

Fundraising Using 21st Century Skills

By Krista Carson Elhai



Why It Matters

Running a theatre department is a lot like running a small business. You need to treat your product as valuable, precious, and well worth paying to see. No one would ever consider going to a football game or grocery store and getting something for free, so why do we diminish the value of our theatre programs? Fundraising and marketing go hand in hand, and successful fundraising is a direct result of building relationships in your school and greater community. Build those relationships and theatres will be filled and your students will benefit for years to come.

The most painless way to fund your programs is to fill every seat and have the entire campus and community wearing merchandise with your theatre department's logo. Create a buzz around your products (productions, swag, merchandise) so students on campus – and members of the community – will want to have what you provide.

Things to Consider

Marketing will increase traffic to your social media and department websites and generate interest in your events. Here are some steps you can take to engage your community and produce successful fundraisers in your theatre department:

1. **Assess your school community**

Begin by determining what works on your campus. Know the rules and policies of your school community and study a campus group with a successful program. Don't steal from them but pay attention to what they do. That group has learned what works – no need to reinvent the wheel. Another good starting point is to create a relationship with the activities director. You can share resources, best practices, and guest speakers to energize your students

2. **Brand your program with a name and a logo**

It can be as simple as "West High School Theatre." Have a logo designed and put it on everything from your class syllabus, to your website and stickers you gift to community members.

3. **Delegate to students**

Do you have a fundraising officer? Or two? Consider naming a publicity officer. These students can plan, oversee and run many of the department fundraisers, as well as run the department's website, Instagram, Newsletter, and Facebook page. Invest in training these officers and share training with other high-profile groups on campus.

4. **Create a season brochure**

Have a brochure ready as soon as you announce your season – the earlier the better. A brochure distributed at the start of season can create a buzz in the community for your upcoming season. They can be placed in teacher mailboxes and handed out at every community event your students attend and/or participate in (see Step 6).

5. **Create a culture where your events are not to be missed**

What you provide has value. You are training the community leaders of tomorrow and teaching 21st Century Skills every day. The current culture in your school may be to give complimentary tickets to teachers and administrators but take a close look at what your department is getting out of that practice. You have a must-see product, and as human beings we place greater value on what we pay for.

6. **Community involvement**

Get your kids involved and visible in the community. Volunteer them for high profile events. Face painting for donations, assisting community leaders, passing out information – anything where community leaders can interact with your students and learn about the program will benefit your students.

Get yourself involved in the community. Look carefully at your city. What can you do? where you can volunteer? Perhaps you can participate in a school board or city council campaign, or a committee, or a fundraiser. In every outreach you do, consider how you can educate people about your program. Some of your best community supporters may be Chamber of Commerce and civic leaders. They are out in the community daily and can become high profile ambassadors for your program.

Consider taking a fresh look at your rehearsal schedule for each show. If you work a few minutes longer on a few days, you can schedule two or three days where you and your kids go into the community and raise the profile of your program. There are all kinds of options where you can talk to community members and pass out brochures: animal shelters, senior centers, shopping malls – all while wearing a show/department shirt and taking fliers from your current production. You and your cast/crew could potentially reach hundreds of new theatregoers in just a few outings.

7. **Create a Local Advocacy Network (LAN)**

The LAN can be a recruited small group of adults who know and appreciate the value of Arts Education and are willing to spread the word on your behalf. Consider realtors, Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, city officials, for example. Keep them up to date on your events and what you need to run your program. Strategically, when choosing your LAN, explain how important they could be to your program's mission. Start with alumni parents who understand and have seen first-hand the value of what you provide students. Make sure these people are well stocked with season brochures, fliers of shows, and know the financial needs of your program.

8. **Host a Friends of Our Theatre (FOOT) Auction**

FOOT Auction is a goods and services auction that brings your entire department together. Select 6-8 numbers from a musical (use choral selections-no royalties needed) for entertainment. Gather gift baskets, tickets to local events, photo sessions, tutoring sessions to auction off, whatever may sell with your audiences. Ask a well-known teacher or administrator to serve as the auctioneer. If possible, serve desserts, or appetizers. Use paddles just like a real auction and designate the proceeds for something very specific – student scholarships to the State Thespian Festival, costumes for the musical, etc.

This event could be a mainstage show and be put together by a student committee with members from every class. Depending on the place in the season, it could include previews from upcoming productions.

9. **Conduct alumni outreach**

They are your secret weapons. Tap into their potential and use them. Alumni shows, cabarets, hosted events (older alums), can all be potential fundraisers. As your alums age, approach them about having in-home events specifically to raise money for student scholarships. If your department has been around for a while, consider approaching alumni from your predecessors' program(s) as well. It's a great way to bring the generations together and share the history of the program.

10. **Market branded swag**

Sell whatever the kids in your department are into right now: shirts, lanyards, water bottles, stickers, etc. Don't purchase in too large a quantity, or you may be stuck with merch you can't move. Have a merchandise table at every show. Let audience and students vote on what they would be willing to buy and follow up with their suggestions.

