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The Journal of Performing Arts Leadership in Higher Education is a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the enrichment of leadership in the performing arts in higher education.

Goals

1. To promote scholarship applicable to performing arts leadership
2. To provide juried research in the field of performing arts leadership
3. To disseminate information, ideas and experiences in performing arts leadership

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THE IMPERATIVE FOR CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

This address was initially presented on May 29, 2025, at the Tianjin Juilliard Leadership Forum in Tianjin, China.

The title of these remarks sends a clarion call to all artists and cultural leaders. Now, like never before, there is a heightened sense of urgency for us as artists and cultural leaders to proclaim music's value to humankind with impassioned voices and persistent resolve. The global conditions surrounding us in this gathering, while unique to each of you and your institutions, are unimaginable for some, yet possibly for others, expected.

Most delegates — perhaps all — in this inaugural 2025 Tianjin Leadership Forum have championed the cause of classical music in the face of indifference and neglect throughout their careers. But few — perhaps none — of us could have prepared for the uncertain future of today's world, where the chaos of relentless change often immobilizes us. Clearly, cultural leadership in these times must vividly reflect and inspire a more tenacious and robust advocacy for music and musicians.

For context, it will be useful to consider first the prescient characteristics of cultural leadership, especially those that worthily define who we are as human beings and as artists. Second, we will explore the common practices and qualities of artists and cultural leaders that evolve and emanate from the plethora of individual cultural leaders and their respective worldwide communities, for these practices and values are indeed fundamental to the future of classical music. We will then review the privilege and responsibility of the artist and cultural leader and finally, we will conclude with observations about the primacy of culture.

Cultural leadership engages people and issues from a perspective of understanding, appreciation, respect, and tolerance. The simplest definition is that cultural leadership is the intentional use of one's innate talents and intellect to improve and enhance the quality of life for people in their particular communal settings, urban or rural. Cultural leadership not only starts with a new vision or idea but also renews values and practices that should be sustained or preserved in all communities.

It could be said that cultural leadership is an amalgamation of common values espoused in the work of cultural leaders. The connective intersections of our individual endeavors as artists, cultural leaders, and global citizens are illumined. So, what are these distinguishing qualities of cultural leaders?

Effective cultural leaders:

> Act in a manner that engenders mutual trust and ensures the birthright of music for all humankind.

> Elevate the spirit of fellow citizens and inspire hope through qualities of character and mind, such as rapt attention, absolute respect, tolerance of diverse opinions, impeccable integrity, compassion, empathy, and yes, humility.

Effective cultural leaders:

> Possess a breadth and depth of knowledge that offers wise and discernible judgements about musical excellence and worth as it relates to the creative activities of composers, performers, teachers, and scholars.

Effective cultural leaders:

> Believe that core artistic values are transcendent, eclipsing time, place, and personality.

Effective cultural leaders:

> Are custodians of the arts and conveyors of wonder.

The enlightened cultural leader is an active contriver of ways to avert the worst and seek opportunities when none seem apparent.

Such opportunities, when seized and fully embraced, often have an impact that exceeds expectations. Here are several examples from three continents:

> In a remote, rural Alaskan village a couple of hours from Fairbanks, a music teacher at an elementary school established choral programs for all schools in the district and organized a community chorus. Later, she started a choir for senior adults.

> A professor in Vienna holds "salons" in her home every Sunday afternoon to give aspiring pre-college musicians an opportunity to perform and to engage in dialogue with appreciative audiences. This professor has composed several volumes of contemporary piano works, inspired by and written for these young students. The volumes are marketed now internationally by a major publishing house. Teachers from Japan engage her for summer residencies in Vienna for students and their parents.

> And then a third example of seizing opportunities in order to keep serious music alive…
>
> A parish organist at an inner-city cathedral persuades friends and diaconal leaders to organize and support a weekly "concert supper" event where parish members and impoverished people alike share the sustenance of great music and the nourishment of a simple meal.

The examples are endless, and the settings are unimportant. What IS essential is using our gifts and sharing them in a way that is broader. Why do we have to do this? Why now?

It is because support of the arts has been, for the most part, abolished by governments. Long ago, most churches and faith traditions abdicated the serious arts, and no one needs to be reminded how school budgets for music programs and the arts have been either radically reduced or eliminated.

