WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
A CROSSROADS OF COST AND CONTENT FOR THE ARTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Depending upon whom one reads over the past 15 years, music is either spiraling toward irrelevance or succeeding against all odds. In 2009 Henry Fogel, Dean of the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, made the following statement in his keynote address to the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM):

In June, the NEA released its national Arts Participation study for 2008, and in case nothing else I have said gives you cause for worry, that study should. It shows a dramatic decline in arts participation and attendance across the board, at all age levels, over the past six years. While we might wish to blame some of that on the economy, reading this study in detail indicates, I think something deeper — a continuing trend toward a distance between Americans and the arts. If we, at the higher education level, continue to train artists without dealing with the climate into which we are sending them, we run a very real risk of contributing to a continuing trend toward irrelevance.¹

One year earlier, Alan Fletcher, CEO of the Aspen Music Festival and School, had stated in his keynote address:

Suffice it to say that we musicians are living and working in one of the most exciting times ever for the science of how humans hear and understand music, and what it means to us. Great scientists are engaged in telling us, and the world, that music is absolutely central to human experience, and even to the definition of humanity itself.²

One decade earlier (1999), NASM sponsored a compendium of ideas titled The Basic Value of Music Study, in which they wrote that while music plays a central role in the daily lives of millions of individuals (who spend billions of dollars on it annually), polls repeatedly show that “public acceptance of music (and the other arts) does not translate into acceptance of music as a basic subject. In

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fact, when matched against other disciplines, music ranks near the bottom in educational priorities.”

These appear to be confusing times. Are the arts essential or irrelevant to American culture? Essential or irrelevant to higher education as it trains practitioners and theorists? If, as I maintain, they are essential, then are we pursuing a strategy that will ensure they remain that way — teaching completely and deeply a vast content with ever-increasing expectations for new knowledge, new skills, new competencies? Are the arts, as currently taught, a worthy and sensible choice of discipline for a 21st-century college student to pursue at a time when college costs have risen so dramatically and the ability to repay loans remains a rising challenge?

Returning to Henry Fogel, he stated in his keynote address that he sees “a growing climate of anti-intellectualism in America, and with it a trend to diminish the importance of our cultural heritage. This includes not just Western classical music, but folk music, jazz, blues — the whole range of the musical arts.” If this is indeed the case — if American culture prefers highly marketed groups with origins in local neighborhoods or garages — then what is the need for a specialization in antique music or its techniques? An arts degree almost becomes a financial risk.

And yet, Fogel rose to optimism toward the end of his speech quoting playwright Arthur Miller: “When the cannons have stopped firing, and the great victories of finance are reduced to surmise and are long forgotten, it is the art of the people that will confront future generations,” continuing that “the peak of human achievement in civilization after civilization, is represented by its artistic and cultural achievements ....” If this is instead the case, then as higher education lurches toward this imminent crossroads at the intersection of cost and content, it is time we asked and answered some difficult questions creating, as a result, a new model for our degrees that is both manageable and sustainable, and that grants faculty the time to teach and students the time to learn deeply enough to become true leaders of the future.

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2 Fogel, 2.

3 NASM holds a similar worry that national programs have emphasized the passive enjoyment of music over its serious study, claiming that such an approach reduces cost but leaves American students and culture short-changed. See The Basic Value of Music Study: Ideas for Spreading the Word, 20.

4 Quoted in Fogel, 7.
Current Issues: Increased Costs and Content Overflow

It is my opinion that if the increasingly urgent issues facing the arts in higher education are not addressed, these disciplines risk a listless slide into irrelevance as costs outweigh the value of the content within the degrees. Let me itemize some of the issues, with which I am sure most readers are already familiar, though not perhaps all in one list.

- Since 1982, while inflation has risen about 115 percent and family incomes about 147 percent, university costs have risen over 490 percent. This disconnect is more compelling for majors in the arts and humanities than in other disciplines (STEM, for example) since post-graduate earning potential is generally lower, making loans accrued during college more difficult to pay off.

