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Growing Families at the Amherst Early Music Festival



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The Amherst Early Music Festival is the largest presenter of early music workshops in North America, attracting students and faculty from all over the world. Its dedicated staff and vibrant work-study program have ensured a positive experience for attendees since 1980. When special accommodations were made for members of teaching faculty who wanted to bring a child and caregiver to the festival, news of this arrangement spread positively across the festival, and other faculty and staff took advantage of complimentary lodging and meals for families and caregivers. The case builds toward the question of formalizing a policy for family accommodations and the effects such a policy might have on attendees of the Amherst Early Music Festival.



This case study was prepared by Stephen Biegner of the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music. The **Eastman Case Studies** are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

The World's Early Music Workshop

When visitors turn up the long, winding hill that leads onto the campus of Connecticut College in New London, the topography looks like almost any other liberal arts college up and down the coast of New England. There are beautiful stone facades, a quad, and a smattering of parking lots in front of administrative offices and educational buildings. And then, stuck jauntily into a corner at the first intersection visitors reach on campus, a hand-painted sign reads, “ here for AEMF” (“Turn here for AEMF”). This is just one the “punny” signs one sees on campus, letting early music aficionados know they are in the right place for the Amherst Early Music Festival. Despite its modest campus accommodations, the festival has grown to be the largest presenter of early music workshops in North America. Through its wide-ranging offerings, the AEMF creates learning opportunities for amateur and pre-professional students to study with leading musicians in the field of early music.

The Amherst Early Music Festival evolved from an annual summer workshop for early music. A group of early music teachers began the workshop in 1963. They had been using several locations for the workshops including Salve Regina College in Newport, Rhode Island, and Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts before finding a home at Amherst College in 1980. In 1986, the group fully incorporated as Amherst Early Music, Inc. and began officially referring to the summer workshop as the Amherst Early Music Festival. The festival remained on the Amherst campus until 1999 when the board decided to find a new location to host the annual workshop. After trying out three other venues with mixed success, Connecticut College emerged in 2006 as a welcome solution, representing a halfway point between Massachusetts and New York City, cities that fed the festival's participant base. Festival administration found Connecticut College so accommodating that year that it has continued to operate there ever since, while keeping the Amherst name.

The principal festival is broken up into two weeks, starting after July 4 each year. Staff arrive a week in advance to prepare all the living spaces and classrooms. Of the two festival weeks, students can choose to participate in the early week, the late week, or sometimes in both weeks depending on their course of study. Each year celebrates a new theme with annual repertoire based in one of four languages (English, French, Italian, or German) that rotate each year. The language focus helps funnel musical topics toward the heart of the festival known as the “Central Program.” Students who enroll in the Central Program take four classes per day (Monday through Friday), with additional, optional activities in the evenings such as lectures, concerts, madrigal singing, English country dancing, and more. Over the course of the festival, participants can enroll in programs for recorder, Baroque strings, keyboard (harpsichords, virginals, and clavichords are provided), Baroque and Renaissance winds, early notation, dance, and choral music.

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The Amherst Early Music Festival has now grown to attract students and faculty from all over the world. Together with Festival Director Frances Blaker, Marilyn Boenau—the second executive director in the organization's history—now oversees almost 100 professional faculty members, 90 young professionals in the festival's various young artist programs, 80 work-study students, a staff of 34, and a student body that has grown to over 400 during the combined two weeks of the festival.

In addition to the two-week festival in July, Amherst Early Music also hosts weekend workshops on the Eastern Seaboard. One occurs annually in Philadelphia over the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend

in January. A Spring Break Weekend Workshop takes place in Washington, D.C. in March each year. Litchfield, Connecticut plays host to a Memorial Day Weekend Workshop in May, and the organization runs the City Recorder Workshop in New York City during the month of October. In addition to these weekend workshops, Amherst Early Music also publishes three player-friendly music editions (playable on a number of instruments), which were not previously available in a modern edition. In 2020, they offered a truncated version of the summer festival online, hosting numerous virtual classes to stay connected with its ever-growing community.