Music has been and is a bridge of understanding between people of different creeds, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures. When these bridges are destroyed without any regard for the welfare and sanctity of human life, the goodness of our work is heart wrenchingly lost.

The following situations vividly demonstrate the desperate cry for a new and different kind of cultural leadership:

Political turmoil in my country and in others…

> Many Americans are dismayed as funding has been eliminated for the National Endowment of the Arts, National Public Radio, and any other media deemed to be biased toward the current administration.
>
> Often, the arts and education best exemplify the free creative expression of artists and cultural leaders, and heightened dissonance over appropriate boundaries results.

And another tragic situation:

> A young East Los Angeles public school student in a gifted class taught by a YSM graduate wrote in an essay, "I am a young violinist, I want to be a teacher. I cry when my father beats my mother. I hope one day I can own a beautiful violin."

There is work to be done. Indeed, there is work to be done, and cultural leaders "with qualities of mind and character" enlarge the centric mission and align goals

of human dignity and worth with those they have in music and the arts. In the current geo-political environment, complacency becomes complicity.

We must be mindful of any complacent tendencies. Even with the ecclesiastical constraints and policies placed on music in the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Julius III and his predecessors, Palestrina's musical voice soared with beauty. And there was Shostakovich, whose compositions enabled him to simultaneously express his feelings and navigate the political landscapes in Russia and abroad.

The expansive topics and concomitant conversations in our plenary and breakout sessions have a cantus firmus of change. In addition to confronting the despair of certain challenging situations, we as artists and cultural leaders must grapple with the new paradigms of teaching and learning in the digital age. The curricular debates about musical literacy and career preparation must focus on the language, grammar, and syntax of yesterday, today, and tomorrow in our music.

"It is my belief," states John Struble, "that the discussion must not begin with the question of how to save classical music. It must begin with the question of finding the mission of music itself in our world today, the one we actually live in."

That mission is discovered by cultural leaders and artists on the frontiers of communities where cultural leadership resides and where transcendent voices carry our values forward from the past into the present – and to the future through our work.

Culture is the essence and substance of society reflecting its values and setting its compass and sextant. And the arts are the most revealing aspect of culture, for they tell us about the values, feelings, and aspirations of our global sisters and brothers — fellow human beings we have met and those we have not met.

President John F. Kennedy, in a speech at Amherst College one month before his assassination, clarifies the matter of privilege and responsibility for the artist and cultural leader, and I quote —

> "Privilege is here, and with privilege goes responsibility. The artist, however faithful to a personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. If sometime our great artists have been most critical of our society, it is because of their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes them aware that we fall short of our highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. Art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth."

These words resound and echo the clarion call of cultural leadership. The human spirit is defined by the culture or cultures in which it resides. So here we stand, with our fellow human beings across this globe at a cultural crossroad, and we, as artists and cultural leaders, must lead to the new Byzantium.

…

Described by the *Los Angeles Times* as an artist of "great skill and accomplishment," **Robert Blocker**, the William Edward Gilbert Professor of Piano at Yale University, has forged an international career as a concert pianist, a transformative academic leader, and an impassioned advocate for the arts and education. From 1995-2023, he served as the Henry and Lucy Moses Dean of Music at Yale, and former President Richard Levin said that "Robert is a visionary leader who cares deeply about faculty, staff, and students." Frequently sought as a speaker and consultant in arts management and leadership strategies, Blocker is affiliate Professor of Management at Yale and Honorary Professor and Fellow at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. His support and service for classical music, the arts, and education is best reflected by the diverse plethora of local, national, and global leadership roles he has assumed for over four decades — including the advisory board of this journal since its inception. The publication of Robert Blocker's second book by Yale Press in 2026, entitled "Music: The Currency of Hope," continues his thoughts and ideas about cultural leadership and its potential impact on society. His most recent recording, "Eight Contemporary Character Pieces for Piano," was released in the fall of 2024 by Nimbus (UK).

