

## US SURVEY OF TRADITIONAL DANCE, MUSIC AND SONG ORGANIZERS



Photo of the 2014 Southwest Regional Organizers Conference attendees.

Taken by: Ben Werner

## AUGUST 2018



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## ABOUT THE SURVEY AND THIS REPORT

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**Purpose of the survey:** The primary goal of this study was to learn about the current challenges and needs of traditional dance, music, and song (TDMS) organizers in the US who have CDSS membership (group Affiliate or individual/family). The survey follows closely upon the release of the Canadian organizers survey report which was made public in January 2018.

**Survey design, data collection, and reporting:** The US survey questions are a subset selected and refined from the more extensive Canadian survey. This allowed us to compare results with the Canadian findings while also completing the project in a much shorter time period. The survey was open for responses from February 16th to April 13th 2018 and was primarily promoted to CDSS affiliate members through two directed emails. It was also promoted through a CDSS e-blast, one CDSS Facebook message and was posted on a few traditional social dance forums (e.g., Shared Weight; the ECD BACDS list; Pourparler).

**About the report:** The final report provides a summary of the overall findings. More detailed findings for individual open-ended questions as well as recommendations coming out of the report are being provided directly to the CDSS staff and board. (An interim report was provided to the CDSS board for strategic planning in April 2018.)

The majority of the findings from this survey generally resonate with the findings of the more comprehensive Canadian study. Some comparisons are highlighted within this report. You can find the Canadian report on the CDSS website.

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## SURVEY PARTICIPANTS, THEIR ORGANIZATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

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**Number of respondents:** 121 organizers completed the survey.

**Age:** Of those respondents who listed their age (N=97), the mean age was 58 and 77% of question respondents were 50 or older.

**CDSS affiliation:** 81% of respondents are either individual/family or group Affiliate members of CDSS. Not surprisingly, this is quite different from the Canadian survey (28% were members of CDSS) as the goal of the Canadian survey was to reach as many different TDMS organizers as possible rather than focusing on current CDSS members.

**Geographical distribution:** Eight states had over five respondents: New York (15); Maine (14); Massachusetts (11); Vermont (10); California (10); Oregon (7); Illinois (6), and Texas (6). 36 of the 50 states had less than three respondents and 22 of those had no respondents. This lack of representation from multiple states impacts our ability to capture challenges and needs specific to different regions of the US. However, there is still much to be learned from the results.

**Organizational structure:** Almost all organizations are functioning as a non-profit or an unincorporated volunteer group/individual organizer.

- 57% 501(c)3 non-profit (either separately or through the CDSS group exemption)
- 34% volunteer group/individual NOT officially incorporated
- 4% incorporated state non-profit but NOT 501(c)3 tax exempt
- 0% incorporated for-profit business
- 4% other (e.g., city program; sole-proprietor)

### **Types of traditional dance, music or song activities being organized:**

Survey participants were asked to identify the different types of TDMS activities they organize and also to identify their primary activity. Figures 1 & 2 provide graphic images relating to the findings that are summarized below.

- **Most common activities:** 91% of respondents identified social dance traditions as their primary activity. Contra dance dominates the activities being organized by respondents, followed by English country dance and community dance. Very few respondents identified activities such as morris dance, jam sessions or house concerts as their primary activity.

The high rate of response from traditional social dance organizers may have been influenced in part by where the survey was publicized. However, similar results occurred with the Canadian survey despite having intentional outreach to a very broad range of TDMS activities for that project. Thus, the high rate of social dance respondents may also reflect their relative interest in engaging on this type of project, their relative need for support and/or their interest in being connected to the broader TDMS community.