11. **Offer program ads**

Ads can be a large source of income if you can keep your program printing costs low. Otherwise, they may not be worth the time it will take to do a graphic for a clean and professional look. If ad sales are new to your program, consider starting with a short shout out ("Break a leg Jimmy. Love, Grandma") for \$20. They take up less space and are easy to include in a program. If your theatre space has a screen, consider running projected pre-show/intermission ads. Have your kids design these and make them available right up until show time. As a start, these ads can be supplemented with upcoming show announcements, campus announcements, and personalized thank you notes from the director and cast to families and community members who have contributed to productions.

12. **Charter booster groups**

If the culture of your school allows parents to make a positive contribution and work for the good of a program, it can be worth the time to charter a booster group. Draw up a constitution (the district/site PTA should have samples). Keep the group focused on your vision and take the lead at meetings so parents don't associate size of contribution with size of roles awarded to their student. And you don't necessarily need to call them "boosters." Consider something unique, like "Pack Theatre Parents."

13. **Solicit grants**

Grants can be a great deal of work, from writing and submitting the application to administering the execution and reporting back to the grantor. Start small with local grants or a something like a [Target Field Trip Grant](#). Follow the directions to the letter, as most grants have very specific criteria and rules. Create several paragraphs about your program, budget information, and collect data about your students. Keep this information, as well as any feedback from grantors, so future you can cut and paste from past grants. Get the word out to parents, staff, community, and friends that you are on the lookout for possible grants and company matching donation programs.

14. **Write an end-of-the-year solicitation letter**

Send out an appeal letter in mid-November/early December to every alumni family, current families, and community members. Start it off with a compelling quote from a parent whose student has benefited from the program. Write an introduction to the program, skills learned, and a specific ask (new light board, body mics, marquee) so donors know what is needed. Follow up all donations with a handwritten thank you note (on notecards with department logo).

15. **Create an Amazon wish list**

Create a theatre wish list on Amazon and share with your parents and social media contacts. This is a quick and easy way to pick up makeup supplies, props, rope light, and miscellaneous items for your program.

16. **Issue a program calendar**

In November, have a student design a calendar to sell in mid-December. Many companies will provide a template so department photos can be slipped in. Add show dates, make sure as many kids are in the photos as possible. These make inexpensive holiday gifts with a high profit margin.

17. **Legacy campaign**

A legacy campaign is a long-term investment plan for your program. Look at community foundation models and tap into parents involved in planned giving (check your local colleges). Search out and ask for a meeting with people who are involved in the world of donors and building campaigns. They will be a valuable resource for you and can share their best strategies and advice. It also provides a way to invest any excess funds your program may have in a CD or savings account and put it to work long term.

18. **Additional tips to follow up with fundraising and outreach:**

- a. Hand-written thank you notes: Send them for everything.
- b. Lunch with reporters: Take them for coffee or lunch at least once per year.
- c. Coffee dates with your LAN: Keep them engaged, honored, and up to date with your department needs.
- d. Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS: Fundraising does not always need to benefit our own programs. If a theatre department is displaced due to fires, hurricanes, flooding, or other tragedies, consider producing a benefit to give them a boost.
- e. Stationery: Design department stationery. Include contact information, Thespian Troupe number, and adult staff. Use it for everything. Design note cards with the department logo for quick thank you notes students can write for any adult who contributes to a show/program.
- f. District/Site clerical staff can be crucial to your program's success. Develop relationships in each office. Send them fliers, season brochures, and small gifts. They may be able to assist with jobs such as graphic design work, providing access to school board agendas, and emailing groups of district staff.

Recommended Actions

- **Create a five-year strategic plan.** Start by determining what the one-, three-, and five-year goals are for your program. Consider what kind of funding it will take to achieve those goals. If, for example, you would like to produce a full-length musical in three years, plan two years of a cabaret or one-off show where all funds raised go into your musical bank account. Bring students – especially those younger ones – into the planning conversations. Include parents, administrators and the school community, and educate them as to your plan. You need to create the vision and communicate it to others. Make this an “elevator pitch” class assignment so all of your kids know where your program is going.
- **Implement an action plan.** Choose one to three new fundraisers to implement each year. Once you’ve chosen the fundraisers, select a student chair and committee. Use action plan templates for the students to make a plan, follow campus procedures for getting approval, and create a clear vision for what the money is being used for. Donors are more inclined to give when they know exactly what you need.
- **Conduct post-event reviews.** Have a post/reflection meeting after each event to assess if a) it is worth repeating, b) if it happens again what worked and what needs revised, and c) if it doesn’t fit your group you can toss it out or share it with someone else on your campus.

About the Author

Krista Carson Elhai has taught theatre for 36 years and directed over 250 productions as Theatre Director at Claremont High School in Claremont California. Her program has over 530 students involved and raises \$175,000 annually. She is a member of the College Board’s Pre-AP Arts Committee, the California State Thespian Board, the California Educational Theatre Association board, and serves on the Educational Theatre Association National Board.

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