PERFORMING AS SERVICE: RESPONSIBILITY, PRESENCE, AND WORKING FOR OTHERS

Adapted from a chapter of the author's forthcoming book,
The Form of Practice: Thoughts on Our Embodied, Musical Lives

"…the main thing is to live for that audience. What you're there for is to please the people – I mean, the best way you can. Those few moments belong to them."

Louis Armstrong, interview with Richard Meryman, *Life*, April 15, 1966

Performance is often discussed in terms of excellence, tradition, or individual expression. Less often do we ask what kind of social practice it actually is — how we relate to our audience, how authority is distributed in the room, and whose presence shapes what can happen.

If rehearsing is the practice of working *with* others, performing is the practice of working *for* others — and that is a great responsibility. Not because we are tasked with delivering virtuosity or adherence to tradition, but because this ritual we signed up for asks for our humanity. And that's not easy.

Presence

Embodied performance is its own practice: the live, bodily act of engaging with others through music. Scholars across pedagogy, embodied cognition, and sound studies have long described embodied practices as relational and ethically situated rather than merely technical (hooks, 1994; Johnson, 2007; Oliveros, 2005; Robinson, 2020).[1] Performance is one example of how those conditions play out in lived form.

Still, most of us were trained to believe that performance is the payoff of our practice — the place where preparation culminates in display. We cultivate skills so we can show them, and the audience receives what we've made. This framing turns performance into a delivery system, and us into delivery devices.

But is performance the culmination of practice? Sometimes a show doesn't even feel *related* to our practice. A moving performance can rise out of chaos; a flat one can follow years of careful preparation. Of course, the way we prepare and practice has an effect onstage — but a performance includes an audience. And that single variable changes everything.

Performance, then, is a distinct *part* of our practice. It's the part where we practice being with others. It's the part where we cultivate presence.

---

[1] This essay works alongside that literature – but as reflection grounded in lived musical work, not as review.

Presence begins by showing up in the body you actually have — not the idealized body from the perfect day in the practice room, but the one you walked in with. The one that might be flooded with adrenaline, sure, but also the one that's tired, distracted, self-conscious, under-rehearsed, or buzzing with ego.

Some nights we step onstage with shaky hands and legs that would rather take us back home. Other nights it's insecurity, the residual knot of an argument earlier in the day, the worry that the body won't deliver, the imposter syndrome that says we shouldn't even be here. And sometimes it's the opposite: the temptation to bask in attention and applause, as if we are the gift.

All of this is part of the body we bring.

We frequently treat these states as malfunctions to fix, ignore, or run away from. But there is another option: to notice the nervous energy, the ego glow, the fatigue, the envy, the panic — without immediately trying to convert them into confidence or calm. Not as a victim, but more like a caretaker: attending to what is there without assuming it needs to disappear.

This doesn't guarantee presence. These states don't resolve themselves just because we acknowledge them. But resisting doesn't help. When we stop fighting the body we're in, at least we're no longer split in two — trying to perform *and* trying to escape ourselves at the same time.

From there, the task becomes clearer, even if it remains one of the most difficult things about our practice. I don't think we're onstage to display or impress. And we're not there to prove to anybody that we belong. We're there to be with our audience the way we might sit with a child or a friend. We're the ones saying something, of course, but if we're not simultaneously listening — *deeply* listening to our audience — something has slipped. Our performance may still be competent, but it's no longer relational.

The Ego Trap

There's a trap in performing — one that's hard to spot because it often feels good while it's happening. It's the impulse to make the performance about what we are providing. To think, consciously or not: Look what I've given you. *Look how much I'm worth*.

We've worked hard, we want the effort to mean something, we want to be seen, and we definitely want to be paid. But when we measure the performance in terms of how much we've "given" or how much we "deserve" in return, performance shifts from a shared moment to a transaction

The responsibility of performing isn't to hand over a finished product; it's to hold a space where something can happen that isn't ours alone.

I think we've all experienced moments when a performance felt truly shared. In my life, one stands out.

Katrina

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

It was the beginning of my second year as professor of trumpet and jazz studies at Louisiana State University. I lived in downtown Baton Rouge. I wasn't accustomed to the South. Or hurricanes. So, when Katrina was on its way, I asked my neighbors how to prepare. "Oh puh-leeease, they say the 'big one's' comin' every year."

