

COMMENTARY

The New Performing-Arts Curriculum

By Richard E. Goodstein, Eric Lapin, and Ronald C. McCurdy | OCTOBER 09, 2016

The fact that enrollments in traditional music, dance, and theater performance degrees have stagnated and job prospects have become dim is undisputed. It's a simple supply-and-demand problem — with the steady decline of full-time performance-based arts careers, there already are too many students graduating from colleges, universities, and conservatories in performance programs with



Boris Séméniako for The Chronicle

narrowly focused career paths that cannot be realized.

This does not mean that students with the talent, passion, and drive should be discouraged from an arts-performance major, nor that a small percentage of performance graduates won't enjoy a lifelong career in the arts. But the changed landscape requires a change in arts-performance curricula, student advising, and cross-disciplinary opportunities for performance majors. This shift will not come easily, as many performance programs are moneyed recruitment machines that are seemingly oblivious to the harsh realities of careers in the arts for performance majors.

Over time, conservatories and arts schools have built up endowments and scholarship programs to significantly discount tuition for highly qualified performance majors. In doing so, unsuspecting students are lured into degree programs that provide little promise for a sustainable career, meager prospects to fully utilize their talents, and little chance to acquire even an entry-level position in the multibillion-dollar arts industry. So they go back to school.

The professional jazz bassist John Clayton refers to this continuation of professional-arts education as "fear-based education." Clayton's position is not anti-grad-school, but rather that if a student decides to attend grad school, it should be because that is the student's passion, not because it seems to be the only option. Without training in the necessary skills to sustain a career in the arts, this fear-based model thrives. A 2004 *New York Times* story revisited Juilliard graduates from the class of 1994 and provided a sobering report on where they ended up. Many were no longer involved in music, many spoke of having been naïve about the music profession, and some had become disillusioned and finally pursued other interests. Some just needed a job that paid the bills.

The article speaks volumes on how many students are ill-prepared for sustained careers in the arts. While some students simply do not have the grit and dedication to make it as performers, many others seem to lack the knowledge of how and where to even begin.

The stark reality, now probably even more than in 1994, is that a strictly performance-based arts degree does not guarantee a sustained career in the performing arts. Graduates find bits and pieces of low-paying and often transient work that often leads to burnout and disillusionment. Arts educators should no longer ask students to continue an endless cycle of rehearsals leading to extraordinarily high-quality performances for dwindling audiences and a rather striking separation from career preparation. Today's graduates are too narrowly trained within the framework of an outdated arts education.

There is, however, reason to be optimistic. Some colleges have begun reshaping their curricula to reflect these new realities, and many others are discussing how best to provide the requisite tools for today's arts-performance students. Among others, the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University has the Music Entrepreneurship and Career Center; the Berklee College of Music has a program in music business; and Julliard now has the Center for Innovation in the Arts.

At our own institutions, Clemson University has a collaborative performing-arts major, and the University of Southern California has programs in music industry and popular music to provide students with a wider and more practical range of skills. However, the necessary curricular changes will be difficult to achieve, especially considering the glacial pace of curricular reform in higher education.

Yet a shift needs to occur now. Graduating students will often be required to create their own performance opportunities that fall outside of traditional careers in the arts. A career as a full-time symphony musician or professional dancer is certainly still possible, but the chances are slim. A new curriculum that gives students a much wider range of tools to navigate today's arts landscape is essential.

The curriculum should reflect the fact that performance majors will need to know how to market themselves, become creative entrepreneurs, and understand how their training can translate to a sustainable career in the new arts economy. Arts educators should provide opportunities for their students to become leaders in this new economy rather than adhering to old traditions. We have heard about "building new audiences for the future" for years, but there has been little progress in the tradition-bound classical-performance education model.

To the contrary, performance education today should be thought of as artist/entrepreneur training. An entrepreneur is someone who organizes a business venture and assumes the risk; adopting this mindset will be of great benefit to today's performance graduates. To create this mentality, these students should be exposed to a variety of business-related topics to augment their skills development within the historical context of the traditional art form.

New courses in arts collaboration, arts management, and marketing will be invaluable to a newly imagined performance curriculum, training students to answer questions like: How do artists protect their intellectual property? How do commissions work for composers? How does an artist book a tour, and handle the logistics? What about taxes and bookkeeping and technical riders? Creative-arts students generally have great ideas when given the opportunity to envision their future without traditional boundaries. Our job, as arts educators, is to foster this creative thinking and provide the training to develop these ideas. We can best do that with a curriculum that encourages students to market, produce, and present their own ideas.

No one can predict the future; however, a broader and more skill-based curriculum will undoubtedly provide greater opportunities for today's arts-performance graduates. It is time for arts educators to face the music.

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