

**American Youth Circus Organization / American Circus Educators
Strategic Update for our Community
June 2017**

AYCO/ACE Board of Directors

Introduction

This report provides members of our community with a brief picture of AYCO's history, and an assessment of the challenges and opportunities we face today. This picture forms the backdrop to recent work by the board developing a vision and strategy for growth.

A second document, '*A new vision for circus arts in the USA*', will be available in early July. '*A new vision for circus arts in the USA*' is an attempt to engage a wider group from the circus community, including youth, youth leaders, educators, producers, performers and funders, in discussions about a collaborative effort to advance circus arts in the USA.

Note that as AYCO considers future growth, the board is not considering eliminating or reducing in scale any of its current programs or initiatives. The Board hopes that three existing organizations, the American Youth Circus Organization, American Circus Educators and Circus Now will come together, along with others, to create an umbrella for mutual support.

At the AYCO Festival in August 2017 there will be a facilitated opportunity to discuss our history and future strategic options. The Board welcomes comments from all our constituents. Stakeholders who are unable to attend the festival or would like to comment in advance, please send an e-mail to planning@americanyouthcircus.org. Comments left there may not be addressed individually, but the strategic planning team, led by Zoe Brookes, will include them in their analysis and report on them at the Festival meeting.

AYCO History

1998 - 2009

- Following our founding in 1998, AYCO activities were primarily focused around our annual youth festival and educators' conference, and led by a small board of volunteers.
- A 2006 strategic plan, facilitated by Carlo Pellegrini helped the organization focus on mission and direction

2008-10

- AYCO Board expresses desire to share the burden of managing AYCO with professional staff. President David Hunt, at 2009 AYCO Festival, invites the community to step in to help AYCO move to the next level.
- Zoe Brookes volunteers to help with a strategic plan

2010 -12

- Chuck Johnson takes over from David Hunt as President, oversees implementation of strategic plan
- Zoe Brookes volunteers as Executive Director for two years.
- AYCO makes a shift to paid staff, increases membership by 10x and increases engagement from a broad range of circus education programs

2012

- AYCO Board recognizes the need to provide guidance on program Safety and starts the Safety Program
- Amy Cohen replaces Zoe Brookes and becomes AYCO's first paid (part-time) Executive Director

2014

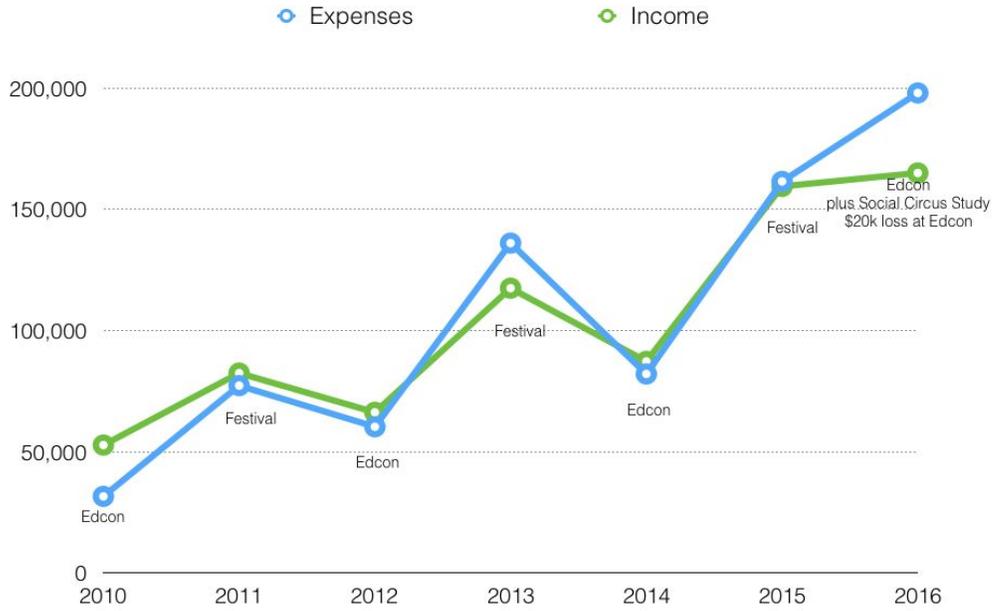
- In recognition of the extent to which AYCO is providing important resources for educators who serve both youth and adults, AYCO creates the American Circus Educators association (ACE), with the same staff and board.
- The addition allows AYCO/ACE to craft offerings specifically aimed at youth and others aimed at the educators who serve them e.g. AYCOGram and ACE News; AYCO Festival and Educators' conference.
- Increase in membership by 50% builds our capacity to offer resources, such as access to insurance, to our members.
- A meeting at the Cirque du Soleil headquarters positions AYCO to lead a movement for Social Circus growth in the USA with the support of CdS.
- Jesse Alford replaces Chuck Johnson as AYCO President