Just before Katrina made landfall, the sky became deeply purple. The wind and rain picked up. When the first tree went down, I took shelter inside, and, along with everyone else, I waited. It was probably several hours before it felt safe to go near my window.

All the power was out. No phones, no electricity. When it finally passed, I went on a walk to survey the result. We didn't have flooding in Baton Rouge, but tree fall was serious. Entire blocks were buried under limbs. Because we had no news to access, we had no idea what was going on in New Orleans. But word started to spread.

Schools shut down for about 10 days. The LSU campus was a mess and needed time to recover. In the meantime, I volunteered for the Red Cross. I was a white professor, new to the region, and barely beginning to understand how race and geography intertwined there. I had a limited frame for what I was walking into.

They picked me up and said they'd train me on the way to the first shelter.

The training started in the car and ended when we got out. I was told we were going to one of three shelters in town and that each had 5,000 people who had evacuated the flood zone. I couldn't believe the number at first. There was no infrastructure yet, but our main goal was to get people dry clothes, food and water, and comfort. In that order.

When we walked into the giant room, just seeing that number of people was startling. But what struck me even more was that every face I saw was Black. At first, I didn't understand — I had assumed disaster would have displaced people from every part of the city. Only later did I begin to grasp how closely race and geography were tied in New Orleans, and how those ties shaped who was most vulnerable when the levees broke.

I was shown to the lower level, where clothes were being brought in by the dump-truck load. The pile was two stories high. Our job: go upstairs, find someone in need, ask their clothes size, go back down, find clothes, ask about food or water, and help them navigate the shelter.

The first person I approached was drenched.

"Wow, you are soaking wet!"

“Yeah, I had to break out of my attic and swim away.”

It took me a second to think through that sequence. The water was that high? Where would you swim to? In all that chaos, how would you know what to do?

The devastation was becoming clearer.

The second person I approached — a woman, holding two children — was inconsolable. I tried to comfort her.

“Hey hey, it’s going to be ok. I’m here to help, and look, look right here, you’ve got your kids! Everything’s gonna be alright.”

“I had to leave one behind,” she said, choking on her words.

Her words stopped me cold. I can still see her, hear her. I tried to focus: get her dry clothes, show her the room where the lost children were. “I’ve already been there,” she said.

In the aftermath of the storm, thousands of children were reported missing — most eventually found — but in those first days, the shelter felt saturated with chaos, heartbreak, and fear.

All the volunteers could do was try to help in the moment. Attending to what was in front of us without any sense that it was enough. It was just a bunch of ordinary people without much of a plan. But it had its own beauty: we were all trying to take care of each other in a way. Volunteers and evacuees alike.

Over time, the shelter shifted. Systems emerged from the ground up: places for kids to play, for information and news, for worship and prayer. It was haphazard, but culture was rising in this temporary town of 5,000 people. People settled into routine and brought their specialties to the mix. They carved out spaces for storytelling, for laughter, for communion. It was really something to witness. As if culture itself was inevitable.

At one point, some friends and I offered to play a show. But looking back, we weren’t introducing anything new. Music was already part of the shelter — carried in people’s voices, in their bodies, in grief, in the hum of kids playing in corners.

The concert itself was a blur – thousands of people, hundreds of children in the front rows. At some point, Simon Lott — one of the greatest drummers in New Orleans — locked into a groove on the drums, my colleague Bill Grimes joined him on bass, and the whole room lifted. A kid in the front row asked me for the mic so I handed it to him. And without a shred of inhibition, he told his story over the music — what he remembered, how he escaped, who he missed. When he was done, the crowd erupted with fierce, enveloping affirmation. He wasn’t alone. Another kid took the mic, then another. One by one, they shared their stories, and the music and audience held them.

It was something I’d never really seen before. And in that moment, I began to understand something I’d only half-grasped before: this wasn’t my concert —

it was a space the community was already holding, and I'd simply stepped inside it. I may have been one of the people who helped set the show in motion, but the pulse and shape of it belonged to the people there. It wasn't about me or the band or about how we were playing. It wasn't achievement, status, money, or mastery — the things we, as performers, are so quick to chase. It was about being with the culture we were part of.

