

Going Free?

Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and General Admission Fees

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Preface

In “Going Free,” Dr. Andrew Pekarik reviews the topic of admission fees with a special focus on the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (CHNDM). The study was conducted with the help of Dr. David Karns in response to a request by members of the Board of Regents.

Andrew adequately captures the main issues associated with admission fees at CHNDM as well as other U.S. and European museums and discusses some of the implications associated with changes in admission policies.

This study, like almost all other products produced by the Office of Policy and Analysis, is intended to address practical issues. It, like other studies, was reviewed by Andrew’s colleagues at different stages. I thank them for their insights.

Carole M.P. Neves, Director
Office of Policy and Analysis

What is the likely effect of removing admission charges at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum?

This paper was researched and written in response to an inquiry by the Smithsonian Institution Board of Regents, asking about the likely effects of free admission to the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (CHNDM) in New York. Currently CHNDM is the only Smithsonian museum that charges general admission. This paper examines admission policies at museums elsewhere and presents some of the important implications of a change of admission policy.¹

CHNDM became part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1968, following the decision of Cooper Union to close its museum of design. The revitalized museum opened in the Carnegie Mansion on Fifth Avenue and 90th Street in 1976. Under the current policy the general admission fee is \$12. Seniors and students are admitted for \$9. Children under 12, Smithsonian members, and CHNDM members are admitted free.²

During the early part of its history in the Carnegie Mansion, the museum set aside one evening a week for free admission. Since that time, admission has been free to all only during certain special periods (e.g., during National Design Week in 2006, sponsored by Target).

Most American museums charge admission.

Among all American museums, 60% require general admission fees, and 40% are either free or have suggested admissions.³ Zoos and children's museums are most likely to charge admission (nearly all do), and university and college museums are least likely to charge (64% do not). The median admissions fee is \$6. Most museums that charge admission offer free or reduced admission to certain sub-groups, such as children, seniors, and members. For museums that charge, income from admissions comprises 6% (median) of total operating income.⁴ Among art museums that do not charge general admission, many charge for special exhibitions.

Most Manhattan art museums charge admission.

Aside from CHNDM there are about 24 museums of art/design currently open in Manhattan (see Table 1). Seven charge no admission and none of these seven charge for special exhibitions.⁵ One Manhattan art museum has strongly "recommended" admission.⁶ Among the other 17 museums, the average general admissions fee is \$12 (the median fee is \$12). All except one offer reduced rates for seniors and students.⁷ In addition, 7 of these museums have at least a few hours in the week that are free or have suggested admission fees.⁸

Some major art museums have long been free or have never charged admission.

Art museums that have long had free general admission include the Cleveland Museum of Art, Toledo Art Museum, Kimbell Art Museum, Menil Collection, Amon Carter Museum, Des Moines Art Center, and J. Paul Getty Museum. Others, such as the Brooklyn Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Metropolitan Museum of Art have established “suggested” or “recommended” admission policies that, in principle, allow the visitor to determine the exact amount to pay.

Some art museums have recently removed admission charges.

The following are some examples of US art museums that have removed admissions and the year they went free:

- St Louis Art Museum 1971
- Minneapolis Institute of Arts 1988
- Dayton Art Institute 1994
- Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art 1998
- San Jose Museum of Art 2001 (reinstated admission charges in 2006)
- Cincinnati Art Museum 2003
- Baltimore Museum of Art 2006
- Walters Art Gallery 2006
- Indianapolis Museum of Art 2007

Most notably, the entire system of national museums reporting to the Department of Culture, Media, and Sports (DCMS) in the

United Kingdom restored free admission in 2001. (Many national museums in Great Britain started to charge admission in 1984, at which point visits fell as much as 40% in some major museums.⁹) Data systematically collected in the UK since then offer the best empirical information on the effects of removing admission fees.

Removal of admissions fees increases attendance to some degree.

