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# Curriculum Reform—A Perspective

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College curriculum reform seems to be everywhere in higher education these days, and music departments and independent schools of music are no exception. Some schools are trying to streamline their curricula, magically offering more choice while cutting back on budgets and requirements. Some schools are re-examining the core elements of a classical education, while others are experimenting with the best of both professional and liberal arts studies, or offering design-your-own flexible degree programs.

What is all this reform seeking to remedy? Many faculty and administrators are concerned about the “student as consumer” mentality, the general lowering of standards, and the ongoing issues of both grade and degree inflation. In this age of disillusionment, when most students view college as a passport to a paycheck, administrators and faculty are questioning what an undergraduate curriculum should provide.

Curriculum reform discussions are often mired in the particulars of credit hours, distribution issues, and what to include in a degree program. The view offered below comes from the perspective of hindsight and reported outcomes. But before tackling any specific recommendations, it’s worth unpacking the broader mission to which we’re all committed.

## The Purpose of a College Education

The people who most often grapple with the purpose of a college education are upper administrators and people in graduate schools of education. Rarely would anyone ask a school’s career counselor to weigh in. Far down on the food chain, most career counselors toil in obscurity in some corner of student services or in a separate building, removed from faculty and curricula. After all, we’re the “end game” folks; we advise students and alumni, and teach career-related courses not considered part of the core. What would we have to add to the conversation?

## A Career Counselor's Vantage Point

The career counselors' perspective is colored by the fact that we see students at "crunch" moments. We see students when they're questioning the value of their college pursuits, when they're considering transferring to other schools, changing majors, or dropping out. We see them when their own ambitions and life goals are most in conflict with their parents', and when they write their first grad school essay, or cover letter, grant proposal, scholarship appeal, or study abroad application. We see them when the full weight of their student loan repayment fees sinks in. These are moments when students are assessing the value of their educational investment. Career counselors hear (often loudly) how a student's college experience lives up to, or falls short of the admissions office promise. And because we often advise both students and alumni, we gain from seeing how students change in their own perspectives, through their course of studies, through grad school, and as they launch themselves in the world. My years as a music career center director, tempered by my years as a faculty member teaching music career development courses, have given me a distinct vantage point for considering curricular issues.

The standard reason for getting a college education these days is to get a better job in order to have a better lifestyle. Certainly, for first generation college students, the issue of securing a decent future is paramount. But in the larger context of a student's future—a lifetime of work and family and community—what we see is a more compelling reason for attending college that fuels the more obvious one. Career counselors look beyond immediate outcomes. There's more to life than that better job. Hopefully, there's more to a college education, too. Getting an education to get a better job is the easy answer, not the whole answer.

## The Ultimate Goal

Underneath the "get a better job" business is a more basic human yearning. People go to college hoping to find their life's mission or purpose. What people want ultimately (see Maslow's hierarchy of needs) is to live a meaningful life. And college is, in our culture, the usual route to the promise of finding a meaningful life. The process of learning—the real business of education—is to create meaning, and the ultimate goal is to create a life that has meaning. In life, we all want to make good use of our talents and to feel that our work matters in the world. Though it may be unstated or unconscious, this yearning is expressed in many ways, from

students' angst over choice of major to their demand for relevancy in the curriculum. Some students arrive on campus with the drive to succeed and just a vague cause, but they're looking for ways to harness their energies to specific objectives. Others may be lacking in ambition and are seeking in college the cause that will ignite their passions. College is, we hope, a place for inspiration.

## Delivering on the Promise

Providing the pathway to a meaningful life is a tall order. Complicating matters is the fact that there's often a gap between what the staff and faculty idealistically think we're providing and what students actually reap.

The undergraduate years, for most middle class Americans, mark the actual coming of age. For many students, college years are about learning to fend for oneself, managing one's time, choosing courses and majors, working part-time jobs, learning to balance checkbooks, live with roommates, and deal with one's healthcare, and sexuality—all the necessary hoopla of becoming an adult, a citizen. But if an undergraduate program is to be more than an adolescent holding tank, a laboratory for cultivating young adults, what should it provide?

A college education provides the opportunity to question and test ideas about how to live a life. And this brings us back to that quest for a meaningful life. It is during the undergraduate years that students struggle with what to believe, and they eventually choose the lives they want to lead and the people they want to become, based in part on the challenges they find in the curriculum. College provides the opportunity to question it all. What is life? What is of value? How shall I contribute to the world?

## College In Hindsight

Through my own informal poll of friends, acquaintances, and clients, I've asked what people retain from their undergraduate years. These are people with ten, twenty, and thirty years to look back on their college years, trying to trace whatever they gained from their experiences.

Of the answers I've received, no one claimed to retain any specific knowledge or skills. They say their college years yielded them a few life-long friends, a needed buffer between home and having to work full-time, a chance to grow up, and for a few lucky folks, an inspiring teacher who changed their lives by changing their thinking.