We did another concert the following week. And the next. Soon, we had a series: Jazz at the Manship. With support from the Higher Ground Relief Fund, associated with Jazz at Lincoln Center, we raised money, and brought in displaced musicians like Wes Anderson, Alvin Batiste, and many more. The series went on every week for months and ended up being something we could all look forward to.

Closing Thoughts

"We all wish we could practice for our lives, you know?"
Nathan Fielder, *The Rehearsal*

We don't emerge from the practice room fully formed, ready to take the stage and deliver meaning. The stage isn't where we prove we've practiced enough — it's where the practice continues: reshaped by context, made visible in relationship, embodied with others.

Performance isn't about what we bring into the room, but what emerges in the room.

And there's no neat border between "onstage" and "offstage" anyway. Every exchange, every gathering, every shared moment asks the same thing of us: to stop proving and start being with. In a world that rewards display over presence, transaction over relation, this might be the most political thing we practice.

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WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM?

In March 2015, I had one of the absolute peak experiences of my career: performing as Solo Cimbalom for the World Premiere of *Scheherazade.2, A Dramatic Symphony for Violin and Orchestra* by the American composer John Adams. The commissioning orchestra was the New York Philharmonic, conducted by their then-Music Director Alan Gilbert, with Leila Josefowicz as violin soloist.[1]

The first day with the orchestra went memorably well overall, with encouraging comments throughout our rehearsals from Alan and Leila, whom I only just met. We had a scheduled rehearsal to close the day's events involving only the conductor and the two soloists, for our cadenza in the 3rd movement. During the rehearsal, it became clear that I had learned something incorrectly, and under the pressure of the moment I could not process where I was making the mistake that was hindering our attempts to execute the passage. Alan and Leila were gracious towards me, assuring me that they knew I would figure it out on my own. We elected to end what had been a very successful day overall and go our separate ways.

Scheherazade.2 was my third World Premiere with John Adams, with his oratorio *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* having been our first direct collaboration in 2011-2012.[2] I also played percussion on the 2009 World Premiere of his *City Noir,*[3] with both previous premieres taking place at Walt Disney Concert Hall with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Premiere weeks can feel a bit fraught, with many revelatory layers that are not universally positive. I had seen moments of stress of all kinds, and this week in New York was no different. After the rehearsal ended and Alan had left the stage, Leila and I shared small talk as we packed up. Meanwhile, John approached and let me know his displeasure at my derailing the rehearsal with the incorrect performance of my part in the cadenza. Naturally, I felt I deserved the admonishment, feeling similarly frustrated with my mistakes. I assured John that I would make the necessary corrections and have it ready for the next day's rehearsal, but he shrugged me off and stormed away.

In the time between the rehearsals, I had a lot to think about. A composer whose body of work will have relevance for centuries wrote a featured part for me, and I had just upset him with the errors in my preparation for the World Premiere. A reputation for unreliability could have a massive impact on our relationship moving forward. However, I wasn't worried because I had developed

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/28/arts/music/review-john-adams-unveils-scheherazade2-an-answer-to-male-brutality.html
[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/02/arts/music/the-gospel-according-to-the-other-mary-by-john-adams.html
[3] https://www.nonesuch.com/journal/john-adams-city-noir-premiere-to-air-on-pbs-great-performances-2009-10-21

a system of preparation that I knew I could rely on despite the error revealed that day. The World Premiere performances were enormously successful, and I have gone on to perform *Scheherazade.2* with 18 different major orchestras, both in the United States and abroad.

Genesis

I am often asked how I got into playing the cimbalom. It's an interesting story, because my transition from freelance percussionist to cimbalom artist is rooted in my response to properly managing a catastrophic evolution in my early career. From 2005 to 2013, I was a "regular extra percussionist" with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. During that era, the LAPhil only had three staff percussionists. They are an orchestra whose programming is heavily laden with challenging and new music, so the few regular extra percussionists were needed often. During the first few seasons I was working with the LAPhil, I was their "first call" substitute, which basically amounted to a full-time job and little room for playing with any other groups. I was often asked to perform very difficult parts, and did my best to perform them at an elite level.

