

The CDSS Affiliate Network Speaks: A preliminary look at the first annual CDSS Affiliate Survey

by Emily Addison & Katy German

We are thrilled to report some of the findings from CDSS's recent Affiliate member survey! Yes... we (Katy & Emily) confess to being data geeks. An impressive 48% of CDSS Affiliates participated in the survey, and 94% of respondents continued through to the final few questions.

What is a CDSS Affiliate?

CDSS Affiliates are autonomous and independent organizations that pay an annual fee to receive information, connection, and services through CDSS.

The goals of the survey were to learn:

1. More about our Affiliates and the work they are doing.
2. What Affiliates like about the services we provide and how we can improve.
3. What value Affiliates see in traditional participatory arts and what advocacy work can be done to support our shared traditions. (Results coming soon.)

1 What are our affiliates doing?

- **Their focus:** The majority of Affiliates who participated in the survey focus on social dance: 59% focus solely on social dance (e.g., contra; squares); 5% focus solely on ritual dance; 2% focus solely on song; 1% focus solely on music jams; 1% focus solely on other types of traditions; and 32% organize two or more of the categories above.
- **Their organization health:** We asked three direct questions to gauge how Affiliates view the health of their organization. While the majority of Affiliates reported that they are thriving or are stable, many Affiliates are struggling. For instance, 31% of respondents identified that their organization is struggling some or a lot—more than we would hope. Roughly 41% of respondents noted that their series (i.e., recurring events) is struggling some or a lot. Interestingly, only 20% of respondents felt that their special events are struggling.
- **Their strengths:** Overall survey participants feel most confident in the positive culture they create on the dance floor (welcoming, warm, friendly, inclusive), their ability to identify and attract talent, and the experience they have on their organizing teams.

- **Their challenges:** It was not surprising that the most common challenge currently facing Affiliates is around attendance. However, while we haven't formally compared the Affiliate survey findings with our 2016 and 2018 survey of organizers (Affiliates AND non-Affiliates), our initial impression is that more organizers have broadened their interest from simply getting new people to attend, to also retaining those new people and existing participants.
- **Their youth engagement:** Many of our affiliates are engaging youth in a wide range of ways. For instance, 25% of survey participants noted that their dance series attracts school-aged children and/or college students. Also, 29% of survey participants incorporate community dances, and 15% incorporate family dances into their programming.
- **Their terminology:** Approximately 1/3 (33%) of all survey respondents that organize social dances are either regularly using or are experimenting with gender-neutral terms for dancer roles. The most common terminology reported to be used is Larks and Ravens.
- **Their funding:** The vast majority of Affiliates receive funds from door entry fees. However, many other sources of revenue are also being used by Affiliates. For instance, 39% of Affiliates have annual membership fees, 25% use their special events to generate funds for their organization, 24% have individuals who sponsor events, 21% hold fundraising events, and 16% hold an annual appeal for donations.

2 Provided Services & Improvement

We were very heartened by Affiliates' positive perception of their relationship with CDSS. On a five-point scale, 85% of survey respondents reported very positive or positive feelings about their Affiliate's relationship with CDSS, while the other 15% were neutral (i.e., no negative or very negative feelings among respondents).

- **Why are groups Affiliate members?** While group liability insurance and non-profit tax exemption are common reasons for groups to become Affiliate members, we were pleasantly surprised about how many Affiliates identified other reasons for joining CDSS. For instance, 20% of Affiliates cited that they

