Are Higher Ed Institutions Really Doing What’s Best for Music Education? Part 1

I approach this topic with some trepidation, not because I don’t think it needs addressing, but because there are many wonderful and dedicated people working in higher ed institutions in music who may feel that they are under siege and I don’t wish to add to their burdens. However, through years of observation and numerous interviews with leaders in the profession, I believe we are too often failing those wonderful young men and women who major in music. In this first article, I will provide some statistics and thoughts about the increasing numbers of performance majors in music and its impact on music education as well as on the students majoring in music. In next month’s article, I will offer some suggestions of changes to curricula that come primarily from interviews with some of our leading music educators.

First, the data. According to the NASM Higher Education Data Services Survey for 2017-2018, Chart 2-11 “Music Major Enrollment by Size and Type of Institution: All Institutions”:

- Bachelor of Music Degree or Other Professional Degree (performance degrees)

426 institutions report offering this type of degree

Enrollment for 2017-18 in this type of degree: 25,353

Number of degrees/certificates awarded July 1, 2016-June 30, 2017: 4,862

- Baccalaureate Degree Programs in Music Education, Music Therapy, and Music Combined with Outside Field (50% music content)

523 institutions report offering these types of degrees

Enrollment for 2017-18 in these types of degrees: 38,683

Number of degrees/certificates/ awarded July 1, 2016-June 30, 2017: 5,843

This study only examined undergraduate degrees. I recently researched every NASM-accredited school to determine the total number of degrees offered of each type, including graduate and post-graduate programs. There are currently 688 performance degrees offered, 795 music education degrees, 631 other types (therapy, theory, musicology, etc.), and 541 Liberal Arts degrees with a music concentration.

These numbers show that the number of enrollees, graduates, and degree programs in music performance is nearly equal to those in music education, leading us to ask what the impact is on music education and where are the jobs for the thousands of students graduating each year with performance degrees? Leonard Slatkin once said that Julliard, Curtis, and Peabody could fill all the performance jobs, so why do so many publicly funded universities and many small institutions allow (or pressure) young people to spend years and many thousands of dollars to get a performance degree that will almost certainly not result in employment as a musician?

In hundreds of clinics and adjudications over the past three decades, I have observed a pretty consistent decline in the musicality and musical proficiency of many school music educators. They are wonderful people and dedicated to their students, so why do they seem to not be very good musicians? My hypothesis is that way too many colleges and universities have performance degrees in music. At these schools the better musicians are often pressured to be performance majors and led to believe that they are “too gifted” to be music education majors. These young people are frequently still in their teens and their studio teachers and ensemble directors (whose lives are easier if their students are not having to take education courses) are their most powerful influences. The result is a diminishment of the personal musicianship of the music education majors. Music ed students are frequently not included in master classes, are often not in the top ensembles, and at larger schools may not even have lesssons with a full-time faculty member.

So, what are we to do? School band and orchestra directors have an obligation to their students (and parents) to educate them about the reality of the music business. The students and their parents are the customers, they have what the college/university needs (students and tuition), and therefore possess the power to shape the marketplace. When someone suggests that a student major in performance, the first question should be: “Please give me the list of your graduates who are currently making a full time living as musicians.” If the list is short (or blank), the next question should be, “What is there about (the student) that leads you to believe they will be the exception to this long-running record of non-success?”

For those in higher ed institutions, hopefully, they will ask themselves: (1) “How many of our performance major graduates are working as full-time musicians?” (2) “By pressuring the better musicians to be performance majors are we serving their interests or ours?” (3) “Is our emphasis on performance majors making music ed majors *de facto* second-class citizens and are they capable of leading young people to make great music?”

These are tough questions that many don’t want to ask (or have answered). If we are truly to be good stewards of the future of music education and of the young men and women who wish to major in music, shouldn’t we be asking them?