Change can be swift, and difficult

When performing with top orchestras, there can be an established culture where compliments are not readily given, and critiques of the extra players are not always shared. I learned this cold reality at the end of my third season playing as a regular guest of the orchestra, when the LAPhil abruptly stopped hiring me to perform with them. There was no explanation given. This was a shattering development, as I had allowed my work with the LAPhil to define me, both financially and as a musician. I was forced to reckon with this new reality, which induced significant soul-searching about my place in the music scene of Los Angeles and where I would be able to fit in without working for the LAPhil. I was concerned about my professional reputation, both with my fellow musicians and also orchestra contractors. My parents and wife pressured me to approach the LAPhil to try and gain understanding as to why I was no longer being called, but intuitively I knew that was a mistake. Why was I owed an explanation? I was not a member of the orchestra. I was a freelancer, serving at the pleasure of my employer. To demand an explanation for their decision would mean severing the professional connection forever, as it would have absolutely been impertinent for a temporary worker to question the decisions of the LAPhil percussion section.

Applying lessons learned from crisis

I spent the next 10 months trying to establish a new foundation within myself, one that was not going to be defined by one orchestra, or one professional experience of any kind. It had become clear to me that the best way to ensure job security was to become as diverse as I could, with an expanded skill-set and establishing more solid relationships with other orchestras and musicians. I also made the internal commitment that **I was going to determine my value**, and not allow the decisions of an arts organization or any inevitable errors in performance to impact my self-identity as an artist. This decision gave me the courage to take artistic risks when given the opportunity.

After 10 months near the bottom of the LAPhil sublist, they began calling me regularly again. I never missed a summer at the Hollywood Bowl, for which I am enormously grateful. The opportunity to take an artistic risk revealed itself in November 2009, when the LAPhil offered me the opportunity to play cimbalom for the first time. The LAPhil New Music Group would be playing a suite from, *The Yellow Shark*, by Frank Zappa on their Green Umbrella series,[4] and within a movement titled, *The Girl in the Magnesium Dress*, there were 21 measures that required the cimbalom as a part of a much larger percussion complement. This offer to play the cimbalom inspired me to buy my own instrument, thinking that with time, I could develop enough proficiency to play it with the LAPhil and in the studios and market it nationwide. John Adams was going to be the conductor for the program, but I had no notion of trying to become a muse for composers to expand the repertoire. I just wanted to get some gigs!

The first rehearsal arrived, and I had been able to learn the cimbalom part effectively. At the break, John Adams approached me and said, "I didn't know anyone around here knew how to play this instrument." I replied, "Well, I do now!" He then floated the idea of writing something for the cimbalom in the future, which excited me tremendously in the moment but once the concert was over, it felt like more of a fun fantasy than something to count on. To my great surprise, in July 2011 John and I began collaborating on what became a huge cimbalom part for *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*. This was followed by featured cimbalom parts for, *Scheherazade.2*, and his latest opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, which premiered at the San Francisco Opera in September of 2022.[5]

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[4] https://www.sequenza21.com/2009/12/last-night-in-l-a-zappa-and-partch-and-the-festivals-midway

[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/11/arts/music/john-adams-antony-cleopatra-opera.html

Career evolution

The decision to teach myself the cimbalom sparked a cascade of events that has allowed me to play on cimbalom or percussion with over 25 different major orchestras, both within the United States and internationally. The lessons I learned from the "failure" of being dropped to the bottom of the LAPhil sublist ended up being the catalyst for a massive career shift that completely redefined my aspirations, and the varied terrain of being a freelance percussionist and cimbalom artist has provided a unique education on how to execute your tasks at an elite level but with awareness of the work being performed around you. I have adapted the philosophy of always doing my work in the service of my colleagues so that the group is successful. This ethos has enabled me to serve as a regular substitute percussionist/timpanist with the LAPhil, The Cleveland Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Nashville Symphony, and several other orchestras. Highlights have included performing as a featured artist on two Grammy-nominated recordings,[6][7] recording major label releases with six different orchestras, and playing timpani, percussion, and cimbalom on scores for film, television, and videogames.