- **Lack of representation from certain traditions:** Many traditions had very little to no representation, especially when looking at the 'primary activity' (e.g., no organizers identified their primary activity as house concerts, Scandinavian dance, Scottish social dance, MW square dance, or New England square dance; also, despite traditional jam sessions being quite common throughout parts of the US, only two participants listed this as their primary activity).
- **Organizing more than one tradition:** One-third of respondents are solely focused on organizing one tradition (e.g., a group just organizes English country dance). However 2/3 of survey respondents are organizing events in more than one tradition (e.g., one organization might organize contra dances, morris dance and a song circle).
- **Other traditions being organized:** Organizers were provided an opportunity to list other types of TDMS activities that they organize beyond those listed in Figs 1&2. The only other traditions mentioned were historical dance, international dance, and shape note (each mentioned by one respondent).

- **Comparing to the Canadian survey:** Some differences were noted between the US and Canadian survey results – the biggest difference being the type of tradition. While the vast majority of US survey respondents are involved in traditions historically served by CDSS (e.g., contra; morris; trad song), only 40% of Canadian organizers were involved in those core CDSS traditions. Another 40% were involved in Canadian-evolved traditions (e.g., Metis fiddle; Cape Breton square dance) and 20% were involved in other traditions (e.g., International folk dance). This likely has to do with the fact that the Canadian survey mandate was broader (i.e., any TDMS organizer rather than current CDSS members) but also perhaps because CDSS has traditionally served many of the US-evolved traditions but not as many of the traditions from other countries beyond England and the US.

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## CHALLENGES FACING ORGANIZERS

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The top challenges facing survey respondents are: (1) attendance-related issues (2) the need for more organizers & volunteers (3) issues around promotion (relating to attendance) (4) finances, and (5) issues around space/venue. This is similar to the Canadian survey although the order of top challenges were different and Canadians were more concerned with talent than venue.

### Looking at topics of major or medium concern:

Organizers were given a list of 23 possible challenges/concerns and were asked to identify the level of concern for each (5-point scale of major, medium, minor, not a concern, not applicable) (See Figures 3&4). Topics relating to attendance had the high percentage of respondents noting a major or medium concern.

- Attracting new people (79%)
- Need more participants/attendees(77%)
- Retaining regular participant/attendance (62%)
- Aging population (58%)

Other topics that were of major or medium concern to one-third or more of survey respondents include:

- Need more volunteers (60%)
- Need more organizers (52%)
- Publicity (e.g., website, posters) (50%)
- Not enough money (39%)
- Venue/space rental cost too high (31%)

The majority of organizers were not concerned about topics relating to administrative/financial management (e.g., insurance; incorporation; tax filing; managing money) or talent (e.g., lack of access; ability level; travel issues) (see Figure 4). However, these issues are still are of major or medium concern for some organizers which is not insignificant for those particular organizations.

Results were somewhat similar when comparing 'major or medium' concerns between the US and Canadian surveys. For instance, attendance issues were also most common for Canadians. However more Canadians had major or medium concerns about topics relating to money (e.g., not enough money; fundraising/grants) while more US organizers needed additional volunteers or organizers. Additionally, more Canadians are struggling with talent costs and insurance.

Respondents were also asked if they had additional concerns or challenges beyond those listed in Fig 3&4. Some of the responses fit within headings listed in Fig 3&4. However, examples of additional concerns include:

- New people not returning
- Not enough younger participants, organizers, and/or talent
- Lack of willingness to try new things
- Understanding/managing newer shifts in certain TDMS forms such as gender-neutral dancing and role swapping
- Balancing talent pay vs participant affordability

### **Organizers' biggest challenges:**

Organizers were asked to write about their biggest challenge or concern. A full half of the organizers who answered this question identified attendance issues – organizers are concerned that they do not have enough people attending their events. Many organizers mentioned declining attendance generally and some related attendance to participants 'aging out.' Additionally, many of the organizers are finding it hard to attract new participants (generally as well as younger or youth participants) and convert them to regulars.

Approximately one quarter of respondents wrote about challenges relating to an aging population. As mentioned above, some of this had to do with attendance. However, other organizers wrote about not having enough young people willing to take on leadership positions or volunteer generally. Additionally, a few organizers noted that older participants can't necessarily participate in the same way as they may have in the past. While almost all comments focused on older demographics, two organizers noted the challenge of having too many children at their events.