A Growing Family, an Evolving Culture

Since the festival's inception, work-study students have always played a major role not only in keeping such a large operation running but also in fueling its growth. Students attending the AEMF have the opportunity to apply for work-study aid. The administration offers students a nominal reduction in tuition in exchange for completing a variety of tasks, ranging from ushering and making coffee to classroom set-up and stage crew. First-time work-study students typically receive up to \$200 toward their tuition bill. Their sundry assignments are designed to allow them to attend all of their classes, rehearsals, and performances. While work-study students at the AEMF are invested during the summer weeks of the festival, they also deliver a valuable point of continuity with a high rate of return year to year. Many even end up transitioning to festival staff or sometimes faculty positions.

"I really like the moment at orientation when we say, 'OK, if you've ever have been a work-study student, please stand up,' and basically the whole faculty and staff stand up," says Emily Eagen, the AEMF's assistant festival director. Emily presently oversees the student work-study program and views the program as the lifeblood of the festival. "If you're on staff, no job is really beneath you. You help out with carrying boxes, you help think through logistics or come up with creative solutions to problems that pop up – things

that feel really different from making music. But all of these jobs the student workers do are about sustaining an arts organization." Emily jokes that if you were to pay the work-study students hourly, they would end up being the highest paid people on staff. When not in their classes, these students are often up early to prepare various events across the festival and are staying up late to make photocopies, help with schedule change requests, sew costumes, and strike sets. Even if they are not formally on call, work-study students know that they must always be available to deal with any last-minute issues or projects that can arise. Work-study opportunities continue to be an effective way for students to afford the festival while also allowing them an inside look into how an arts organization operates.

Having a staff and steady supply of work-study students who know the ins and outs of the festival has benefited the AEMF in the long run. Even though Connecticut College has hosted the festival for the past 14 years, a given year's classes, concerts, storage spaces, or even accommodations may shift, depending on the size of the festival and the schedule of concurrent events at the college. The festival has no permanent storage space on campus through the year; therefore, it rents a storage unit nearby, which houses boxes of music, books, office supplies, opera costumes and sets, and other essentials. Each year, the AEMF takes the week before students arrive to retrieve items from storage, determine which classrooms and performance spaces they have access to, make room assignments, situate 16 keyboard instruments, and more. Having a group of people who are familiar with the grounds and the routine has proved crucial. Executive Director Marilyn Boenau affirms, "These staff members who know where things go and know how things work are really helpful to us. They become more and more valuable

Work-study students at the AEMF deliver a valuable point of continuity for the festival with a high rate of return year to year.

over time because they know so much. There's just this institutional memory. I think that helps paint the picture of why it's essential to keep people."

Marilyn talks a lot about how important everyone who works at the festival is to the organization. She often laments the fact that the AEMF can't pay much, so she and the board have tried to make up for this in other ways – free meals and housing, a flexible schedule in case another gig comes along, and other accommodations. So, when Marilyn found out one of her faculty members was pregnant, her first thought was, "How can I make this work?"

Hsuan-Wen Chen was a member of the harpsichord faculty and current co-director of the festival's Baroque Academy. In 2010, she and her husband Jason Priset, a member of the AEMF lute faculty and an administrative staff member, approached Marilyn to let her know that they were expecting their first child. They still really wanted to attend and teach that year as faculty members, but were concerned about whether the cost of bringing along their infant would prevent them from participating. At first, they all came to the arrangement that Hsuan-Wen and Jason would bring along one of their parents to watch the child while they taught. It was agreed that the couple would pay for the parent's room and board. But after thinking about it for a few days, Marilyn decided this still wasn't right. "They get to have this baby there with one of their parents and now they have to pay for the parent? That started to bother me." Marilyn went back to Hsuan-Wen and Jason and told them she would waive the room and board charges for the caregiver.

Just a couple of years later in early 2012, Emily Eagen announced that she was pregnant and wanted to keep working at the AEMF if she could afford to do so. At

that point, Marilyn realized this topic was something that needed more careful deliberation. As her staff members were getting older, marrying, and thinking about starting families, Marilyn understood that there might need to be some sort of policy, whether official or unofficial, that would allow faculty and staff with children to continue their association with the AEMF.