How to excel in different roles

There is a lot to learn when building a career with zero job security. As a freelance musician, my reality is that I have to fit every bit of my artistic effort within the confines of the orchestral ethic both at the macro (full orchestra) and the micro (within the percussion section) levels. When working within a percussion section of an ensemble, I have two "bosses": the principal percussionist and the conductor. This construct requires me to develop my own artistic concepts, to inevitably be shaped by others. The workplace culture is such that you have to be able to play your part with authority, while enjoining it with your surroundings in balance of sound, color, and timing. One also has to develop an understanding of when to lead the group from within, sometimes even when playing an instrument traditionally thought of as an "accessory" rather than a lead voice. Orchestral music is the rare arena where the temporary worker can have a very important role to play that lasts only a moment.

As a cimbalom artist, collaborating with the composers like John Adams or directly with conductors as a featured artist reveals a very different dynamic. The fine arts are aristocratic by nature, and artists like Adams or the great conductors of the world are royalty. Through the cimbalom, I have been asked to serve as

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[6] https://www.thestrad.com/violinists-leila-josefowicz-christian-tetzlaff-and-gil-shaham-nominated-for-2017-grammy-award

[7] https://symphony.org/2025-classical-grammy-nominations-announced

a muse to fulfill the artistic concepts of these singular figures of the arts, and the nature of this relationship shows that **shared commitment to creating bold new concepts can create partnerships that transcend the class divisions stereotypical of any field**. These kinds of partnerships can be universally found in all large-scale efforts amongst those involved whose primary concern is that the finished product is successful. When John Adams identified me as a qualified collaborator, I didn't question it. I committed to the notion that I was to be a vessel for his ideas, and that it was a one-way current. I understood that my role was to implement his ideas, receiving information and attempting to interpret it. This is only a small variation in my general ethos at work: I apply my own ideas, but with recognition of the activities of all involved.

How to behave professionally

Throughout my career, I have learned that there is much to recognize regarding how professional success is **affected by behavior while with colleagues, both on and off the job.** Talent is the most replaceable commodity in the workplace. Effort and humility are the most valuable. It is equally (if not more) important to avoid doing the "wrong" things when you are trying to make a good impression at a new opportunity as it is to do the "right" things. The longer I have been a professional musician, my observations of new professionals continually reinforce that there are several key things to keep in mind if you want people to like having you around. The first thing to remember is:

- **Don't excessively talk about yourself.** It's boring. You will never be able to qualify yourself with your words. The only way to truly make a good impression is with your professional output.

If you quietly perform your tasks in service to the work being done around you, and make sensitive adjustments to what you are doing without being asked using your own judgment, that is the type of effort that will be immediately noticed by the more experienced workers around you. It is very easy to be self-absorbed with your efforts, seeking perfection. Doing your job to your highest possible standards with hyper-awareness of the group goal will invite positive attention in the way that will make an impact on your career. If you are able to take a personal approach to your craft while being flexible, it provides a practical way to job satisfaction.

Sometimes you may go for what feels like an inordinately long period of time without positive affirmations from your colleagues.

- **Do not rely on encouragement or permission from your employers to inspire you to create at your highest level**. You are there because they want to pay you to do great work. You should be able to assess the quality of your own effort, and chronically drawing your employer's attention away from his own work simply to affirm your own insecurity will not be positive.

My mindset is to be well-prepared before rehearsal, and then play the part while incorporating the adjustments demanded by the activities around me. This method can reveal your individuality and sensitivity to your artistic partners simultaneously. You never know when your unique ideas will catch the attention from someone who can change your life forever. Personally, I absolutely love it when I work with a young percussionist for the first time, and they show signs of being a sensitive artist. It's rare.

It is also critically important to recognize that when you are new in a workplace, networking is not a priority.

- Do not treat every introduction to a new co-worker like an opportunity to remind everyone that you are available for gigs. **Everyone there knows you want to work**.

If you make it clear to those around you that you are focused on trying to make professional connections and extracting opportunities from people you just met, you will be seen as a parasite. It's a big turn-off. The best way to get people to want to help you is via your on-the-job performance. People will find you if they have work for you, and you can't force it. Allowing professional relationships to develop naturally, while avoiding engaging in gossip or office politics is the way.

Even with making maximum effort to come to work prepared to impress your co-workers with your fully informed approach to your job, your superiors will have critiques. Some of these critiques can feel enormously cutting, even personal.