Since substantial publicity normally accompanies “major” fee reductions, removing admission fees often results in an initial increase in attendance although that increase may not be sustained in later years. In the first seven months after fees were lifted at the DCMS museums, the number of visitors overall increased 62% over the same period in the previous year.¹⁰ However, much of the increase was attributed to the fact that those who visited prior to the lifting of charges tended to make more frequent and shorter visits once the museums were free. In other words, although free access did raise the number of visits, most of the increase came from existing audiences.

Admission fees are secondary barriers to visiting, not primary.

As noted above, most of the increases after removing attendance fees are due to traditional visitors making more visits. This is due to the fact that admissions charges are secondary barriers to visitation. Other barriers, such as lack of interest or time, are much more important reasons for not visiting than cost, according to national studies done in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.¹¹

Removing admission fees does not attract a different socio-economic group.

National Studies in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States all demonstrate that more than any other demographic factor, going to arts events and museums is highly correlated with education.¹² In the United States, an individual with a masters or doctoral degree is nearly five times more likely to visit an art museum than a high school graduate and ten times more likely than someone whose has no education past grade school (58% for graduate degree; 49% for bachelor or professional degree; 13% high school graduate; 6% grade school).¹³

In 1997, two-thirds of NEA survey respondents (67%) said that they would like to go more often to art museums; however, as many, or more, survey respondents cited “difficulty in making time,” “limited availability,” and “inconvenient location” as barriers to greater participation as cited “expense.”

Thus, while removing the cost barrier can make a museum economically more accessible, those who take advantage of the opportunity tend to closely resemble existing audiences in their levels of education.

Some art museum directors who eliminated general admission charges said that eliminating charges alone – without significant marketing efforts – was unlikely to increase the number of visits.

Visiting is about more than money

People in the lowest income bracket [in Germany] regard entrance fees as a barrier almost five times as much as people in the highest income bracket....Closely related to income are *education* and *occupation* as variables influencing this assessment. An explanation for the impact of these variables on the assessment of museum entrance fees as a barrier can be found in the sociological models of life style or milieu identifications. A visit to a museum is more than an economic decision; it is an expression of a life style.

Volker Kirchberg, University of Luneburg

Entrance Fees as a Subjective Barrier to Visiting Museums in Journal of Cultural Economics, vol. 22, p. 10, 1998.

Many American museums that remove admissions fees charge for special exhibitions.

By keeping an admissions charge for special exhibitions, museums that have gone free are able to maintain admission income as well as an important membership benefit. In fact, some museums have seen marked increases in admissions income following the removal of admission charges, due to an expanded special exhibition program for which fees are charged.¹⁴

When museums go free, membership expands at some museums.

This outcome has been noted by some American art museums which have gone free and by donors that sponsor free admission, although precise data are not available, and explanations are difficult to come by. A likely possibility is that the increased level of special-exhibition programming that often accompany the removal of admissions fees, and the membership benefit of free admission to these exhibitions, may encourage membership.¹⁵

Earned revenues do not grow proportionally with increased attendance.

Studies in Britain indicated that when admission fees were removed and attendance rose, earned revenues also grew, but per-person expenditures in cafes and shops fell. It was suggested that this might be due to the fact of shorter visits and more crowded conditions, or possibly to a changed perception of the

value of the visit.¹⁶ The increase in visits also raised the cost of maintenance and brought about the need for additional staff.

Removing admission fees is a fund-raising opportunity.

According to some American museums that have gone free, the movement to make the museum financially accessible to all offers an excellent opportunity to raise more money from particular funders who might otherwise be less generous. When the funders are banks (Dayton Art Institute and Cincinnati Art Museum) or other corporate entities (such as Target Corporation), the museum sometimes grants the corporation “naming rights” to free admission for a certain period.

In some cases the money that is raised to support free admission is used to establish an endowment to cover some portion of the revenue loss. As noted before, when charges for special exhibitions are kept, the actual admissions income does not necessarily fall.