After discussing this with the board, Marilyn and the AEMF were prepared to make an offer to Emily and to any future faculty or staff member who had children. If they decided to bring a caregiver to watch the child while the faculty or staff member worked, the AEMF would pay for the caregiver's meal plan as well as for their accommodations, either in the same room or in a separate room as appropriate. Connecticut College charged the AEMF per person rather than per room, so even if a spouse were staying in the same room, the festival still had to pay for that person.

Marilyn opted to keep the offer of accommodations for parents unofficial. The arrangement is neither listed on Amherst's website nor specified in contracts or other private organizational documents. Yet, the proposal to help parents of young children has rippled positively through the community. Some heard about the offer from Marilyn directly when informing her they might have to miss that year's festival because of a three- or six-month-old on their hands. Others were able to ask their colleagues who already had children at the festival how they did it. Given the unwavering commitment of faculty and staff to the AEMF over the years, Marilyn was confident she would be able to retain most of these workers who otherwise would

have had to forgo the festival. Workers took full advantage of the unwritten policy: in just under a decade, the AEMF went from having one baby in tow

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to 11 kids ranging from a few months old to 10 years old. The new question became: where to put them?

The Family Floor

During the annual festival at Connecticut College, students, faculty, and staff are housed in dormitories. A small number of students may choose to stay at a nearby hotel or vacation rental, but the vast majority, including almost all faculty and staff, live in the dorms. This includes Marilyn and other high-level staff who often have one accessible dorm room on the first floor, which functions as an office, and another on a higher floor where they live. As the number of festival families ticked up over the years, new housing challenges appeared along with them.

In the early years, festival participants, for the most part, were comfortable with one child per floor in the dormitories. But as families accumulated, there would be more noise, more diapers, more gear, etc. There was no doubt among the board of directors and Marilyn that accommodating parents was the right decision for the AEMF; however, there were some additional considerations. For example, staff with children needed to be nearby the main festival office so that their baby monitors could still pick up a signal. All of the families required more privacy and space in the bathrooms not only to store their equipment but also to manage daily routines. They further needed designated spaces other than their rooms for kids to play with toys and with each other.

While there would be no written-out policy, a simple plan of accommodation had evolved over the years. Faculty and staff would be allowed to bring along a caregiver for the week(s) they were at the festival. The AEMF would provide room and board for the caregiver, whether that was a partner, spouse, a grandparent, or a sitter. Additionally, it helped designate family restrooms and play areas in spaces close to the main festival office. That straightforward gesture of accommodation was attractive on its own for many of the faculty and staff. As mentioned, caregivers might be given their own rooms in addition to a weekly meal

plan. In other cases, the AEMF needed to identify a larger dorm room to fit the family. Since the festival didn't provide sitters directly, having these spaces was crucial. Over time though, there was a sense that families benefiting from the festival accommodations were encroaching on the other participants of the AEMF.

"Just thinking about everyone's overall tolerance, it's like we're on a ship at sea," Emily observed. "It's a long time to be together—three weeks, for some. And so, having the kids not wear people down is really something I think that all the parents have to think about." Emily went on to share the evolution of the unofficial policy at Amherst. She recounts one time when suddenly there were three babies on one floor in a dormitory. "This might sound gross, but managing the diaper situation became an issue. There was one year when someone just had to run out and get a diaper genie."

Eventually, enough faculty and staff started coming with their children and caregivers that it made sense to designate a family area. While not large enough to take over an entire dormitory floor, the AEMF was able to create a space that could accommodate those with children. These families shared a floor with those who didn't mind the occasional noise. Staff also converted one of the dorm lounges on the family floor to be a children's play area where parents could store books and toys. Certain bathrooms on the family floor became family bathrooms allowing parents to store training potties and tubs. The area further allowed space and time for families to complete their children's routines.

The family areas assigned by the AEMF of course were warmly embraced by those with families, but they also made for a more pleasant experience for those looking

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for more quiet in the dorms. As the AEMF found this path to keeping faculty and staff connected to the festival, an unforeseen result was that the festival was also fostering a small sub-community within itself. Children could play together, parents who were all working musicians could trade tips, take turns, or occasionally pitch in if an extra rehearsal was called. For young artists, they had the opportunity to see other professionals in their field continue working while caring for their family rather than giving up one, two, or even three weeks of summer freelance income. Whether the AEMF knew it or not, what started out as an unwritten policy purely to retain staff had inspired a palpable change in the festival atmosphere.

