

The Future of Arts Performance in Higher Education

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The Future of Arts Performance in Higher Education

Rick E. Goodstein, Eric J. Lapin & Ron C. McCurdy

Abstract

The job landscape for arts performance graduates has changed dramatically. As a result of a now bleak performance job market, a sea change in higher education arts performance curriculum is needed. Arts performance programs must prepare students with a set of skills beyond traditional performance study. While instrumental proficiency remains essential, skills in entrepreneurship, best business practices, intellectual property, marketing, grant writing, fundraising, creativity, and many others must be a part of a modern performance curriculum. Using specific examples, this article offers solutions and ideas for higher education administrators and faculty to incorporate this broader set of skills into the performance curriculum. Drawing on collective experience in performance, instruction, and arts administration, this article provides insight on how to better prepare arts performance graduates for the new arts economy.

A curricular sea change is needed within higher education to address a “new normal” for diminishing sustainable career opportunities for performance-based arts graduates. The over-supply of highly qualified arts graduates for arts careers dictates the necessity of an examination and overhaul of required course work beyond technical development, history and theory which, in many cases, are vestiges of a bygone era and bound by a century of tradition within the academy.

This issue has been articulated by many over the past 20+ years, including our recent article ([The New Performing-Arts Curriculum](#)). We proffer that there is a path forward.

A transformational curricular update for performing arts majors is needed that will provide new courses, experiential learning opportunities and business-related classes that will prepare performance-based students for relevant arts careers, regardless of their chosen field. New or reimagined classes are critical to navigate the collaborative, multi-media, technologically-driven world that arts students are entering. As former Secretary of Education Richard Riley foreshadowed during the Clinton administration, “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist. . .using technologies that haven’t yet been invented. . .in order to solve

problems we don't even know are problems yet." In short, this kind of nimble thinking is exactly how arts schools should approach the preparation of those who wish to have viable and lasting careers in the arts.

Students graduating with an arts performance degree will become sole-practitioners in a challenging work environment. Graduates will likely need to juggle multiple jobs; including a few paid performances (if they are lucky) and teaching, while maintaining time to practice and develop their own projects. Music schools and conservatories must acknowledge that these students are likely to also have a "day job" to make ends meet. It is a common fact that new graduates, regardless of their talent, will have at the least a teaching job and work that is likely outside the arts upon graduation. In today's new arts normal, it is hard to fathom how perfecting another interpretation of a Chopin sonata or Mozart's clarinet concerto will help prepare a viable career path for music performance majors. Higher education must do a better job in providing relevant career preparation for their performance graduates.

It will undoubtedly take bold administrative leadership, a will to change, and support from appropriate accrediting agencies to lead this proposed sea change. Specifically, classes that develop student creativity, "big ideas," collaborative project-based performances, and integration with technology are critical as these skills are required in today's rapidly evolving landscape. In other disciplines, such as some engineering programs, these curriculum changes have already been made by flipping traditional classrooms and developing strategies in which teams of students work seamlessly on design-based "Grand Challenges" that are being promoted by accrediting agencies and the National Science Foundation. The performing arts must articulate and address our own grand challenges.

In arts education, bold curricular revisions should also include classes focused on entrepreneurship; the business of the arts; grant writing and fundraising; protection of intellectual property; and multi-disciplinary collaborative performances. Examples might include team-taught weekly forums that draw on faculty knowledge beyond performance to address subjects that are typically beyond the expertise of full-time faculty. Many performance curriculum maps already include a weekly studio class and could easily be transitioned to include broader topical subjects. For example, a more relevant arts entrepreneurship class could replace and/or supplement the weekly studio course. Given the often-glacial pace of curricular change, at the very least, these topics should be regularly incorporated into existing courses.

Teaching creativity has been an area of academic research for decades. Scholars have articulated that the development of creativity is a teachable skill and that hands-on, heuristic approaches can be successful. Unfortunately, the fact that creativity often involves allowing students to fail creates an inherent disconnect with America's higher education system. Within tightly controlled curriculum maps, mandating a class (or classes) on developing individual creativity can be challenging; however, it is hard to argue that it is not a critical skill for students entering an arts career.

A popular major in many colleges and universities is entrepreneurship. As arts students enter the work force, they must think of themselves as arts entrepreneurs. In talking to many current students, an often-stated career goal is to build and develop a start-up venture, sell it for profit to a large corporate entity such as Google, Amazon or Microsoft, and move on to the next project. Why shouldn't arts educators view their students as artist entrepreneurs and adjust the curriculum accordingly?

Most arts graduates are going to ultimately become sole practitioners and a "business of one." Because of this, classes should be mandated that include managing a business, protecting intellectual property, tax liability, insurance, accounting, marketing, risk management and understanding contracts.

Another critical area of need is that students enrolled as performance majors must understand and be prepared for the exponential growth of technology. Arts graduates should have a firm grasp of the various software and social media platforms that are the tools of the trade. The ability to build a website, market and distribute their work via social media and create art using digital tools could easily be implemented into the curriculum with careful planning and instruction.

Successful grant writing, fundraising and crowdfunding are also new realities within the arts industry in the United States. Universities and arts organizations have dedicated offices that look for external funding for their various organizations and have skilled professionals that arts educators could utilize to augment the traditional class offerings. Within the new normal, grant writing and fundraising are no longer fringe or elective subjects. Our graduates need these skills now.

Since performance students will focus on creating art that can be monetized, students also need to understand how to protect their intellectual property. From the simple concept of copywriting a piece of art to writing a technical rider, traditional curricula often ignore these primary concepts of making a living in the arts.

Because of these realities, programs such as Clemson University's *Production Studies in Performing Arts* degree now exist. Clemson's degree program is a collaborative and multi-disciplinary degree that includes faculty from music, theater, and audio

technology. Students in the major progress as a cohort through a curriculum that is team-taught by faculty and administrators from the Department of Performing Arts. This core curriculum, beyond specific tracks in the student's emphasis, covers subjects such as grant writing, personal website design, technology, professional development, career development, resume writing, and various other currently relevant arts topics.

In addition, in lieu of a traditional (and outdated) senior recital, Clemson's Production Studies degree culminates with a collaborative capstone project where students from three disciplines (music, theater, or audio technology) plan and execute an arts event. Students develop a project, create a business plan, raise funding, market the performance, execute a contract, and arrange for the venue and/or performers. These skills combine traditional performing abilities with practical and necessary skills that better equip graduates for the new arts economy.

It seems obvious that these types of skills will transcend traditional arts training and make graduates more marketable for a number of sustainable career paths. Considering the sad state of arts performance job opportunities, the notion of "selling out" by abandoning tradition-bound aspects of the performance curriculum in favor of more relevant topics and experiences just doesn't resonate. While there are still a myriad of practical implications to navigate in this approach, (such as curriculum mapping and who will teach these classes), complexity cannot be an excuse for inaction.

It's clear that a transformation of the traditional arts performance curriculum is needed. Arts faculty and administrators must serve as the catalysts for this change, in tandem with our accrediting bodies. A fundamental shift in curricular requirements must be launched in order to give students the tools for a successful, sustainable career in the arts. While some of our more enterprising students will figure out how to create and sustain a career in the arts, most will not. One thing is certain, the current modus operandi for arts performance in higher education is not sustainable. Unless we make bold and thoughtful modifications to our curricula, we could find ourselves out of business in the coming decades.

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