

Dance Flurry Organizers Discussion – 2025
Session facilitated and notes organized by Emily Addison

Over 35 organizers attended the 1½ hour discussion at this year's Flurry. We began by going around the room and raising our hands to show what forms of dance we organize, where we're from and the relative health of our dance. We then went around and talked about why we love dance.

What we love about traditional dance:

- Emily - I love to dance because it gives me a sense of belonging.
- Mary - I like to dance because it's happy movement.
- Joyce - I love to dance.
- Doug - I love the music.
- Kristen - I love a structured activity.
- Joe- I like the connection structure.
- Roy- I like the interpersonal dynamics of all the partners
- Todd - I just have a lot of energy. I've got to use it and it's nice to meet people.
- Steven - Sheer ecstasy of moving my body in time.
- Zach - I love making mistakes and I'm having the community all help me make it better. And also I did a really deep dive into like why people like the contrast.
- Grindel - I love to dance because I like to move with other people.
- Alice - I like that you use nonverbal silly activities.
- Matt - I like the physical touch and connection
- Patty - When I'm at a contra dance, there's nothing else. It's just totally into the dancing.
- Kevin - I really enjoy the connection and the love.
- Paul - There's so many reasons, but one that just comes to mind is joy, sharing joy.
- Bob - I come for the fun.
- Warren - Hope.
- Jen - I do it for smiling and happiness.
- Bill - I like the, on the music, physical activity, and I feel like I found my tribe.
- Aliza - Sometimes I call it speed dating, but the real reason that I'm interested in it is to take those group movement skills outside of the dance to be crowd movement skills in non-dance situations.

There were more people who arrived late.

We briefly identified burning topics of interest for discussion. Here's what was raised:

- Starting a brand new group or reviving a current group either or either
- How to build up volunteers and create a committee.
- How to fit into your larger regional dance community – in particular, different callers in the area using different role terms.
- How to deal with extremely problematic/harmful dancers in the context of whether to inform other organizers or not.
- The undervaluing of organizers.
- Lack of diversity in our dance community when the form could be expanded.

We then moved into discussing some of these burning questions for short periods of time.

Question of organizers not being valued:

Framing of the challenge...

- Organizers put in so much time and effort in AND they are often are very high skilled.
- It's built into our culture that organizers are the undervalued ones (e.g., how we are seen in the broader community; unpaid). Examples:
 - Notion of "talent" as the musicians and callers
 - Callers as the "keepers of the tradition"
 - CDSS podcasts focused on callers and musicians
 - Bands/Callers hired for CDSS camps, even as programming chairs. Organizers not included.
- Plus movement towards bands talking with each other and co/counter-negotiating – treating dance organizing committee like corporations when they are small groups of volunteers. Don't want to get a bad reputation that difficult organization to work with.
- Bands travel and get to know each other. Not the same opportunity for the organizers.

Conversation...

- CDSS has just hired an affiliate coordinator whose job will be to work with organizers.
- Puttin' On the Dance conference (<https://www.puttinonthedance.org/>) for dance organizers is happening this spring (CDSS is one of the sponsors).
- Contra dance has uniquely bad economics. Costs are fixed and high (e.g., always live band which is very different than some other forms of dance). Plus emphasis on accessibility through low prices.
- One organizer is using recorded music as they start to rebuild their community.
- There are communities where the callers and musicians donate their time, just like the organizers. That see their performance as community building and want to donate in that way. That is a model that could theoretically work for more communities.
- Consider increasing the price point for entry.
- One community has budgeted in \$2K to pay someone to help plan their dance weekend.
- Have open books to show where all the money is going.
- Can look at profit sharing.
- One of the reasons that performers are talking with each other right now is they don't know what the pay standards are right now. 10yrs ago, callers/bands all knew the going rate.

Extreme problem dancers and whether/how to share information across dance communities:

Original idea: When there is a dancer who is particularly problematic/harmful, what mechanism can organizers use to let other organizers know so as to try to limit the dancer's harmful impact on other communities.

Conversation about the extreme cases...

- Know who the other organizers are in your region and have 1:1 conversations with organizers in the communities that you think the dancer might be attending.
- Organizer that runs a national event appreciated another organizer caller them and letting them know about a travelling dancer who targets teens. This was direct organizer to organizer conversation.

Conversation about less extreme cases...

- Have a clear procedure on how to handle these situations and publicize that.
- Have a code of conduct that is clear on what is allowed/not. Posting on the wall near the door.
- Mention the code of conduct on the microphone by an organizer.

- Can frame some of these as creating an unsafe or inaccessible environment rather than saying 'you are harassing people'.
- One-time issues can sometimes be addressed through a simple conversation. Have two organizers talk to the dancer.
- Challenging when concerns are word of mouth (e.g., dancer saying that their friend had an issue).
- Some people do grow and change --- be open to that.
- May need to bar the dancer/refund annual membership if the behaviour isn't changing.
- Idea that if a performer has issue with a particular individual, could have that written into their contract that that dancer can't attend the event that performer is working.

Diversity of community members....