A quarter of respondents identified finances as their 'biggest challenge.' Often organizers wrote about revenue issues (primarily related to low attendance) however some also wrote about challenges relating to expenses (i.e., not having enough money to pay talent or the hall rental costing too much).

A quarter of respondents wrote that their biggest challenge related to organizers/volunteers. The vast majority of these comments focused on not having enough volunteers for leadership positions at the board/committee level although a few respondents want more 'day of' volunteers. A few other respondents mentioned challenges relating to board functioning.

### Other 'biggest challenges':

- Approximately 1/5 of respondents wrote about challenges relating to talent (e.g., not being able to pay enough; talent quality)
- Approximately 1/6 of respondents wrote about venue issues (e.g., cost of the venue)
- A small handful wrote about issues relating to geographical location (e.g., too much else going on in a big city)
- A few other individuals had other 'biggest issues'

While these 'biggest challenges' roughly align with the Canadian survey results, more Canadians had major challenges with insurance, weather, and issues relating the CAN/US border.

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## RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS OF INTEREST

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Organizers are looking for a wide range of supports. They want help:

- Connecting and networking with other organizers (e.g., opportunities for discussion)
- Accessing a wide range of information that will inform the work that they do (e.g., information on increasing attendance)
- Specific supports to meet various needs that they have (e.g., insurance)

While organizers wrote about receiving some resources that they find useful, gaps were also identified.

### Supports organizers will definitely or quite likely use:

Organizers were given a list of 17 possible resources/supports and were asked to identify the likelihood that they would use each resource (6-point scale of definitely yes, quite likely; somewhat likely; unlikely; definitely not; not applicable).

The most common resources to be 'definitely yes' or 'quite like' used by organizers were: (See Figure 5)

- Online discussion forum for sharing info among organizers (58%)
- Central web page with links to online resources for organizers (57%)
- Insurance coverage for your events (53%)
- Calendar platform for you to post your events (50%)
- One-on-one advice from experienced organizers through email, phone, etc. (48%)

60% or more of respondents were interested in almost all of the resources when 'somewhat likely' was included along with 'definitely yes' and 'quite likely' (See Figure 6). This suggests that that most of the proposed resources would get a fair amount of use. For instance, 70% or more of respondents were definitely, quite or somewhat likely to use:

- Online discussion forum for sharing info among organizers (87%)
- Central webpage with links to online resources for organizers (85%)
- One-to-one advice from experienced organizers through email, phone, etc. (83%)
- Materials (video, audio, notes) from past organizer conferences (77%)
- Small and/or one-off grants for special initiatives (77%)
- Calendar platform for you to post your events (76%)
- Organizer conferences/workshops (73%)
- Belonging to an organizers collective (73%)
- Scholarships to pay for organizer training (73%)

One surprising finding was that the resource of least interest was help with incorporation or charitable status (75% of respondents said that they were definitely not interested, unlikely, or not applicable). Perhaps this is because those who are interested are already accessing this service through CDSS or elsewhere.

### Other helpful resources not currently receiving:

Participants were asked if there were other resources they would find help but aren't receiving. Less than half listed another resource and most were repeating items listed in the prior question (e.g., grants). This suggests the list of proposed resources captured most of what organizers feel would be helpful.

Approximately 20 organizers asked for information on specific topics (e.g., various publicity 'how-tos'). Others wanted help connecting with other organizers (e.g., creating regional collectives; west coast organizer conference) and there were a few one-off requests (e.g., help with ASCAP).

### The most helpful current supports:

Organizers were asked what support they currently find most helpful (either from CDSS or elsewhere). Insurance was the most common response with over two dozen organizers acknowledging the coverage CDSS offers. (A few organizers mentioned they get coverage elsewhere.) A dozen or so respondents wrote about the 501c3 status and another dozen or so wrote about financial assistance (either for camp or special initiatives). Other resources offered by CDSS that were mentioned by less than a dozen respondents included the CDSS News, camps (most comments relating to grants rather than the camp itself), and the store. One or two respondents mentioned other resources like CDSS e-blasts and individual CDSS staff/volunteers.