- Legislators almost annually augment state licensure competency requirements to increase the likelihood that students graduate from college meeting professional qualifications. The new requirements create additional workloads and learning curves for both faculty and students, and require curricular adjustments to accommodate them.

- Advances in technology continually add new areas of knowledge and practice for which fluency is expected prior to entering the workforce, adding more adjustments to the curricula and schedules of both faculty and students.

- An increasingly small planet with greater awareness of its diversity expects its citizenry to have exposure to, if not experience with, diverse cultures, which requires time, scheduling and effort.

- A recent new expectation from NASM to be covered in a higher education degree is worker and workplace health and safety. The accrediting agency expects music departments to find ways to teach this new topic, as I assume other accrediting agencies expect from departments in their field.

- The baccalaureate degree remains a typically four-year project, with approximately 120–128 credit hours (where it has been for

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7 This data is available in many places with some variation. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Forbes magazine and InflationData.com all mention numbers approximating these. The web links to the online articles are: http://www.classesandcareers.com/education/2011/02/10/what-drives-up-the-cost-of-college-tuition/; http://www.forbes.com/sites/steveodland/2012/03/24/college-costs-are-soaring/; and http://inflationdata.com/Inflation/Inflation_Articles/Education_Inflation.asp.
decades), and the traditional academic day, week, even year has also remained largely the same over the past century. The additional knowledge and expertise required in a degree have therefore had to be squeezed into an unchanging template, requiring faculty to make difficult decisions about how to teach the additional materials—what to cut, what to de-emphasize.

In short, while a 21st-century baccalaureate degree has become proportionally expensive for students, it has also become a degree in which much more content must be crammed during the traditional time frame of 120-plus credits. The increased costs especially have brought some scrutiny to the arts: Is the college debt load worth accruing when the ability to pay back the loans will likely be challenged by lower salaries than one might find upon employment in other disciplines (STEM, law, pre-med)?

At a time when I serve on a committee tasked with finding what to cut from the music education degree at Iowa State University in order to bring the nearly 150-credit-hour BME down toward the 128 credit hour BM, my sense is that what really needs to happen is that all degrees need to increase their number of credit hours. Of course, this will fuel the ire of those who already protest that a college education costs too much: “Now we must also take out an extra year of loans?”

Let us leave the cost alone for a moment and ask why one needs additional time in a degree. A college degree in the arts prepares (and to some degree certifies) practitioners, creators, teacher-educators, theorists and critics. It is the environment where one learns

- the practice of a discipline, such as an instrument or voice; an artistic medium, such as paint, acting, familiarity with the processes of theater and/or film and its public presentation
- the language of a discipline, such as music theory
- the technology of a discipline (lighting, computer-aided design, music composing programs)
- the pedagogy of a discipline — learning to instruct others to succeed, including student teaching for some degrees
- the history of a discipline — its great practitioners of the past and present along with their styles and use of the medium (not only from the historical traditions of a few cultures, but globally as well)
It seems to me, looking at the list above, that in order to explore, at a minimum, these topics fully, 128 credit hours is insufficient and only allows, at best, a superficial introduction to each of them within the context of everything else that goes into a collegiate life. Yet some exposure to all or most of these does occur during a period of approximately four years. Perhaps “some exposure” is enough?

If not, then higher education is becoming a “gloss” covering myriad topics crammed into a finite degree template that evolved at a time in history when “global,” “diverse,” “digital,” “safe,” and “entrepreneurial” were neither buzzwords, nor even considered as a part of the expected curriculum.

Creative departments and their faculty find extracurricular ways to bring students into contact with these ideas — occasional convocations or seminars at times when attendance can be required — but these methods are periodic, and one worries that the impression left on the students by them is temporary.

The problem is that, with increased mandates from state licensing boards, increased complexity of technology and career paths, increased accreditation expectations, alongside additions to the repertoire — musical compositions, art, dance or theater — to study, there is simply not enough time to cover what is needed with any amount of depth and analysis in the traditional degree time frame.

