

A TEEN PROGRAMS HOW-TO KIT

SOME DIRECTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, EXAMPLES, AND STORIES
TO GET YOU STARTED. SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.

WALKER ART CENTER

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO WORK WITH TEENS,
DON’T MAKE IT SEEM LIKE SCHOOL.”

—Sarah Schultz, Associate Director of Education, Public and Teen Programs, Walker Art Center

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WHY TEENS?

Perhaps you already know that teenagers are a rewarding and important audience for your museum or organization to develop. Maybe you are already working with them. Maybe you're just starting. But in case you're just thinking about working with teens, let us tell you why the Walker Art Center began to focus five years ago on this exciting and at times exasperating audience. Studies have shown that teenagers are among the most underrepresented audiences in museums. While many may attend the occasional enforced school field trip, they often don't see museums as a place they can call their own. The Walker found itself in a unique position to try to reach teens. There is an immediate connection between artists and teens—both are actively engaged in overturning conventional wisdom and questioning the status quo.

As you will see, the spirit of youth-directedness guides all our work with teenagers. While we want to nurture future audiences for the arts, what we want most is to impact teens' lives right now, and try to create opportunities and ways for them to interact with and shape the life of the institution.

WALKER ART CENTER TEEN PROGRAMS MISSION STATEMENT

Teen programs create and support the interactions with and connections to contemporary art, young people, and artists of our time. Teen programs seek to provide vehicles and resources for young people ages 14–18 to safely ask complex questions, voice their own ideas and opinions, and explore their critical and creative potential.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN



ASK YOURSELF WHY YOU ARE BEST QUALIFIED TO PROVIDE THIS SERVICE.

Begin by developing your mission. This is the big picture: the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your program.

What are you trying to accomplish, and why?

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH ASSEMBLY PARTS (OR GETTING THE SUPPORT YOU NEED). YOUR SUCCESS WILL DEPEND ON HAVING THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS IN PLACE:

AWARENESS ➔ Develop support within your organization. Chances are good that your work with teens will have a ripple (or tsunami) effect throughout the institution—from security staff who will want to know why teens are wandering the halls to your director, who may start getting unsolicited letters about how to improve things.

EXPERIENCED STAFF ➔ Engage people who can work well with teenagers and have good negotiating and organizational skills. Know how to identify such people.

TIME ➔ Expect that working with teens will be labor-intensive and will always take double the number of hours you think it will.

WILLINGNESS TO LEARN ➔ Learn from the teens and be sure to acknowledge your own mistakes.

FUNDING ➔ Get some! Think about what it will take to support the scope of your program.

KNOW YOUR TEENS ➔ Begin by asking the big questions. Who will your program target? All teens? Some? “At-risk” youth, HIV-positive teens, pregnant teens? How old? What geographic parameters? Become involved with your targeted group by reading their high school newspapers, spending time with them, watching MTV. Find out how you can connect with them. Ask them what juvenile programs, schools, or community centers they’re involved with.

KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO ➔ Stick to your limits. It took the Walker three years of research and experimentation before hitting on its most successful program to date—we created a teen advisory body, the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council, affectionately known as WACTAC.

INSTALLATION AND OPERATION: THE ACTUAL PROGRAMS

“What I’ve taken from it is a new perspective as far as things that are going on, like some of the artists I’d never heard of before until I came here. I think it’s a really cool place, and my mind, as far as creativity, has expanded since I’ve been here. And in such a short time, I’m a little more open to things I haven’t seen before, and I think the Walker has shown that to me.”

— Walker Teen Programs participant

There are as many ways to create exciting and cool programs for teens as there are hairstyles. As a multidisciplinary contemporary art center, all of our programs are designed to connect teens with living artists, raise their awareness of the art of our time, and provide ways for them to voice their own creativity and comment on their own culture.

We create programs that engage teens on a variety of levels—from simple awareness (the teen-produced zine *Fig. 12*) to attendance (free gallery admission, an annual Student Open House, and public programs aimed at teens, such as artist talks by the Guerrilla Girls, Sue Coe, and Michael Franti) to intensive programs with small groups of teens, including artist-in-residence activities. This is a lot to explain and illustrate, so we created a brochure to give adults an overview of our programs.