2016

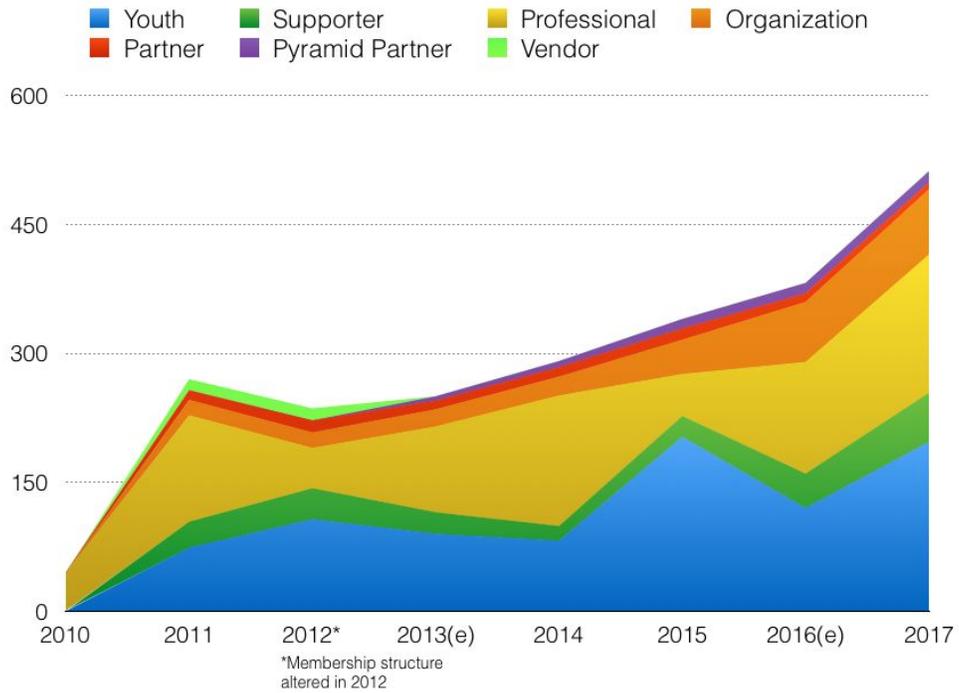
- At the AYCO/ACE strategic planning retreat, the Board responds to voices from the Youth Advisory Committee, recognizing the need to help youth continue a lifelong engagement in circus arts and agrees to seek ways to become part of an umbrella effort to support circus arts as a vital part of American culture.
- A committee is charged with examining ways to increase AYCO/ACE's capacity to build services; noting the success of Circus Now in making links between producers and emerging artists, this committee agrees to work with a committee from Circus Now on this question.
- AYCO commissions the first ever independent study about Social Circus and Social and Emotional Learning.