**Some Brief Examples of Increased Content**

**Recent Additions to the Literature**

Since my field is music, I will use examples from that discipline to expand upon the points above. Consider: In 1968 the *Norton Scores* (edited by Roger Kamien) was a single volume containing 942 pages of musical scores to 41 works beginning with Josquin’s *Ave Maria* (ca. 1500) and ending with Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930). The current 11th edition has two volumes, is over 1,200 pages, includes chant, the music of the medieval mystic
Hildegard von Bingen, but also 20th century composers Scott Joplin, Arvo Pärt, Jennifer Higdon, John Adams and John Corigliano, among others. The first volume alone has 38 compositions while the second volume contains 51 — a 117 percent increase in content, covering an additional 650 years or so.

While I personally believe all the included composers deserve study, by including them the music and composers originally studied must receive a different level of attention to detail in a course that has the same number of contact hours as one from 1968. If, on the other hand, a faculty member were to omit all the additional composers (among them people from different ethnic backgrounds and genders), and teach the archaic course material, a case could easily be made for being at best out of touch, and at worst biased.

Technology

Linda Marcel, in an online publication from the *Forum on Public Policy*, writes, “As college departments strive to maintain a relevant college music curriculum, technology is a compelling factor for change and can be the imperative crux of an evolving music program.” She continues, “For the past decade, the National Association of Schools of Music … has included technology as one of the six critical competencies necessary for Baccalaureate Degree graduation.” I agree; technology is critical to modern success in the world, but what do we compromise to make the time for that part of a modern education? A modern degree in music needs time allocated to the learning curve for music composition software, something not needed 30 years ago. Added to a theory curriculum, it must necessarily detract from some other aspect of theory, and add to the out-of-class contact hours between faculty and students.

Composition software is but one example. The Iowa State University faculty has been discussing whether or not to include basic office programs (word processors, spreadsheets, database management, citation programs) to the university curriculum in more visible and controllable ways. If adopted in the future, what will give way to accommodate such offerings?

Competencies

Competencies are a current hot trend and buzzword, although they have been around for decades. They separate into two facets, principally. First, is the trend that students must show they have assimilated and are fluent with defined competencies in each area of a curriculum. In education this matters concretely as competencies are listed for individual disciplines as well as for

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9 Marcel, 2.
general pedagogies. One could rephrase this: *students need … curricula will heed.*

Second is the idea that university curricula should evolve toward a mode of teaching that allows students to gain these competencies at their own pace, testing out of ones they already know and emphasizing others that need more attention. Competency-based learning has been loosely equated with independent study — in both theory and practice a fine method for learning, unless 35,000 state university students all expect the individual attention of an independent study all year long, at which point the pedagogical and financial aspects of the model cease to correlate.

Since mass independent study is infeasible and thus unlikely at most larger institutions, it will become the faculty’s responsibility to find creative ways to blend acquiring specific competencies into a larger classroom setting, with evidence on syllabi and through course evaluations that the merger was successful for the majority of students. Required tests that demonstrate a graduate’s comfort with mandated competencies before employment is offered will likely also support a program’s success with this approach in the future.¹⁰

**Crowding From New Requirements**

As mentioned, NASM is now expecting departments to include workplace safety into a curriculum. Where will it fit? Within the past 20 years cultural diversity was added, a worthy addition. Still, it took time previously designated for other learning. Do we now reduce world cultural music to accommodate the new workplace safety, or instead do we compromise the counterpoint of Palestrina, or Western classical music before J.S. Bach?

If, instead, faculty continue to wedge new topics into single-encounter seminars, do they do the topic justice, treat it adequately? Will the material likely stay with students if it is encountered only once in a seminar? Does it give potential employers any confidence if it does not appear anywhere on a formal transcript? Restated, these questions poke at the two essences of higher education: “Do the students gain an *education* when material is peremptorily covered, and does such coverage have merit as a *degree* qualification?”

In “Creative Approaches to the Undergraduate Curriculum Part II,” Kristen Thelander, Mark Wait and Michael Wilder ask, “What should we expect our students to know and to be able to do independently when they

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aduate?” In a spirit of creative inquiry they also ask what the artistic purpose is for inclusion of freshman theory in the curriculum. Will students need it in the future, and what will the future look like? We certainly cannot know with any degree of precision; however, current trends signal a reason to consider modifications to our curriculum in order to prepare students for a future that cannot help but be different than the present.