Six years ago we started out in a slow and episodic manner. We began with something called the Adolescent Think Tank, a citywide alliance between educators, teenagers, and staff from local and national cultural institutions. The group met monthly to identify and develop programming that would interest and intellectually nourish adolescents. Ideas sparked by these discussions shaped the Walker's earliest teen programs. This allowed us to gain some experience and figure out what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong. We learned two things along the way that influence all our current work:

- Teens want, need, and may even demand to have input in the process, not just the product. Allow them to participate in shaping and running the project.
- The social aspects of a program are a critical part of the process. Often the most exciting thing the kids get out of a project is meeting other teens with different backgrounds and interests.

TIPS FOR ASSEMBLY

When recruiting participants for our youth programs, we try to find a diverse group that doesn't have access to many cultural opportunities. We tried numerous strategies and eventually settled upon a combination of getting applications and information directly into the hands of teens and contacting teachers and community and youth workers to identify young people who might fit our criteria. We often have to repeat that we are not looking for those who are already involved in lots of programs, are high achievers, or the best artists in the class.

"I guess I wasn't sure what they were really looking for... I mean, I felt like my page was pretty blank when I sent it in. I guess they weren't looking for experts in the art scene, but they wanted teens who really wanted to get involved." — WACTAC applicant

WHETHER YOU'RE DOING A SINGLE PROJECT OR TRYING TO CREATE A SERIES OF PROGRAMS:

HIRE GOOD TEACHERS → Quite often the smartest or most talented artists, scientists, zoologists, historians, writers, and other professionals are not the best teachers. You may need to hire an experienced teacher along with your supertalented “expert” to help translate ideas and skills to the teens.

KNOW WHAT YOUR GOALS ARE AND HOW YOU DEFINE SUCCESS → Is the project about skill-building? A finished product? Both?

DESIGN EACH PROGRAM TO INCLUDE MENTORING → Create programs that allow the teens to interact with a variety of adults as well as peers.

EVALUATE → Yuck—it’s the thing no one likes to do and the thing that is the most important. We always do an intuitive, subjective evaluation. During and at the end of every program, staff members and visiting artists or teachers routinely discuss how the project is going and how the kids are getting along.

HIRE A PROFESSIONAL EVALUATOR → After your first year of programs, it might be time to contract a professional. We hired an evaluator to conduct focus groups and interviews pertaining to both the Teen Arts Council and our other teen activities, such as artist-in-residence and interpretive programs. The benefits? It helped confirm that our informal feedback and instincts were correct; it helped identify program strengths and weaknesses; and it provided invaluable documentation of the program’s overall success for our institution and funders.

BUILDING A TEEN ARTS COUNCIL

One of our major achievements and efforts is the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council (WACTAC), a diverse group of 11 teenagers who help provide access for teens to contemporary art and artists. They meet weekly to assist the Walker in creating a safe and welcoming public space for teens. WACTAC organizes and designs new, teen-specific events and programs in collaboration with museum staff, aids in marketing existing programs to teens, and identifies interpretive and educational links to programs of interest to teens. All Teen Arts Council projects and programs are decided upon collectively by the Council.

We get phone calls weekly asking us how we started the WACTAC, how it works, why we do it. We could easily write a book filled with amazing anecdotes about how being involved with the Teen Arts Council has changed the lives of teens and how the teens have changed staff members and the institution. Here is an abbreviated version of what WACTAC is, how we started it, and how we continue to maintain it.

The first year we hand-picked the teens who were to become the charter members. We identified our target audience—a diverse group of 14- to 18-year-olds from the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. We sought youths who were at essentially the same developmental stage, who lived within close enough proximity to arrange their own transportation to weekly meetings, and who represented a cross section of the population at large. Most, but not all, had had some previous involvement with the Walker through a school program or artist-in-residence program.

Once teens join the Council, they may stay on until they graduate from high school. We usually have about six open spots annually (about half the group graduates each year). WACTAC members now recruit and choose incoming members through an open application and interview process. They are keenly aware of keeping the group diverse on many levels and often will reject a strong applicant to insure, for example, that a particular school is not overrepresented on the Council.

We started out thinking we could meet once a month. It became clear to the teens before it became clear to us that this wasn't going to work. The teens themselves voted to meet weekly and this schedule has continued for the past three years.