All of this makes me wonder, then, what does reforming the curriculum actually do? For a way to consider the curriculum, Andrew Abbott, of the University of Chicago, wrote in his “Aims of Education” address (<[www.uchicago.edu/docs/aims.pdf](http://www.uchicago.edu/docs/aims.pdf)>) “You can think of the curriculum as the shadows cast on the wall by the light of education as it shines over, under, around, and through the myriad phases of our experience. It is a mistake to take these shadows for reality, but they are something that helps us find or grasp or intuit the reality. The false notions that there *is* a fixed curriculum, that there *is* a list of things an educated person ought to know, and that the shadow-exercises on the wall themselves *are* the content of education—these false notions all come from taking too seriously what was originally a wise recognition—the recognition that the shadows do in fact provide a starting point in our attempt to fully envision reality.”

Abbott’s eloquent speech was designed as part of the orientation exercises, a rallying cry for the entering class to make the most of their opportunities. It’s a useful reminder, though, to recognize that in the debate over curriculum reform, we must look at what in the long run makes an educational impact. We must look for clues as to which shadow-exercises we should devise.

### The Two Top College Education Experiences: Where the Impact is Actually Made

In my own survey, when I’ve questioned friends, colleagues, and alumni decades after they graduated, I’ve asked what actually mattered most in their college experiences. There have been two phenomena cited time after time, two kinds of educational experiences that made the most impact, no matter where, when, or what the individuals studied. And from watching hundreds of students make their ways through degree programs and on out into the world, I’ve observed that those who have had these experiences are the ones who tend to fare the best in transitioning to the professional world. If I had a magic wand to wave over every school’s curriculum deliberations, I’d wish these were the transformational experiences all students would have.

### The Mentor Phenomenon

One of the most important experiences a college education can provide is that of making a strong personal connection with a caring faculty member who challenges, encourages, and dares the student to expect more

of herself or himself. An ideal mentor is someone who coerces a student into having a more ambitious mission—not just a career—in life. Such mentors serve both as models and as mirrors, reflecting back on students a view of themselves as capable and full of potential. With such a mentor, a student dreams bigger. Music departments may have the advantage in this over others, since performance majors spend the most intense part of their programs studying one-on-one with a master teacher. However, true mentor-matches are probably made in heaven, not in studio teacher or advisor assignments; institutionalized mentoring programs often leave much to be desired. The important thing is satisfying a student’s hunger for the attention of an inspiring adult role model and the challenge of working with a mentor. And schools can do better to help make more authentic, substantive mentoring possible.

Harvard Professor Richard Light’s studies and finding on students’ college experiences are detailed in his book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Harvard University Press 2001). In his article “The Power of Good Advice for Students,” Light writes, “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.” [See <[www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/010501rl.htm](http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/010501rl.htm)>, the article first appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on March 2, 2001.]

Mentoring comes in all shapes and sizes. At Juilliard, Eric Booth directs an innovative mentoring program that pairs first-year students with a faculty mentor outside her or his major area (music students are paired with either a dance or theatre faculty member). The point of the program is to help students acclimate to college life, and to the wider world of the arts, to help them think and dream beyond their specific arts discipline, and to make a connection with a mentor who sees and hears them outside of their specific artistic *métier*. The faculty mentors receive extensive training to help them with non-judgmental listening skills and many have reported this has been a boon to their teaching. Eric Booth has written about the program in *Chamber Music* magazine (August 2005).

In the end, whether a student finds a mentor on his own, through a class, a work study job, or through a program, the objective is to make a connection with a trusted adult role model.

## The Power of a Project

The second educational phenomenon I’ve found to have a lasting impact on students is the experience of becoming fully engaged in a chal-

lenging project, something that ignites her or his imagination and motivation. Projects that have lasting impact are those that demand the best of a student's intelligence and put to the test her or his assumptions and world views. These projects (in the best cases) involve working closely with other students and one or more faculty members both on and off campus. Such projects can connect a student's learning to a community beyond the campus and to a future the student can envision. I envy schools such as Oberlin that have a "winter term," with the month of January earmarked for such student projects.

But the most important aspect of any student project—whether it is a thesis or a community service project, starting a concert or lecture series, or working as editor of a fledgling newspaper—is that it be *fueled by the student's initiative*. The student ends up taking responsibility and therefore owns her or his learning. Such a project can be the light of an actual education (in Abbott's terms), or the petri dish where critical thinking, analytical skills, communication, organization, and interpersonal skills are all developed. But ultimately, it's where a student has the opportunity to discover her or his mission, and finally, to gain the confidence that she or he will live a meaningful life.

## Recommendations

So here are my suggestions, for all of us involved either intimately or peripherally with curriculum reform efforts.

First, let's temporarily set aside the worries about specific course and distribution requirements for any major—the credit hours, the numbers and choices of electives, the nitty-gritty—so that we can consider the big picture. Let's consider the essential questions. What do we want an undergraduate degree to provide? What is the ultimate goal of an education? How can we best deliver on the promise of a college education? Struggling with these essential questions is an exercise that can transform the day-to-day interactions we have with students.

Then, consider how we can best help students own their learning, to engage fully with faculty, ideas, opportunities, and community offerings. Of paramount importance is establishing a strong one-on-one faculty connection, a true mentor relationship. And beyond this, the other essential college experience is that of a truly engaging independent project.

These are the two best ways I've found that programs deliver on the promise of an education. We should design curricula so that more students

have these optimal experiences. We should design curricula for all majors that provide more opportunities for these experiences. We should ask that more courses provide for such connections and projects to flourish. By designing curricula with more connection points for students we will be well on our way to achieving real curriculum reform.

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