By the numbers:

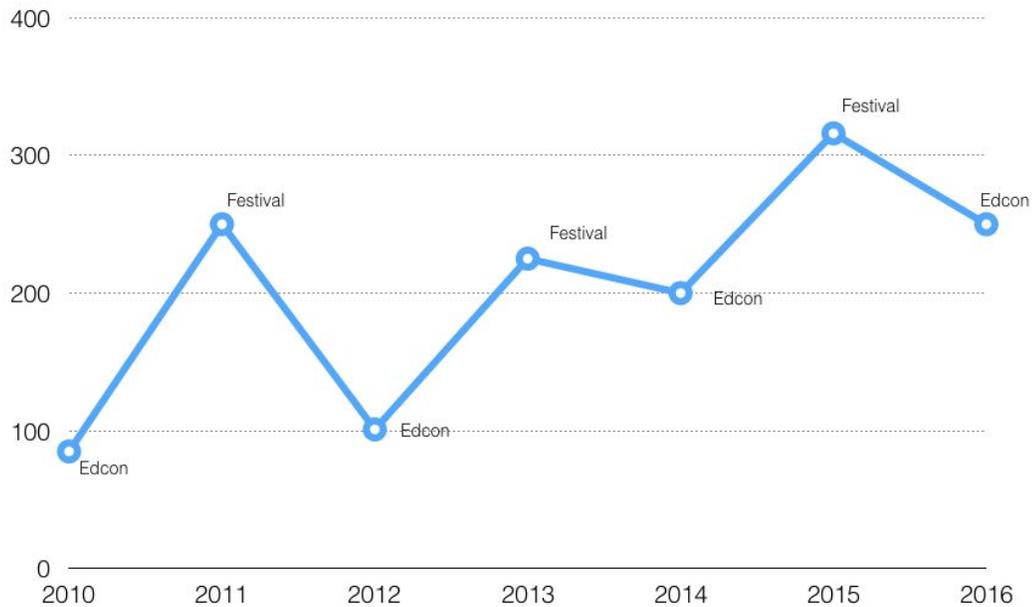
Our budget has grown consistently (even years are EdCon years)



As has our membership



Event attendance has also steadily risen (even years are EdCon years)



AYCO/ACE Today

Here's the assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats discussed by the AYCO/ACE Board in March 2016 and updated in 2017.

Strengths

- Strong connection to existing members
- Recognized hub for youth and educators
- Well-controlled expenses, appropriate income mix
- Growing pool of skilled, young adults
- Strong list of achievements in last few years (safety, insurance, social circus network, 2014 and 2016 Edcons)

Weaknesses

- Limited capacity to meet member needs / innovate
- Internally focused board
- Insufficient scale to attract significant external funding
- Lacking strong voice in world beyond circus
- Limited understanding of scale / dynamics of sector (see capacity issues)

Opportunities

- Social Circus Initiative has potential to multiply its impact on youth
- Smithsonian exhibition in 2017 could accelerate participation
- Development of circus arts in physical education programs in schools
- Bring respect and recognition to circus as an art form
- Develop strong funder relationships that benefit social circus and other circus programs

Threats

- Increasing needs of larger community outstrip our capacity to serve them
- Professional staff are at capacity with risk of burnout
- Without strong support, circus-related communities are separating according to discipline e.g. aerials, juggling, German wheel etc.

AYCO Future

In response to this analysis, the AYCO/ACE Board asked our Executive Director, Amy Cohen, to lay out her vision for future growth. Here's what she wrote:

"Since joining AYCO as the Executive Director, our mission of promoting the participation of youth in circus arts has been the barometer by which I judge every decision I make, on a day to day basis, and with a bird's eye view. My vision is rooted in the grassroots circus education movement in the USA. I understand that this perspective does not represent the true diversity of circus in the USA as our current constituents largely do not represent traditional circus - it's modality, trends, or current needs. There is much work to be done to make connections on this front.