We involved key players from each Walker department to work with the Council. We knew that by asking WACTAC to help promote Walker programs as well as create their own, the teens would need to feel invested in the museum and have an understanding of everything it does. One way we encourage this is by giving them contact with and access to other Walker staff members who can guide them along the way.

Respect is the rule—always. Teach the youths to disagree respectfully. Obviously, we insisted on some basics—no drugs, no weapons, no violence—for all teen programs. But they established their own rules about attendance and involvement. They also have the right to vote a member “out” of the Council for lack of involvement or repeated bad behavior. (This has only happened once in three years.)

WACTAC also initiates and implements two major projects: a zine, *Fig. 12*; and a biennial teen-curated teen art exhibition, this year entitled *Hot Art Injection (may cause side effects)*. They also host an incredible number of other programs, including the annual Student Open House and public talks by visiting artists.

“ . . . I was in the car the other day, and it just dawns on me every once in a while, like, “Wow! We’re one of the first groups to do that, and I was a strong member of WACTAC. . . . I know that the complete experience of it is going to affect me, you know? It’s really cool.”

—WACTAC charter member

CASE STUDY ON DIVERSITY

At the Walker, we choose not to identify teens as “at risk,” and instead focused our recruiting on socioeconomic, geographic, and racial diversity. In our experience, all teenagers could be considered “at risk.” For example, one WACTAC member, “Jesse,” came from a middle-income, two-parent family and was described by the Teen Programs staff as “charming, smart, talented.” During the course of a school year, Jesse’s school attendance tapered off. When he impregnated his girlfriend, he dropped out—never to complete high school—and got a job. By contrast, “Sarah” came from a similar background, but ran away after several abusive incidents with her father. She slept on friends’ couches, and continued attending WACTAC meetings through it all. She now attends a Big 10 university on an honors program scholarship. In developing your teen program, be aware of the challenges that any teen may face, including gang involvement, drug problems, abusive parents, foster care, and other alternative living situations.

“IT’S NOT EVEN LIKE WE THINK OF THEM
AS OUR LEADERS SOMETIMES.”

“I THINK WE GIVE THEM MORE GUIDANCE
THEN THEY GIVE US.”

—WACTAC members

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR TEEN PROGRAMS

- ➔ Empower the teens, but be prepared for what happens. There is a fine line between too much freedom and too much structure. The first year of the Council, we made the mistake of telling the teens they could do what they wanted without the caveat of “within the context and bounds of working in a public institution.” Some lengthy and powerful discussions about issues of censorship followed. The end result: Both adults and teens realized that “empowerment” means negotiation, dialogue, and sometimes compromise.
- ➔ Trust them with money. WACTAC actually has a budget that it can allocate toward projects in any way members see fit. Other Walker departments give presentations to the Council to see if they want to get involved financially.
- ➔ Be prepared to guide them, not rule them. Teens are caught in the strange place of not being a child but not being an adult. They can also sense an adult agenda a thousand miles away. Teens want programs that have some relevance to their lives as they perceive them. We may want their zine to look like it was produced by a group of teenage modernists, while they want it to look like it was produced by a group of teenage anarchists.
- ➔ Keep other museum staff informed about what’s going on. Let them know the joys and challenges of working with teens.
- ➔ Meetings need agendas to keep things on course. Agendas should be well rounded and identified by youths and staff members. Teens should take turns moderating the meetings.
- ➔ You have reached success when the teens believe they did it on their own.

OPERATIONAL TIPS AND MAINTENANCE

THERE IS A TEEN VERSION AND AN ADULT VERSION FOR EVERYTHING;
REALITY IS SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE.

EXPENSIVE IS NOT ALWAYS BEST.

TEEN LANGUAGE: YOU CAN'T KNOW IT, BUT YOU MUST RECOGNIZE IT.

CONTINUE TO LEARN ALL YOU CAN ABOUT WHAT IS
GOING ON IN YOUR TARGETED TEEN COMMUNITY.

YOU CAN NEVER INVOLVE TEENS TOO MUCH.
YOUR MANTRA SHOULD BE: TEENS, TEENS, TEENS.

WORKING WITH TEENAGERS HAS BEEN A GREAT SOURCE OF JOY
AND INSPIRATION FOR MANY WALKER STAFF PERSONS.
WE HOPE WE TEACH THEM, AND WE KNOW THEY TEACH US.

JUST REMEMBER: THERE IS NO WARRANTY.

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