The crux of this moment in history is really no different than that of any prior moment — people have never known what the future will be — except that this is our moment of quandary, and it boils down to the question: “Will we better prepare our students for their futures and for shepherding the future of humanity if we abdicate coverage of material from deeper in our cultural past in order to concentrate upon developments from the last 50 years and the present?”

**An Era of Hyper-Specialization Juxtaposed With Interdisciplinary Initiatives**

Pushing against the desirability of a broad view of culture is the fact that we live increasingly in a hyper-specialized world. In his book *The Organized Mind* Daniel Levitin states that 300 years ago “someone with a college degree in ‘science’ knew about as much as any expert of the day. Today, a PhD in biology can’t even know all that is known about the nervous system of the squid! Google Scholar reports 30,000 research articles on that topic ….”

We also live in a moment when hyper-specialization is being balanced by a desire to find the intersections of diverse knowledge contents through interdisciplinary studies. The president of my institution has created several hiring initiatives that *must* build interdisciplinary bridges between current fields of study, which in itself is laudable, and opens the door to new perspectives. But at what cost? Since a day, a month, a year and to some extent a degree are finite units of time, there is only so much time available for absorbing new information of either specialized or interdisciplinary nature.

Assuming a consistent approach to teaching, the increase of available knowledge requires in itself either an increase in time spent learning the additional information, or else decisions made about what not to learn. I expect I would find considerable agreement when I say that we are at that time now. Perhaps we always have been; however, the early 21st century at many schools and departments of music (and the arts) sees a curriculum that teaches very similar concepts and repertoire to what was taught two to three generations ago, while making piecemeal adjustments to create room for new and recent concepts and techniques.

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Philip Glass vs. Johannes Tinctoris

I am feeling ever more pressingly that this trajectory is unsustainable. Either we need to rethink the baccalaureate degree, giving it more credit hours and more expected time to ensure our graduates are fully exposed to the wide spectrum of information and skills expected in their fields, or we must consciously decide to select concepts that have historically held value in our curricula and demote them from the curriculum to make room for newer competencies that have greater relevance to the present and potential future of our disciplines.

The first perspective might be labeled the “Philip Glass vantage point” in recognition of the fact that minimalism was to some degree influenced by the organa of Perotin, whose music from 1200 A.D. might never have been encountered to spark the new style if it were discarded from a curriculum. The second perspective could be labeled the “Johannes Tinctoris vantage point,” in recognition of the statement he made in 1477 that music composed more than 40 years prior to his time was “deemed by the learned unworthy to be heard.”

In 2014 students need to know more than they did in 1950 in order to be qualified teachers, and to some degree this is arts-specific. Since, as mentioned earlier, great cultures are judged by their surviving arts, the arts spend (of necessity) a greater part of their education reviewing history. While our materials expand with new mandates, expectations and additions to the repertoire, the human culture of the past remains relevant to the complete human experience, and thus to a complete education.

In other disciplines this may hold less potently true. In medicine, for example, new discoveries frequently pre-empt historical ones. (It may no longer be as valid a use of curriculum time to analyze in depth the health benefits of bleeding or the application of leeches as it is to teach modern medical research.) Since time is finite and limited, either curricula need to adapt in the arts to cover — in the same finite period of time, and likely at a more superficial level — an increasingly diverse set of qualifications, specializations, diversities, technologies, skills and prevention training, in addition to those that have historically been considered critical to the completely educated musician, or the degree needs to expand.

In support of the expanded degree, Christopher Nelson, President of St. John’s College in Maryland, referred to an analogy Michel de Montaigne made in his essay On the Education of Children when he compared the education of humans to the taking of pollen by bees to process it into something unique and

new — honey. Nelson continued, “If we are meant to be the bees that plunder flowers to make something that we can call our own, we had better be able to find the flowers that make this possible. They are the great works of literary, artistic and musical imagination that have survived the test of time because they are timeless. If we consider our learning materials as food for digestion, we surely want a banquet set before us, the time to digest what is there, and the opportunity to test each morsel before deciding to reject, accept or incorporate it within us.”