The history that informs me:

I think about the way youth circus has developed a lot when I ponder our growth. Our 2010 census taught us that 92% of the youth circuses surveyed began within the past 30 years. This coincides directly with the emergence of "new circus" in the USA - when influence from Russia and China made its way to the USA, and a new generation of people started to identify as circus people thanks to the circus education they received from these amazing immigrants (leading to Big Apple Circus, Pickle Family, etc). Those new circus pioneers settled down in the 80's and 90's after performing careers, and started circus schools that became many of the founding AYCO member organizations. Those organizations were very small, and served youth.

In my detailed discussions with AYCO founding members before the ACE expansion in 2014, I heard that AYCO as an organization never wanted to exclude non-youth, they chose to focus on youth so the organization would be small enough to manage with a working board, and because at that time youth programs were the most common type of program in the US.

Fast forward- a generation of students have learned from those New Circus pioneers and grassroots youth circus has flourished in the US. There is a new generation asserting circus as their culture - starting their own businesses and programs, choosing colleges based on their proximity to circus schools, linking circus and academia, etc. Participating in circus arts as a recreational activity has caught hold in most major cities and many smaller communities - many thanks to the fact that it proves itself to be (just barely for some, and viably for others) a sustainable pay to play business model. Parents and families have started to get involved as well as adults seeing to take classes for fitness, fun, or community.

Since 2008 (when our AYCO festival almost didn't happen due to lack of capacity), we've seen a clear shift in behavior at our national festival. First, we noticed that 18-26 year olds did not have a role to play - so, we started the work study program and have had consistent at-capacity

participation every year. In 2015 we noticed many families joining in at the festivals - using it as their family vacation - when it used to be that primarily program leaders would bring youth from their program. The original AYCO gathering included 8 organizations, in 2015 we had participation from 100. In 2010 AYCO membership hovered around 40 - today we have 538 members. This represents a wider engagement, and a call to action for us.

The grassroots development of circus in the USA is unique. There is no other country that has this much circus at the grass-roots level, with so little structure and support at the top. Canada and the UK struggle to train enough youth to fill their degree granting circus programs. We have the opposite problem. Most of the countries that we see motivating circus forward have had significant top down support for the development of circus... we have nothing like that, and cannot expect our government to provide it.

How we promote the participation of youth in circus arts:

Our analysis of AYCO/ACE's current situation begs the question, "Is promoting the participation of youth in circus arts enough at this point in time?" When we formed in 1998, yes it was! Most programs were developmental programs geared towards youth. The economy was different, the government was different, arts in education was perceived and supported differently, and the influence of circus globally was very different from what we are experiencing today. Circus is a rapidly growing field.

I believe that we must look beyond promoting the participation of youth in circus arts and actively engage with the ways that youth participation relates to our greater circus context. We know that circus has developmental benefits for youth - but we also see that it creates identity and community - something that stays with our youth for life. I believe we serve our youth if we articulate next steps and provide opportunities for them. AYCO/ACE is in the best position to do this work, and needs to, to fully serve our constituents.

There are many untapped resources for encouraging more youth participation in circus arts - but our current capacity does not allow us to pursue them. One example is working to include circus as an activity in physical education classes nationwide. This would not only engage tens of thousands of youth, but also generate more interest from students who may go on to circus schools for further learning. or circus education but do not have the capacity to do so.

Since 1998, we have all worked together to raise generations of youth who love circus. They are seeking a continued connection with the form, and if we continue to engage them with circus as an art form, many will become supporters for life. Today's youth will be the stewards of a thriving circus culture in the future.

The need to build our capacity:

To truly serve youth and promote the participation of youth in circus arts, AYCO/ACE must find a way to significantly increase its capacity because:

- *Currently, our income derives primarily from circus schools that serve both youth and adults. We believe there is untapped potential to raise outside funding for youth programs.*
- *Our current capacity limits our ability to serve and connect youth directly. It also limits our ability to facilitate youth-to-youth connection outside of our events, something youth have expressed they would like us to do.*
- *Our current capacity limits our ability to serve the Social Circus Network - the Network provides a structure for reaching the youth in circus most in need of assistance, but we do not have the capacity to raise funds to increase this work.*
- *At our current capacity, AYCO/ACE is too small to gain attention from national funders, brands, stakeholders, or board members. Our small staff can execute current programs, just, and no more.*
- *AYCO is in a position where it sustains just barely thanks to careful planning paired with a strike of luck here and there. Events are not consistently sustainable, we can not support a development director or a high level ED with fundraising experience, and we do not have enough of a market to lure major sponsors.*
- *Our staff works above and beyond “part time” to serve the organization in a way that is going to lead to burnout if we do not build capacity to make the team bigger and more collaborative.*

Opening up our network across circus’ current borders and including demographics that we don’t currently serve such as emerging artists, professionals, creatives, technicians, and recreational circus students of all ages will increase our ability to draw resources to the sector.

Supporting youth by supporting professional circus in the USA

To fully support our youth, we need to encourage the development of professional circus pathways in the USA. This would be a new component for our organization.

The value of professional circus to promoting the participation of youth in circus arts is that youth see it and want to do it themselves. Issues of access and equity aside, I believe that seeing professional circus (live or recorded) is key to promoting the participation of youth in circus arts - whether or not youth want to become performers when they grow up. In a tent, on the street, or on the stage - circus is all around us. In the media, the presence of Cirque du Soleil on Bravo network TV in the early 2000’s and Circus Smirkus on the Disney Channel directly correlates with the explosion of circus as a recreational activity.

For a young person who does want to be a professional, pathways are not clear. I believe there should always be options to become a circus artist “outside of the system” but the reality is that internationally circus is becoming professionalized and we need to keep up, In Canada, there is a clear pathway for a young person who wants to be a performer - join circus classes or do gymnastics, go to ENC’s high school, audition for ENC, and hope to be one of the 97% of their graduates each year that gets hired by one of the top 3 canadian circus companies. In Australia,

a young person who wants to be a circus rigger can pursue training in order to become one. In England, students can pursue a degree in circus directing. These are just a few simplified examples of pathways that do not currently exist in the USA. Right now even though the sector is growing, we can't honestly tell a young person that there is a clear pathway for them to become a circus artist - nor a circus rigger, circademic, etc. Without this pathway, our most talented and best advocated for youth seek opportunities abroad, and others drift into other paths.

There is much work to be done for our organization to connect respectfully with traditional circus companies - many of which travel through small towns that would otherwise not have access to circus performance. Having the staff capacity to connect with these institutions could provide a world of access to traditional circus for young people, and build important bridges that honors the diversity of our art form. We are in the right time and place to foster a culture of circus performance in the USA so youth growing up in our programs can be inspired, driven, and motivated by the circus arts that exist around them.

Supporting youth by supporting Social Circus

We have succeeded in creating a structure for collaborative working that engages programs that use circus arts to achieve social change. This is an arena of interest to funders and with potential for growth. I believe that creating links between social circus and the professional circus community strengthens those programs.

For example, most successful social circuses in the US have relationships with professional circus companies. Free tickets, performing in the pre-show, meeting artists and learning about their life paths are all things that Social Circuses benefit from. Linking with established circus companies has helped Social Circuses bolster for credibility and attract funding. Social circus programs tend not to pursue a mission of developing professional performers, but when a student does go on to be a professional artist they become a source of pride, joy, and inspiration.

The case for growth:

The Youth Circus movement has been so successful that we now have thousands of individuals who want to keep circus in their lives.

I'm left with the question of what is more true to our mission- a smaller organization that serves only youth and educators but really doesn't have the strength or capacity to grow as the sector grows around us, or a more comprehensive organization that serves multiple demographics, and can provide more services to promote youth participation in circus arts."

The Board's Vision

Over the last few weeks, the AYCO/ACE board has created a vision statement intended to paint a picture of what a more unified and comprehensive organization might aim to achieve. We have framed each of these potential goals in relation to our mission of **promoting the participation of youth in circus arts and supporting circus educators**, while also considering engagement based on the evolving sector's needs. All of our current programs fit within this vision.