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Raising an Early Music Child

Senior Assistant Festival Director Emily Eagan first started attending the Amherst Early Music Festival as a student in 1989. She received a work-study position and started meeting other students and professionals who would become lifelong friends. After several years of attending the AEMF—always as a work-study student—Emily was awarded a Fulbright grant to study at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Incidentally, a number of colleagues she had met at the AEMF were also in The Hague while she was there. When Emily finished her Fulbright year in 2002, Marilyn reached out to her to ask if she would oversee operations at the festival, which included co-coordinating the work-study program. Emily would be the co-director along with another former work-study student she knew from her time at the AEMF and The Hague.

The administrators of the AEMF are first-rate musicians themselves. When Emily became assistant director of the AEMF in 2008, she was involved in myriad other music projects. She is a member of The M6, an ensemble dedicated to exploring and performing the music of Meredith Monk. She also works for the Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute. Further, Emily is a singer-songwriter who writes and performs folk music,

and she is even a two-time International Whistling Champion. And yet, the Amherst Early Music Festival has been a part of Emily's life for three decades. The festival experience has always been something about which she felt passionately. So, when Emily had her first child in 2012, she wondered if she could continue working for the AEMF.

Since Emily's faculty colleagues Hsuan-Wen and Jason had already brought their child to the festival, Emily wondered if she could do the same.

The circumstances were different though. Hsuan-Wen and Jason were teaching at the festival together, and while they had brought one of their parents to help for some of the time during that first year, the main issue for them became coordinating their schedules so they would not be working at the same time. Emily would be working at the festival with no help; childcare was necessary for her infant. "I can't do this unless I can hire somebody," Emily recalled thinking. "But because I'm one of the admins, Marilyn and the board wanted to make this work." Emily was permitted to bring her mother for one week, and the rest of the time, another festival participant helped out. Emily paid the sitter out of her own pocket. In subsequent years, however, Emily always had to find someone to watch her child. "You can quickly run out of money if you had to get 60 hours of baby-sitting a week."

Each year Emily went back to the AEMF, she figured something out to keep her work at the festival by finding caregivers who would allow her to work and not disburse all of her earnings. For example, the admissions office at Connecticut College posted flyers for local babysitters – some were even students staying on campus for summer session, so they were already in the dorms. As her kids got older, Emily and the growing base of festival parents found a nearby half-day summer camp which freed her up for part of the day. One year, one of the parents discovered a full-day summer camp that some of the older children could attend. The expanding pool of parents and

caregivers also meant there were people who might be on hand in those rare circumstances when an extra rehearsal got scheduled, or if Emily were asked to collaborate on a concert. It became a stable enough situation that when Emily had a second baby a few years later, she didn't even think twice about bringing both to the AEMF.

The experience of bringing children to the AEMF was by no means smooth sailing. "It's hard to parent in a bubble like the AEMF. I don't always like people commenting on my parenting [at the festival]." When her children were toddlers, they were known to scream occasionally in the communal dining hall. If Emily got pulled into a last-minute collaboration or could only find a sitter to watch her children during the day, she would have to figure out what to do with them during performances. Even with hired help, she would have to cope with meltdowns, attend to dirty diapers, and scrounge up meals from the dining hall for picky eaters. Sometimes she'd even have to navigate bringing her kids to an ad hoc rehearsal because she could not find a sitter. "[People notice] how you're dealing with them, watching their temper tantrums, and how they're adjusting, and all that stuff. That can be like constant stress for me."

The benefits of bringing her children to the festival, though, have outweighed the stresses that Emily has experienced.

"I want my kids to be good with strangers, and I want them to be flexible in new environments. And they really love the feeling of mastering the dorms and getting around campus." Her children also get to see their mother work and rehearse. The kids are exposed to all sorts of historical music and witness musicians who are the top in their field. They have developed a group of "festival friends," whom they get to see each summer. And for Emily, the children have served as a way for festival participants to open a dialogue with her. It starts with festivalgoers, many of whom are older parents or grandparents themselves, commiserating

over the joys and struggles of parenthood, and may develop into deeper conversations about music, backstories, beliefs, and a variety of other topics. She's met people from all walks of life – surgeons, lawyers, financial analysts – who also happen to be interested in recorder or viola da gamba. It's expanded her own community, and her children's. "They're getting these skills of living in a village that you don't always have if you're a kid. It's communal living for the kids. So, it's so positive that they all figure out how to do it that early. It's such a good thing."