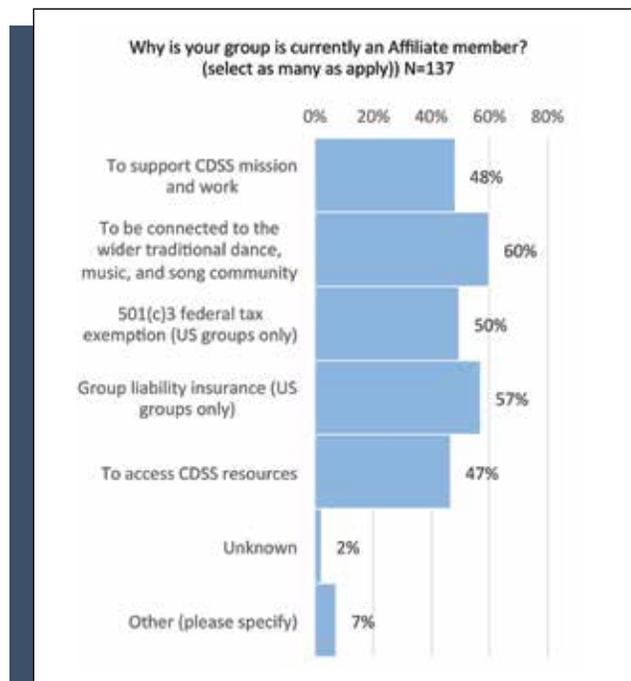
became group members to be connected to the wider traditional dance music and song community (note: respondents could only choose one reason—so that’s impressive!). 60% of Affiliates see that broader connection as a reason to remain a member.

- **CDSS needs to improve communication: Survey results indicated that our communication with Affiliates is not nearly as effective as it could be.** While our 1:1 contact seems effective (e.g., very positive feedback on phone calls and direct emails), our outreach efforts via mail, email blasts, and social media are not reaching nearly as many Affiliates as we would like. For instance, 28% of respondents were unaware of our Affiliate Handbook and a further 24% had never used it. Also, 16% of respondents were unaware of Shop Talk and a further 22% had never used it.
- **Favorite CDSS services:** The services that Affiliates find most valuable include CDSS promotion of local affiliates (e.g., advertisements in the CDSS News; CDSS map, event calendar, and Affiliate directory), non-profit tax exemption, insurance, matching scholarships for camp, and advice for organizers (e.g., access to online resources; one-on-one advice).
- **How CDSS can improve the services offered:** When asked about how we could improve the services that we offer Affiliates, the most common suggestion focused on communication (e.g., Affiliates not being aware of various CDSS resources). When asked for suggestions regarding additional services/supports/resources that CDSS could offer, the most common response was for more ‘how-to’ advice for organizers.

Next Steps for Moving Forward

How we’ll put these findings to good use:

- **Publish the full survey report:** We will complete a final survey report with more detail and will publish that report online.
- **Renovate our existing member program:** Our Affiliate Resource Team will prioritize the next steps regarding the Affiliate membership program. For instance, a few respondents suggested that we coordinate their renewals of membership, 501(c)(3), and insurance to happen at the same time.
- **Strengthen resources for youth:** Our Task Group for School-Aged Participants (made up of Board and community members) will use the findings from youth-related questions to draft ideas on how we can



better support those who are working to engage school-aged children and college students.

- **Improve communication:** Our entire team will examine the feedback on communication to see how we can improve upon and expand our existing modes to reach more members.
- **Improve map & events listings:** Our Community Resources Team (members of our office staff) will use the feedback regarding the map and events listing to improve those online resources.
- **Share best practices:** Affiliates and other organizers have let us know that they benefit greatly from hearing what other groups are doing well (best practices). We will continue to create resources that capture best practices across North America and find effective ways to distribute this information as widely as possible. Stay tuned for two new best practice resources about (1) Open Bands and (2) Fund-Raising Strategies (e.g., door entry costing models; annual appeals; membership and seasons passes).
- **Engage more Affiliates:** We will look into how we can engage even more Affiliates in future surveys and projects as we continue to build a network of North American organizers.

In addition to the next steps listed above, staff will follow up with individual Affiliates who raised specific questions/concerns as part of their survey responses.

The Board and Staff at CDSS are passionate about supporting organizers and are excited about the work ahead of us. Thank you to everyone who provided input to this year’s Affiliate survey!