College is more than a degree; it is an education, and also a time and place to help young people transition to independence, which involves making choices and experiencing the consequences. Perhaps, at best, an education is a living, breathing experience that cannot be proscribed, or forced into a template. Yet, in a time when more information is generated in one month than was generated over history, when modes of learning evolve with each technology upgrade, and when the consumer dollar is ever more conscious of its buying power (or lack thereof), we need to pause a moment to ask ourselves if we can sustain the antique (if not antiquated) model of higher education we currently employ to educate our students for success in a discipline, and in a world. And if we feel the model no longer works, we need to move with great care, and some speed, to amend it.

**Political Impracticalities**

Expanding a degree, however, may be an impossible political task. How might it be accomplished against the headwind resistance of a general public who want an affordable education that lasts a finite time before moving “their student” on to professional life? Even politics internal to a university creates an environment described by a quote from the National Commission on the Academic Presidency as follows:

In reality, the practice of shared governance — however promising its original intent — often threatens gridlock. Whether the problem is with presidents who lack the courage to lead an agenda for change, trustees who ignore the institutional goals in favor of the football team, or faculty members who are loath to surrender the status quo, the fact is that each is an obstacle to progress. If higher education is to respond effectively to the demands being placed upon it, the culture of shared governance must be reshaped.”

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14 Nelson, 6.

15 James Duderstadt, “Governing the Twenty-first-Century University: A View From the Bridge,” in Competing Conceptions of Academic Governance: Negotiating the Perfect Storm, William G. Tierney, editor. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, 137. Accessed: January 2015 via Google Books online, [http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aZm3_EqGTaAC&oi=fnd&pg=PA137&dq=fiduciary+role+of+department+chair+&ots=tcpQc0oDhY&sig=TqDmLwvbes2N9yPbP0u70j94pw#v=onepage&q=fiduciary%20role%20of%20department%20chair&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aZm3_EqGTaAC&oi=fnd&pg=PA137&dq=fiduciary+role+of+department+chair+&ots=tcpQc0oDhY&sig=TqDmLwvbes2N9yPbP0u70j94pw#v=onepage&q=fiduciary%20role%20of%20department%20chair&f=false).
While curricular matters are, generally, the domain of the faculty, any substantive shift in how a degree progresses will likely have political and public relations repercussions, as well as implications for the timing of administrative actions and university processes, thus involving, of necessity, not only faculty but also administration, the board of trustees and possibly state legislatures. In other words, altering the landscape of a degree to allow for a more complete education will involve all segments of the university’s governance, many of which will bring conflicting ideologies and methods to the table.

It is enough to make the boldest reformer blanche. The easier route is clearly either to continue to stumble along, wedging brief encounters with new topics into an already crowded curriculum, or to cut and replace material at the course level, leaving the decision purely in faculty hands. Returning to academic music, that would yield a hypothetical scenario in which a professor returned to the material of a 1968 model — omitting entire eras, possibly genders, possibly ethnicities, and replaced said material with a segment on how to navigate the music composition program Finale™.

The bolder initiative would require a council of like-minded reformers from all levels of university governance to rethink what higher education is at its foundation. This in itself is a supreme challenge that James Duderstadt believes will be nearly impossible to accomplish because “the complexity of the contemporary university and the forces acting upon it have outstripped the ability of the current shared governance system of lay boards, elected faculty bodies, and inexperienced academic administrators to govern, lead, and manage.” Since the modern university encompasses so many facets — including teaching, research, outreach, health care, economic development, social change and mass entertainment — finding a diversely knowledgeable, risk-taking committee of its citizens willing to take on political adversaries, public outcry, entrenched faculty, and any members of the administration or board who threaten to sweep reform under a carpet seems doomed to failure.

So originally did Lewis and Clark’s expedition seem, or the Civil Rights movement, or Social Security.

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Duderstadt, 154.
References
(for URLs and dates accessed, see individual footnotes)