In the case of the San Jose Museum of Art, free admission was funded in 2001 by a corporation and the local government. Five years later, however, a corporate merger and tightened government budgets forced the museum to restore an admission charge. In the case of several museums that have recently gone free, such as the Baltimore Museum of Art and Walters Gallery, free admission is funded by one year grants from local governments.

Removing admission fees can help change perceptions of the museum.

According to some of the directors of museums that have gone free, the most important outcome of removing admission fees is the changed perception of the museum in the community. The perception of increased openness and accessibility can become an important element in changing and stimulating the relationship between the museum and its audience. This altered image can be particularly beneficial when the change is accompanied by a strong marketing program and by sincere efforts to expand the range of offerings and programs. If the spirit of openness and

accessibility becomes a central principle in the museum's overall mission, the effects can be very positive and previously absent segments of the community can be drawn to the museum.

There are some benefits to having admission fees besides admission income.

When a museum has admission fees, it is feasible to provide package tourism arrangements that can build the overall market for the museum through alliances with commercial tour operators.

In addition, a study at the Smithsonian showed that when visitors pay for an exhibition they spend more time in it.¹⁷

Museums should not be "attractions"

Turnstile-focused entertainment is short-sighted. Fixed fees for general admission discourage spontaneous visits and make art museums de facto attractions rather than porous educational institutions. Museums should focus on building operating endowments and annual contributions to the point where they can afford to offer free general admission to the permanent collection, even if special exhibitions are ticketed. In the economics of a healthy art museum, a significant percentage of operating expenses comes from endowment and from contributed income, thereby promoting artistic and intellectual freedom with less compromise. Earned income serves as icing on the cake, derived from shop income, special events, selectively ticketed educational programs, and membership. In such instances, museums are better off providing free general admission, while levying charges for exhibitions, events, and programs that require extraordinary spending.

Maxwell Anderson, Director and CEO, Indianapolis Museum of Art

Prescriptions for Art Museums in the Decade Ahead in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1, p. 13-14, 2007.

Admission fees at CHNDM currently bring in more than \$500,000 per year.

The cost of collecting the \$500,000 is difficult to separate from other, related visitor services functions, but has been estimated as 20 percent. In other words, if the required general admission fee were eliminated at CHNDM, the museum would need to find approximately \$400,000 per year from one or more alternative sources, assuming that collection costs can be recovered. The most likely sources would be additional funding in the Smithsonian budget or creating an endowment for this purpose. The endowment would need to be more than \$12 million to provide the needed income.

Some potential users may be avoiding CHNDM because of admission charges.

It is reasonable to assume that there are some potential visitors who avoid CHNDM because of the fees. The museum offers 25% discounts for seniors and students (since presumably they feel that the full price of \$12 is an unfair barrier for these groups), but even at that level (\$9), some students might still feel that it is too expensive, i.e., not worth the price.

Recent visitor studies at CHNDM have shown that many visitors feel that, although their museum experience is a good value for their time and effort, the current admissions fee is NOT a good value, with this feeling strongest among younger visitors. This may be due to the fact that the CHNDM exhibition area is relatively small compared to the Metropolitan Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney, all of which are within

one mile of CHNDM. This suggests that the CHNDM admission fee might be a barrier for some potential visitors who have low incomes, especially younger audiences.

Without marketing, the unmet demand for visiting CHNDM is modest.

There is some evidence to suggest that there are people who want to go to CHNDM but feel that they cannot afford it.

In 2005 the museum offered free admission on some Tuesdays in August. During those free Tuesdays an average of around 294 visitors came to the museum during normal hours (10 AM to 5 PM), compared to about 240 during non-free Tuesdays around the same time. The additional free-Tuesday visitors represented 7% of the weekly average attendance. During the same period, visitors during Friday evening hours (paid admission) represented 12% of the average weekly attendance. The free Tuesdays did not cannibalize attendance during normal hours on the following Wednesdays since an average of 253 visits were recorded on Wednesdays after free Tuesdays in comparison with 175 on Wednesdays after pay Tuesdays.