In terms of resources not relating to CDSS, close to two dozen organizers mentioned their personal networks (e.g., other local organizers; visiting callers). Close to a dozen respondents mentioned organizer gatherings (e.g., Pourparler weekend; Flurry organizer discussion) and another dozen or so mentioned list serves (e.g., Shared Weight; ECD BACDS list). Various web resources were also mentioned often although it was often unclear whether these related to CDSS or not.

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## THE BENEFITS OF TRADITIONAL DANCE MUSIC AND SONG

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At the end of the survey, participants were asked the following question: "CDSS believes in the power of traditional dance music and song to build community and transform lives – has that been your experience? How does traditional dance, music and song contribute to your community and society at large?" The responses to this question were varied and extremely powerful.

### Positive benefits for individuals:

Respondents wrote about the impact of traditional dance, music and song on individuals. This included:

- Major source of social life (e.g., as a place to meet and spend time with life partners and/or friends; feeling part of a community and the sense of belonging and security that creates; being a place to socialize)
- Shaping and reaffirming personal identify as well as building confidence and esteem
- Building skills (e.g., learning to dance or play music; learning how to interact with other people; expanding personal views).

- Personal health (e.g., general wellbeing; active rather than passive lifestyle; physical benefits; cognitive benefits; mental/emotional benefits)  
Work opportunities
- Bringing fun and joy into life!
- Providing an easy-entry outlet (cost and skill-wise) for participatory arts for people of all ages
- Connecting some people to their heritage and/or types of music and dance they love
- Generally transforming individual lives (e.g., changing the whole direction someone's life)
- And other benefits as well (e.g., as a way to find community while travelling; positive and safe social space for all including family and kids)

**Positive benefits for community and society as a whole:**

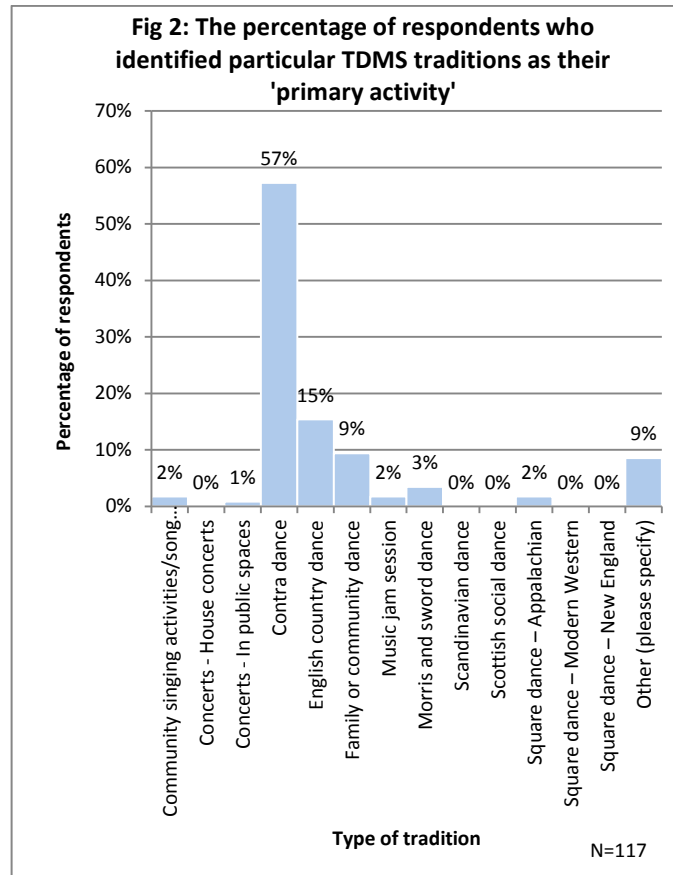
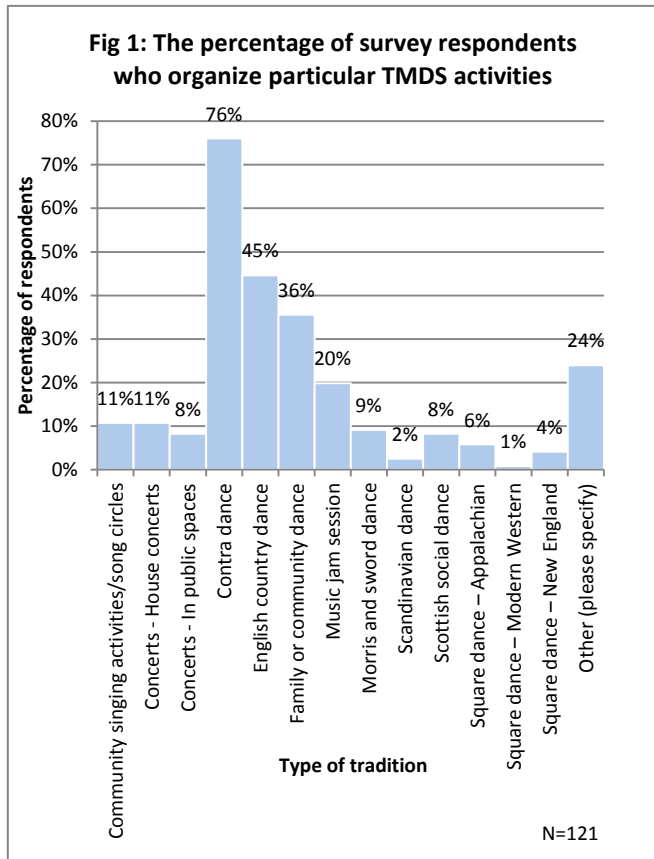
Respondents also wrote about the wider impacts of traditional dance music and song. This included:

- That some TDMS activities are spaces that welcome and encourage intergenerational socializing which is positive on a number of levels (e.g., they are activities families can do together; individuals across generations have the opportunity for positive interaction which is unusual in today's society);
- Some TDMS communities were also noted as being inclusive beyond age. This included TDMS activities crossing barriers of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, background, ability, religion, politics, and other differences. One organizer pointed out that their dance community is one where dancers from many traditions meet and can all dance together;
- TDMS activities were noted as having a positive impact on their wider town/city/community. This included creating social space, building community among the people who participate, and creating a sense of community connection outside the TDMS group. A few respondents pointed out that some TDMS groups are not welcoming or community oriented and that it can take intentional work to achieve a sense of community. A few other respondents thought there was little impact outside their defined TDMS group. One participant noted that TDMS activities can also strengthen physical meeting places (e.g., support a local hall facility) which are sometimes the heart of a community;
- A few organizers spoke to the impact of TDMS on the wider society. For instance, a few pointed out how society is becoming more virtual and consumer/consumption oriented and how TDMS actively challenges those pressures. Other individuals pointed out that TDMS helps keep social fabric together, and that if everyone danced, sang or played music, the world would be a better place.

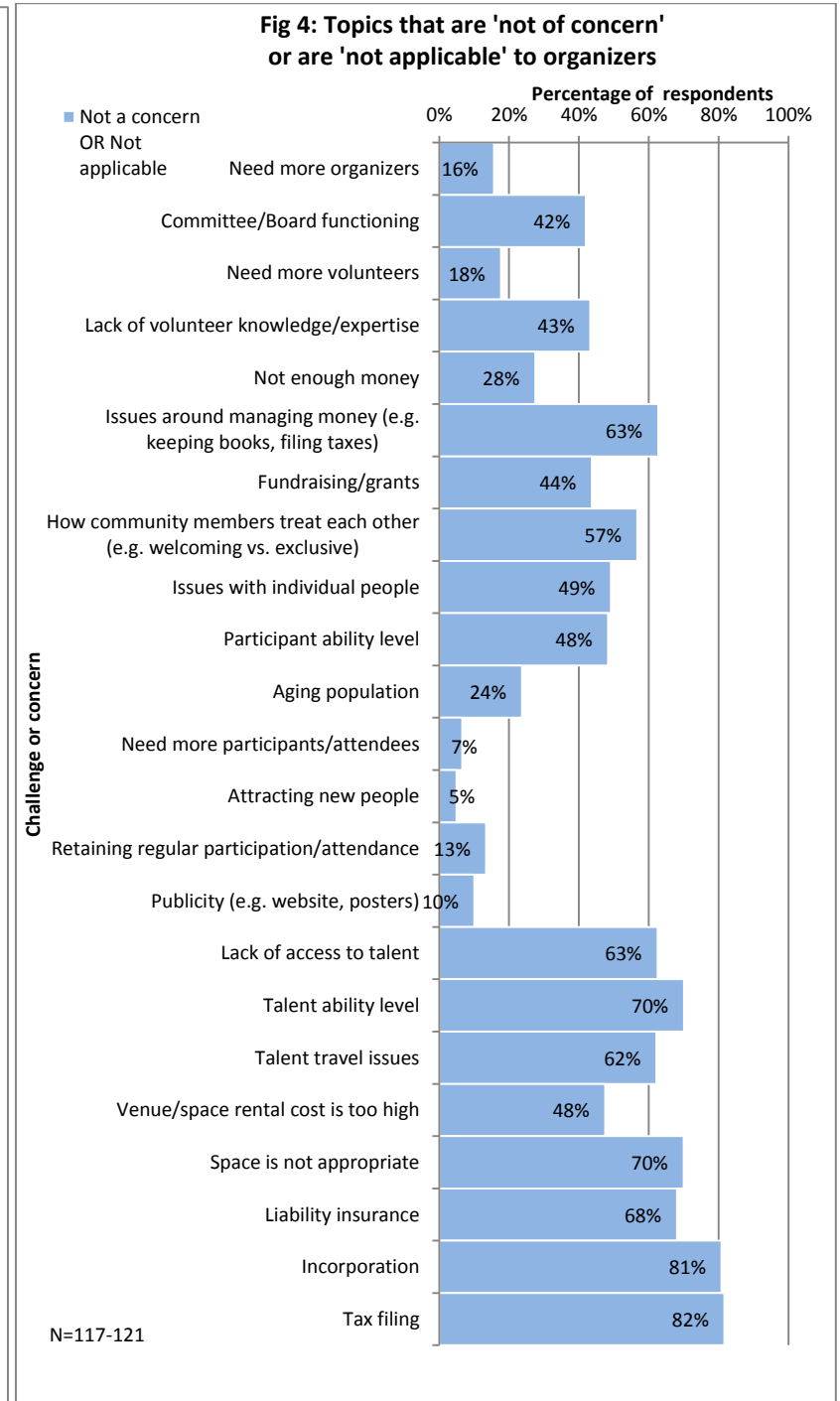
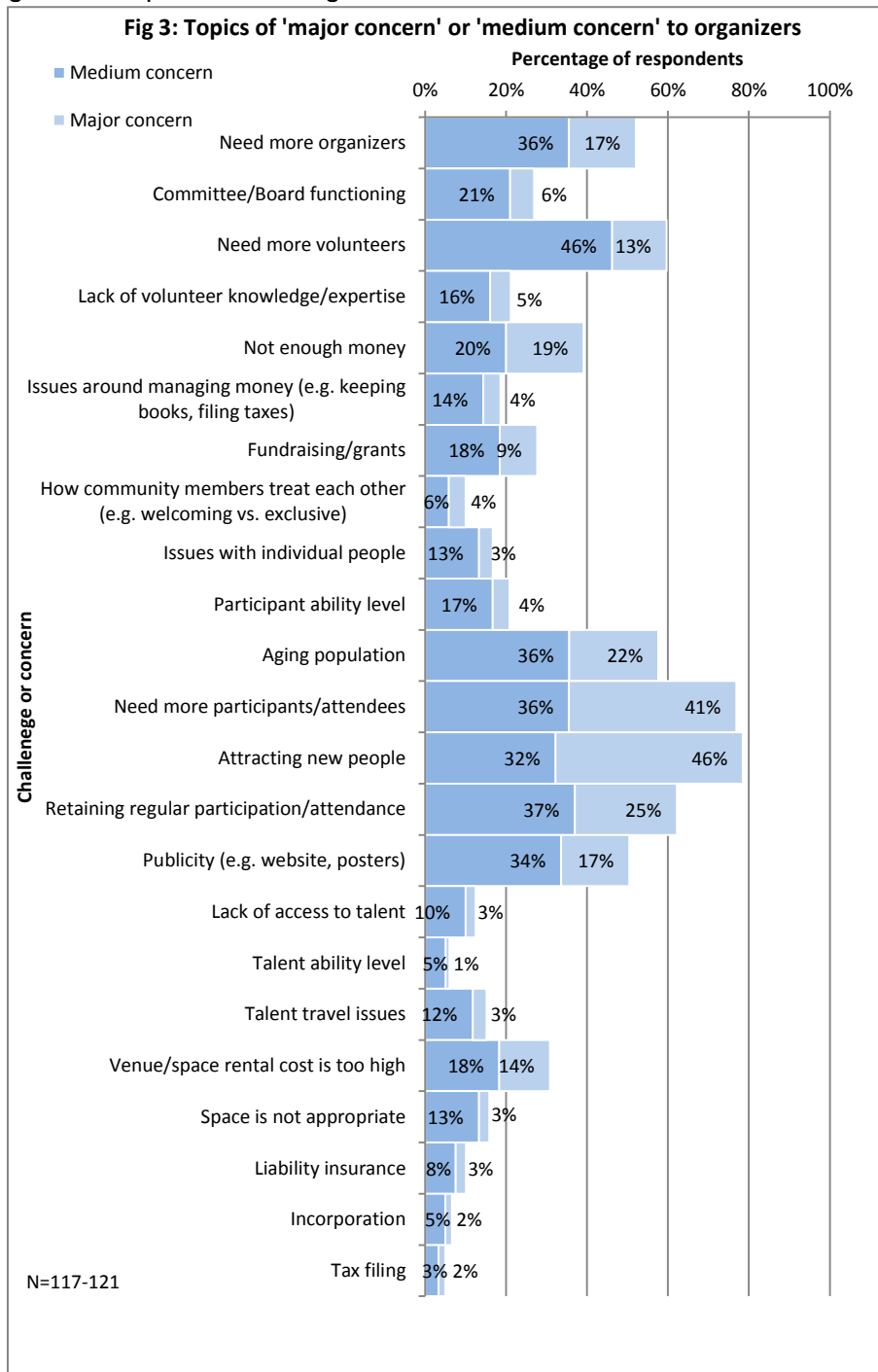
The following quote illustrates many of the benefits outlined above.

