to postsecondary support (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al., 2010; Holstead et al., 2015; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2016). High school students are thinking about their futures. They are drawn to programs that provide resources to support them in gaining skills and knowledge to help them after high school. New Urban Arts employs a full-time postsecondary advisor to support participants with applying to college, putting together a résumé, finding summer experiences and employment opportunities, and assembling an art portfolio.

The program fosters community (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al. 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2016). Developmentally, older youth are looking for spaces with strong feelings of community and belonging. As they learn to navigate new spaces and find themselves with new levels of responsibility, they are looking for places and groups that provide a sense of community

that is different from family and school. They are eager for spaces that are made for them and that are physically and emotionally safe. New Urban Arts focuses on building community among our staff, volunteer artist mentors, and participants. We accomplish this goal through mentor and student orientations, introductory events to help staff and participants get to know each other, and celebratory events such as gallery openings.

Flexibility and Fidelity

In a 2008 study, Lynda Okeke asked why middle school children dropped out of afterschool programs. She found that adolescents have different needs from elementary-aged children. They need programming that is focused or narrow in its offerings, that is faithful and consistent, and that is flexible in how participants engage (Okeke, 2008).

Over the summer of 2018, I conducted research to understand the impact of New Urban Arts programming and how its structure prepared participants for life after high school. I developed an online survey and sent it to 426 alumni who had graduated from high school in 2015, 2016, and 2017. Of those 426 alums, 25 fully completed the survey. The low response rate limits the ability to generalize the findings. In addition, the alumni who completed the survey self-selected to participate; thus, their outcomes may be different from the outcomes of alumni who choose not to complete the survey.

When asked how New Urban Arts is different from other afterschool programs or activities, one survey respondent said:

New Urban Arts is different ... because it's structured in a way that allows for choice. The loose structure really allows for an environment that adapts to the needs of youth, rather than make them adapt to the space. And having artist mentors serve as beacons of activities that students can choose to interact with is also core. In all, New Urban Arts is an ideal example of how to structure fluidity.

Arguably, there is tension between structure and fluidity, between fidelity and flexibility, but New Urban Arts embraces the challenge of building consistency into program design while maximizing flexibility for

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participants. Staff and volunteers are held to high standards related to program structure so that we can give participants an experience that feels relatively unstructured, offering freedom so they can choose how and when to participate. Through monthly trainings for volunteer mentors and weekly staff meetings, our staff and mentors support each other in being as consistent as possible in their interactions with participants. For example, we address participants by name, greeting them individually when they come in and saying goodbye when they leave, each and every day.

To take another example, mentors have to be responsible for setting limits in a drop-in art studio where participants direct their projects. The same participant or group can't be the only ones using a specific material or equipment when other people also want to use it. However, mentors are flexible so that, if no one else is signed up, one young artist can spend the whole day using that material. This rule sounds very simple, but it requires a lot of discipline in an environment that, at first glance, appears amorphous.

Community and relationship building are also critical to maintaining physical and emotional safety in a drop-in studio. Where young people come and go throughout the program day, it is up to the mentors to get to know participants, starting with going out of their way to introduce themselves. As the year progresses and regular participants become familiar with mentors and the studio, they naturally form strong relationships with specific mentors. At this point, the mentors must stay open and accessible to new participants who want to work with them, while at the same time maintaining the relationships they have already built. Mentors and program staff reflect throughout the year on how to balance this dynamic, which can be a new experience for mentors whose background is in the arts and not in youth development or education.

My survey asked alumni how the structure of New Urban Arts had affected their participation. It also asked hypothetical questions about how changing aspects of the drop-in nature of New Urban Arts programming would have affected their participation. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Respondents had the option to leave comments beside their answers to these questions. More comments were left beside the “less likely to participate” responses than beside the “more likely to participate” responses. Generally, these responses emphasized the point or went into specific detail about the respondent’s thinking. For example, respondents left these comments on the question that asked about homework:

If I were required to do homework before working on an art project I would feel discouraged. Part of what makes New Urban Arts great is the power of choice. I would usually go to New Urban Arts after practice or a club and the last thing I wanted to do was think about stressful commitments weighing down on me. What I felt I needed after a long day of school and practice (and especially before going home), was connecting with my mentors or writing poetry. New Urban Arts really encourages getting what you NEED. Having the choice to do so made all the difference for me.