In the years 1990-1992, when the museum was closed on Mondays, but had free admission after 5 on Tuesdays, the number of people who came during the free after-hours period on Tuesdays represented 15% of the total audience for those years. However, this audience might represent those who wish to visit after 5 as well as those who wish to visit for free.

The number of visits to CHNDM could increase with program expansion and marketing.

During National Design Week 2006 (October 15-21), the museum organized a number of special programs and events and offered free admission, thanks to the sponsorship of Target. Target also funded a substantial marketing effort that highlighted the programs and the free admission. During that week approximately 9,000 people visited CHNDM.¹⁸ This was more than two and a half times the average weekly attendance during September and the other weeks of October.

Of course, sustaining a substantial portion of this level of interest would be difficult without increased program activity and marketing throughout the year even with the amelioration of the admissions barrier.

If CHNDM wishes to attract visitors most sensitive to admission fees as barriers (such as college students and young adults), establishing a free evening with special programming and actively promoting it to the target community could improve the museum's image of accessibility and increase the number of visits without requiring as substantial an endowment or alternative income stream as the elimination of general admission fees.

A Contrary View

Although controversial, it is arguable that admission charges can promote access. First...charges could facilitate the targeting of subsidy upon low income or other prioritised groups. Second...revenue from charges may finance increased access in cases where museums no longer have to cut costs by reducing opening hours or where those revenues finance 'outreach' programmes. Third...appreciation of the exhibits...may be constrained because of lack of finance for visitor education in the absence of charges. Fourth, use of revenues from charges to make the visitor experience more attractive may stimulate demand (visits) so much that it more than offsets any fall in demand as a result of the charge *per se*.

Stephen Bailey and Peter Falconer, Glasgow Caledonian University
Charging for Admission to Museums and Galleries: A Framework for Analysing the Impact of Access in *Journal of Cultural Economics*, vol. 22, p. 175, 1998.

**Table 1
Admissions Charges to Art/Design Museums in Manhattan**

Distance to CHNDM	Museum	Admission	Seniors	Students	Children free	Free Times	Suggested Fee Times
1.9	American Folk Art Museum	FREE					
1.2	Americas Society	FREE					
5.5	Artists Space	FREE					
5.3	Drawing Center	FREE					
2.7	Museum at FIT	FREE					
3.4	Hispanic Society of America	FREE					
2.5	Nicholas Roerich Museum	FREE					
0.5	Metropolitan Museum of Art*	\$20	\$15	\$10	under 12 with adult		
1.9	Museum of Modern Art	\$20	\$16	\$12	under 16	Friday 4-8	
0.1	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum	\$18	\$15	\$15	under 12		Friday, 5:45-7:45
1.1	The Frick Collection	\$15	\$10	\$5	not admitted	Sunday 11-1	
0.8	Whitney Museum of American Art	\$15	\$10	\$10	under 12 and NYC Public High School		
0.3	Neue Galerie	\$15	\$10	\$10	not admitted		
3	International Center of Photography	\$12	\$8	\$8	under 12		Friday 5-8
2.8	Morgan Library	\$12	\$8	\$8	under 12		
0.1	Jewish Museum	\$12	\$10	\$8		Saturday	
1.6	Asia Society and Museum	\$10	\$7	\$5	under 16	Friday 6-9	
3.7	Rubin Museum of Art	\$10	\$7	\$7	under 12	Friday 7-10	
0.1	National Academy Museum	\$10	\$5	\$5			
1.9	Museum of Arts and Design	\$9	\$7	\$7	under 12		Thursday 6-8
1.9	Dahesh Museum	\$9	\$4	\$4	under 12	First Thursday	
3.1	Studio Museum in Harlem	\$7	\$3	\$3	under 12		
0.7	El Museo Del Barrio	\$6	\$4	\$4	under 12	Thursday	
4.7	Grey Art Gallery (Suggested)	\$3	\$3	\$3		NYU students, faculty & staff	
	AVERAGE	\$12	\$8	\$7			
0	Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum	12	9	9	under 12		

*Recommended/strongly urged.