Unified, supported, youth, professional, artistic and educational circus arts communities

1. Youth circus artists are connected, engaged, and linked to resources and institutions that can help them pursue their chosen pathway in circus. *⇒ More resources for youth = stronger youth circus sector.*
2. Circus arts practitioners and educators can access the educational and professional development resources they need, including opportunities to connect virtually and in person. *⇒ More resources for educators and program leaders = stronger youth circus sector.*
3. Qualified circus educators can meet the demand of circus schools, particularly for advanced level instruction. *⇒ Better and more qualified educators = youth who wish to develop skills to become professional can access training.*
4. Emerging performance groups can access the space and funding they need to create high quality work. *⇒ Circus develops as an art form = youth aspiration and drive increases.*
5. Arts funders recognize circus arts as a distinct discipline and invest in its advancement. *⇒ Circus gains legitimacy = more funding for programs that can serve youth.*
6. Leading circus artists and companies in the USA have the capacity to create work of the same quality as international leaders in the field. *⇒ More youth see circus = more participation*
7. Professional circus arts workers command respect and fair compensation. *⇒ Respect for circus professionals = healthy career path for youth to aspire to, higher educator retention.*
8. US institutions participate actively in international circus arts networks that provide inspiration through artistic exchange. *⇒ International perspective = cultural exchange via common language of circus for youth.*
9. Circus practitioners can rely on the circus umbrella to represent their interests and to provide up-to-date information on the scale and nature of the circus arts sector. *⇒ More informed circus schools and educators = better served youth.*

Circus as a vital part of American culture

10. There is universal access to quality recreational circus training for all youth and adults. *⇒ More youth have access to circus training = more participation*
11. Circus arts plays a significant role in physical education in schools. *⇒ Significant number of youth have access to circus experiences = participation among diverse*

youth.

12. Circus arts plays an important part in the national conversation about the importance of the arts. ⇒ *Circus develops as an art form = youth aspiration and drive increases.*
13. Widespread performing arts festivals and venues include circus arts in their programs. ⇒ *More youth see circus = more participation*
14. Circus arts performance reaches diverse audiences across the US. ⇒ *More youth see circus = more participation*
15. A vibrant, articulate critical community provides commentary on circus arts presentations. ⇒ *Circus develops as an art form = youth aspiration and drive increases.*
16. The power of circus arts to heal trauma, build community and develop individuals is widely understood, and circus arts are extensively employed in therapeutic settings and to address social challenges. ⇒ *Social and adaptive circus is better understood and respected, as well as present “in the system” = more underserved youth interacting with these programs.*

Respect for history , recognition of the current and invention of the future

17. A vibrant commentary on the history of circus in the USA thrives and continues to be built. ⇒ *Youth read, watch and learn about circus in school and at leisure*
18. Circus artists understand the wide range of possible approaches to creating performance and clear pathways exist for those who wish to engage with circus arts as performers, directors, choreographers, designers etc. ⇒ *Youth face more opportunities and clear pathways*
19. The culture of safety in circus arts is preserved and supported. ⇒ *Youth experience emotionally and physically safe surroundings for their practice*
20. Circus arts feature as courses of study at higher education institutions and are widely written about in scholarly journals. ⇒ *Youth seeking to pursue circus in higher education encounter receptive scholars and a choice of venues to study.*

In Summary, the AYCO/ACE Board hopes this report has provided a brief picture of AYCO's history, and an assessment of the challenges and opportunities we face today. This picture forms the backdrop to recent work by the board developing a vision and strategy for growth.

At the AYCO Festival in August 2017 there will be an facilitated opportunity to discuss our history and future strategic options. The Board welcomes comments from all our constituents. Stakeholders who are unable to attend the festival or would like to comment in advance, please send an e-mail to planning@americanyouthcircus.org. Comments left there will be read by the Board and included in their analysis and report to the Festival meeting.