Best of all, she doesn't have to give up the AEMF gig. While it's not a massive amount of income, it's also not a negligible amount to leave on the table. For Emily and for others in her situation, a festival, a concert, or an opera production that doesn't have any consideration for working parents can mean the difference between taking the job or not. The unspoken policy that the AEMF has stood by has helped Emily and several other faculty and staff make accepting the gig and sticking with the festival second nature.

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Not a Daycare, Not a Summer Camp

The Amherst Early Music Festival is now in a place where it can offer room and board for another parent, grandparent, or sitter of a faculty or staff member who needs it. Financially, the cost to

the festival is minor. In 2019, the operating budget for the festival was around \$420,000. The AEMF spent about \$5,000 to cover caregiver accommodations, including meals – just over 1% of their total budget. Marilyn is adamant that the AEMF does not pay for or provide childcare directly. While the festival could absorb caregiver expenses, offering childcare would be another matter entirely. "Then we're in the daycare business, which we are not," remarked Marilyn.

Operating full-time festival daycare would open the AEMF up to a whole different set of rules and

regulations as a provider. Likewise, if festival organizers wanted to develop any programming for some of the older children, that could also bring the festival into uncharted legal territory. In the state of Connecticut, if a program has at least three students below the age of 16, it is classified as a “camp.” The camp designation requires counselors who all need special kinds of training, plus a nurse on staff and a host of other considerations.

Although the administration maintains its support of families at the AEMF, these parents represent a small constituency within the festival’s general population. There is another group of young artists ranging from 18 to 30 years old, but the majority of students tend to be above the age of 50. While mostly well behaved, children may occasionally break out in a burst of energy and run through the dining hall, for example. This may pose trouble for mobility-challenged participants, who are already navigating a cramped dining space. Nor does everyone find it cute when a child shows up to a rehearsal or makes a noise during a concert. Despite these sporadic nuisances, the majority of festivalgoers appear to genuinely enjoy seeing the growing group of children year after year as “festival friends.” They are overwhelmingly supportive of the faculty and staff who bring their children along to the festival. By now, participants of the AEMF have come to expect children as part of the festival landscape, just as participants do not bat an eye at seeing a host of large theorbo cases lining one of the hallways.

Marilyn, Emily, and others who work at the AEMF are well aware of the large disparity between their two main demographics. “There is a big gap between about 30 and 50—the child-rearing parents,” Marilyn notes. The festival has noticed a trend that students who have attended for years as young artists suddenly stop coming back. As Marilyn explains, “Other things happen, jobs

happen, families happen, and then, eventually, they come back in their 50s.” What if these early music enthusiasts never stopped attending the AEMF?

While the AEMF does not want to transform into a daycare or a summer camp, they certainly want to continue their ability to retain staff and grow the festival. With its unofficial policy of accommodating faculty and staff with children, the festival has shown willingness to support these workers.

There is a culture at the AEMF that demonstrates care for its people, and that spirit is felt by the faculty and staff who have felt supported to start or grow their own families. It has also spread to the student body, many of whom have come to expect—and even look forward to—seeing all of the festival kids year after year.

The AEMF has an upcoming board meeting, and the issue of childcare is on the agenda. Marilyn and Emily have been asked whether it would benefit the festival to articulate an official childcare policy for their faculty or staff. Board members are further interested in recruiting those 30- or 40-somethings who have allowed their connection to the festival to lapse. These students appear to be interested in the content the festival has to offer, but many have families now and cannot leave their kids. The festival is considering whether the privileges of childcare accommodation should extend to students or young artists. They seem to be searching for a way to increase their accommodation of families while continuing to cultivate the fervent culture around early music, which is their mission. Is it possible to continue providing the same experience for the students who have been attending the AEMF for 40 years while also addressing a growing population of young families? Marilyn and Emily have been invited to make recommendations and outline steps in the short and long term.



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