NOTES

¹ Previous reports prepared for the Board of Regents or Congress regarding admissions dealt with the possibility of charging admission. These reports were prepared in 1954, 1986, 1996, and 2001.

² Also ICOM and AAM members and some students are admitted free.

³ Suggested admissions are entrance charges without required amounts. Visitors are required to give something, but an amount is only suggested, not mandatory. Nonetheless, most visitors behave as if the suggested amount was a required fee and pay what is suggested. Although suggested admission is tabulated together with free admission in reports by the American Association of Museum, it is functionally different from free admission.

⁴ AAM Admissions fact sheet

⁵ American Folk Art Museum, Americas Society, Artists Space, Drawing Center, Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology, Hispanic Society of America

⁶ The Metropolitan Museum of Art “recommends” a fee of \$20 for adults, \$15 for seniors, and \$10 for students. The recommendation is made strongly: “To help cover the cost of special exhibitions, for which there is no additional charge or special ticketing, we ask that you please pay the full suggested amount.”

⁷ The exception is Grey Art Gallery which charges \$3 for admission, the lowest fee of any of the charging museums.

⁸ An eighth museum, El Museo del Barrio, is free on Thursdays to seniors only, and a ninth, the Dahesh Museum, has three free hours once a month. Among the seven, The Jewish Museum is free all day Saturday, International Center of Photography and Museum of Arts and Design have a few hours in the week that are “suggested admission,” and the others have between two and four hours of free admission per week. See Table 1.

⁹ Smithsonian Institution, Study of the Feasibility of Implementing Admission Charges at the Smithsonian Institution, 1996.

¹⁰ The United Kingdom Parliament, Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport First Report, 2002.

¹¹ According to national survey of museum visitors in New Zealand, convenience and time are more important than cost. For those who visit museums but are unable to visit more often, the main barriers are lack of time (54%), not available locally (30%), lack of transport (15%), and cost of entry (11%). For those who had not visited at all, the main barriers were lack of time (49%), not available locally (29%), lack of transport (18%), and cost of entry (11%). See Ministry for Culture and Heritage, New Zealand, A Measure of Culture: Cultural experiences and cultural spending in New Zealand, June 2003. Similar results were found in the United Kingdom, where 32% cited a lack of time, 22% a lack of interest, 19% a lack of anything they want to see, 11% difficult to get there, and 8% admission charges too high. See Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, London, Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004, March 2004. A similar result was found even before the national museums removed admissions fees, when the main reasons for not visiting were “nothing I particularly wanted to see” (41%), “museums are boring places” (12%), “I find it difficult to get out” (12%), and “admission charges too high” (10%). See The Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries, London, Visitors to Museums & Galleries in the UK, February 2001.

¹² New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, A Measure of Culture: Cultural experiences and cultural spending in New Zealand, 2003. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, 2005-06. National Endowment for the Arts, 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2004.

¹³ Data from the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Data accessed via Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive (CPANDA).

¹⁴ Interview with museum director; also data from annual statistics report of the Association of Art Museum Directors for museums without admission fees.

¹⁵ Interview with corporate sponsor.

¹⁶ First report, Op. cit.

¹⁷ Smithsonian Institution, Institutional Studies Office, Evaluation of Amber at the National Museum of Natural History, 1997.

¹⁸ CHNDM, in cooperation with eight other museums, is also open free of cost during the Museum Mile Festival on the second Tuesday in June. Attendance is very high during the evening festival with ten percent of CHNDM’s 2005 visit count recorded after 6 PM on June 7, 2005 (13,071) and 16,542 on June 13, 2006 (8% of 2006 visits).