*Traditional dance, music and song builds community and transforms lives. This statement is unequivocal. In [...] we've seen a lively, caring, authentic, relationship-rich community cultivated since we started [...] with outcomes as varied as: - Consistent evenings of joy and connection where new and experienced dancers alike feel affirmed, self-expressed, and engaged with their neighbors in a supportive environment - Countless stories of critical self-development as a result of dancing that enables individuals to function more effectively in their lives and experience a sense of belonging with more ease - People finding passion and developing skills that have an impact in the hall and in their greater lives - Physical and mental wellbeing of the folks in the community - Over thirty new callers trained through a mentorship program - New and existing musicians encouraged to play together in new combinations and mentoring of emerging musicians - Long-term romantic and platonic relationships formed - Creative engagements and support of people's passions and work outside of the contra dance And so much more. Practicing traditional dance, music and song creates the environment where people can cross illusionary barriers like age, gender, race, class, identity and connect with each other in a simple way - with bodies, energy, voice, stories... And once a person interacts with another in a way that is simple and grounded, a common humanity is realized and more potential exists for relationship and societal renewal." [contra dance organizer in Maine]*

Figures 1 & 2 : The types of traditional dance, music, and song (TDMS) activities organized by survey respondents



Figures 3 & 4: Topics of concern to organizer



Figures 5 & 6: Resources and supports of interest to organizers