Original idea: This is a tradition that's naturally maintained by the traditionalist and the semi-professionals. Idea that don't have to think about contra as a tradition. You can think about it as a choreographic pattern. The concept of contra came from a tradition, but I don't actually care that much about the tradition part at this point. I care about getting people to know that people can move like this, together this easily and use it for other purposes and other styles and other music and music with words. Idea to not talk about it as a subculture. Can be insular without realizing it. Community does a lot of self marginalization. Want more diversity in who is attending these dances.

Conversation:

- Shouldn't care about diversity of attendees. Have people of colour in our dance community and they hate being tokenized. The idea that 'something good about our dance that minorities attend' is problematic.
- There are many forms of folk/ethnic dances. Could look to have cross-over/joint dance events. Brings people and communities together.
- Could include contra dance in ethnic dance performances (e.g., on college campuses).
- Like being part of the sub-culture of contra. Belonging.
- People usually come to contra through friends. If want people from other walks of life than what we tend to see, need to go outside of your community and make actual friends with actual people. Authentically.
- Work to make advertising on campuses better. People shouldn't have to 'read the code'.... Shouldn't self-marginalize here. Princeton is going to try a flyer that does says dance, come, price... not mention contra.
- People have different interests naturally and different levels of openness, etc. Some will be attracted to contra, others will not.

We then opened up the conversation to any and all great ideas from various communities.

Popcorn time --- any and all great ideas:

- Brooklyn Contra: Branding on bags, stickers etc. - All consistent colour and font. Have water bottle stickers where people can put their name but also says Brooklyn Contra.
- Brooklyn Contra: Noticed challenge of upskilling dancers so paid Alyssa Adkins to put together a curriculum that is now available for free.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ueac5IML7Lm1CX4539sHSG5XRKDjco2T/view>
- Brooklyn Contra: Have created a substack about dance organizing.
<https://brooklyncontra.substack.com/p/on-emerging-and-emergent-futures>
- Rupert Community Square Dance: Rupert (small village north of Ottawa) has a community hall run by a non-profit that makes lots of money through their second hand store. The organization's mandate is to support the community. Band approached the committee about

trad dances (e.g., intergenerational; bring people together). The organization provides the hall for free, covers the insurance, and provides \$1200 for performers. So the dances are free by donation, the organizing is simple and the performers are paid well. Regularly gets 100 people out – very diverse ages, mixing the English and French communities in the area.

- Rupert Community Square Dance: Timing is 7-10 which is great for the teenagers. They can then go hang out together after. No beginner lesson... about community fun as #1.
- Belfast organizer: Need to consider fire safety (e.g., exits are clear etc.). Someone else followed up to say that there's free crowd manager training in Mass: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/crowd-managers>
- Weekend refund policies:
 - Warren (Em not sure which event): Have a non-punitive refund policy. If someone has to cancel, we send them an email to give them a choice. What would you like to do? You can either credit it to a future event, a refund, or a donation to the cause. Doing this for about maybe 25 years. Results is about a third refund, a third credit, a third donation, but a lot of good work. Will do even if someone doesn't show up. "Difference between folk and corporate. Heart over power."
 - ???(not sure who): Challenge in post-COVID times is if lots of people cancel last minute because of sickness or tough economic times with 100% refunds, that could gut an event.
 - POTD: Patty has been looking into event insurance. (Note from after the Flurry: The insurance policy came back very high and didn't cover some critical pieces.)
 - Flurry: If there's a serious issue, can call on the community to support (e.g., snowstorm year - passing of the hat raised thousands of dollars).
- Re volunteers
 - Not getting enough volunteers although repeatedly asked - considering putting forward that the even might not happen. Not sure if that's the best approach.
 - Divide up roles – important the people follow through on what they commit to.
 - Specific asks are key – people need VERY clear parameters of what getting involved with.
 - When looking for board members be clear about the role – how many meetings, what's expected, that your voice will be heard.
 - Frame the ask in terms of what the volunteer needs to know to want to help rather than what the dance needs.
 - Ask people to help with cleanup at end... that brings them into the circle and starts their involvement.
 - Frame it. For instance...There are five organizers and 40 dancers, if the work was spread equally, like, one-eighth of your time should be spent organizing. And so every eight years or so, you should spend a year being on that organizer board. Find your long-term dancers and say, hey, you've been here for a lot. It is a little bit of a slight guilt.
 - Have potluck... brings people in and then do the work.
 - Simplify things and do less to eliminate the need for certain volunteers. (e.g., do one general poster rather than individual events)
 - Emphasize volunteers as a team and make it fun. If stay to the end, have a little ritual for those folk. Celebrate that they helped make the event happen.
 - Make meetings fun.
 - Promote that committee work is great for building your resume. Can get some great skills & experience!
 - Look to see if CDSS could connect organizers with people willing to volunteer their professional expertise? (e.g., lawyer; graphic design; web design)

- Consider community dances with simpler, more diverse dances as a way to include more individuals in the community. (Not everyone can contra dance)
- Do dances for already established communities like schools – although don't expect that they will become regular dances. (They not so keen to move outside their community, to a place that is unknown.)
- Word of mouth again so key.
- Would be great to coordinate with booking bands regionally. (This was at the very end of the session so we didn't get to explore.)