No. Just no. I can do homework at home.

Similarly, alumni explained their responses to the proposed requirement to attend for two hours each day for two days a week:

It's such a hard concept but I was definitely staying there for more than two hours at a time. However, as a high school student I would say being told something is mandated might make me feel an-

Table 1. Survey Results: How Programming Changes Would Affect Participation

HYPOTHETICAL PROGRAM CHANGE	More likely to participate	Less likely to participate
If required to attend 2 hours per day, 2 days per week	36%	68%
If required to complete an hour of homework	24%	76%
If required to arrive either at 3 pm or at 5 pm	16%	84%
If required to stay for a full 2 hours	8%	92%

chored down and not want to attend. Personally, it was such a place that embodied freedom compared to everything else that was rigid in my afterschool life. I knew I could come back to New Urban Arts and just delve right in.

With the many commitments that I had at the time, it would have been difficult to also add fixed blocks of time into my schedule. All of the other programs/activities I participated in took a fixed portion of my time that sometimes contributed to my stress. With New Urban Arts it was the opposite.

Fully 80 percent of survey respondents were involved in other activities after school in addition to New Urban Arts, including sports, school-based clubs (debate team, theater, and so on), religious activities, jobs, and other youth organizations.

An open-ended question asked what made New Urban Arts different from other afterschool activities. Respondents' answers fell into the following categories: community, choice, freedom, acceptance, safety, free (that is, no cost), arts, and leadership. Below are some of the open-ended responses:

New Urban Arts is different because of its unique environment. The structure is flexible in a way that allows you to drop in and head out at your convenience. New Urban Arts also has tons of workshops and activities to choose from.

[T]he staff encourage growth and development as an individual. It was not just task based, but rather the environment itself served as an expression of freedom—which was among the most liberating after school activity that I could possibly imagine.

You are free to enter and leave as you please, the staff actively works to make students feel appreciated and welcomed, and students are able to engage in activities that they are genuinely interested in without feeling forced to do anything they don't want to do.

Implications for the Field

These responses say a lot about how New Urban Arts attracts older youth. First, our policy on attendance is that we don't have one. Ironically, this means participants attend at high levels; some attend every day, and some drop by a couple of times per week or per month. Adopting an open-door, drop-in model like ours may scare program providers and funders who are looking to engage a specific number of young people for a specific number of days. Many afterschool funders want to see attendance metrics; they often tie attendance requirements to funding. Of the programs

Deschenes and colleagues studied for their report on engaging older youth, 92 percent had attendance requirements, "many of which are tied to a funding source, although only 22 percent [of programs] indicated that they enforce these requirements" (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al., 2010, p. 18).

However, in that same report, Deschenes and colleagues note that "commitment may matter more than hours," especially for high school youth. "Many providers reported that daily attendance at a youth program

is often not realistic for teenagers—that high school students would never come to a program four days a week and that it is developmentally 'off' to expect older youth to attend a program every day" (Deschenes, Arbreton, et al., 2010, p. 18).

Early on in New Urban Arts' development as an organization, we created our own attendance tracking system. Participants sign in on a sheet of paper when they first arrive, and staff input the sign-in sheets into a custom module, built into our Salesforce database. This process gives us an accurate account not only of how many young people are attending on any given day, but also the frequency with which they are returning; it also allows us to cross-reference attendance data with demographics. "Off-the-shelf" participant databases and tracking software for afterschool programs are not set up for drop-in programming: They require participants to be "enrolled" in a "class," and they process absentee rates rather than frequency of return. New Urban Arts made a large investment to build our own database system so we could track and analyze participation and attendance. Other programs may

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need to make similar choices in order to implement drop-in programming.

Once participants show up, we retain them by using documented best practices for working with youth of all ages, but especially older youth. We have a safe, consistent community of professional artists, offer professional-level materials for young artists to work with, make leadership opportunities available for those who so choose, and provide postsecondary support if they want it. All of these practices give participants flexibility in how they engage in our program and maintain implementation fidelity through the efforts of well-trained artists and staff.

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