- All professionals have a duty to recognize that one of the key things that we are being paid to do is **absorb criticism and allow it to inform our efforts**. Taking critiques personally will not serve you, no matter how righteous the indignation may feel.

Everyone has a superior entity, even the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. No one is immune to criticism, but being skilled at applying it effectively is tremendously valuable. An employee who does not absorb criticism well is not useful. As an artist, my work product is often a product of my soul. To feel

convicted about my approach to what I create is central to the essence of being an artist, but in the various roles I perform in, this is not a luxury afforded to me. As illustrated at the end of the *Scheherazade.2* rehearsal, the heat of negative attention can be stifling; developing a system for absorbing and applying criticism is critical for when all eyes are on you but not in a good way.

What is also valuable is developing a short memory for mistakes, but a long memory for your ability to overcome them. Becoming well-acquainted with my capacity for both elite execution and unforced errors has helped me recognize that you can have both great and subpar moments within the same effort.

- Anxiety is inevitable, so one must learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, and do your best work recognizing that there has never been a "perfect" performance. Don't let the great be the enemy of the good, allowing occasional imperfections to affect the overall product.

I endeavor to remember that a concert is an aggregate of many events, and that the beholders of my effort (the audience, my employers) develop their own individual determinations of its value, along with my own. Because of the inherent subjectivity of art, some events that feel significantly negative in the moment can have surprisingly little impact on the overall opinion or outcome of a performance. Conversely, successful efforts that feel like a major triumph can be quickly forgotten, especially when you are a freelancer. There is no savings account for great performances, and there will be no denouement. Your reputation is earned with every project. Focusing on enhancing a reputation for being unafraid to do hard things on a deadline will earn a type of attention that goes beyond how you play any individual instrument.

Despite our best efforts, sometimes professional relationships can end without warning, or explanation. I felt blindsided when the LAPhil stopped hiring me, but the truth is that I should have been prepared for that scenario from the beginning. Searching myself for the reasons why things went wrong galvanized me in the ways necessary to survive the uncertainties of freelance work.

- It is critical to acknowledge the essential truth that in both career and life in general, there's the way you want things to be, and there's the way they are. Once you accept that reality, you can make a plan and chart a new path.

Fortune favors the bold, and being calculated yet intrepid can pay huge dividends. When the vicissitudes of life are intense, focusing on creating new opportunities, collaborating with enthusiasm, having a spirit of adventure, and being unafraid of a less-than-perfect outcome can send a signal to the kinds of people who share your enthusiasm for doing the things others are scared to try.

Embracing evolution

Looking back on the last 20 years of my career, there have been many moments where I wagered that my capacity for hard work would make up for any lack of talent or aptitude when attempting to fulfill the requirements of a new opportunity. I have become an accidental soloist of sorts; my musical identity evolved not because I sought to be a featured artist, but because I was desperate to pay my bills and support my dream of making a decent life for my family. This desperation propelled me to accept challenges that forced me to grow. Through the lessons of success and struggle, it was revealed that I had a responsibility to define myself as an artist and as a human. I began to treat every opportunity as a chance to enhance my profile as someone who could be counted on to be ready for the first rehearsal, no matter the level of difficulty or inconvenience. This ethic gave me the required confidence to teach myself to play the cimbalom while collaborating with titans of the performing arts. Effectively absorbing the passive lessons of professionalism at the workplace enabled me to develop relationships with major orchestras across the United States. Directing my effort towards being a diverse and willing collaborator opened a path out of failure towards a career more artistically rewarding than I would have ever thought possible.

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Proclaimed by The New Yorker as "The Man to Call When You Need a Cimbalom (A What?)," **Chester Englander** has introduced the sonic and emotional power of the cimbalom into the mainstream consciousness. He has performed on percussion, timpani and cimbalom with 25+ major arts organizations throughout America and internationally, including multiple international and domestic tours. Chester has been a featured artist on multiple Grammy-nominated releases, and has been recorded on scores for film, television and video games in the studios of Los Angeles and Nashville. He is active as a public speaker, having presented lectures on professionalism and career development, and masterclasses and clinics in percussive artistry. Chester has served as Percussion faculty for Cleveland State University and The Cleveland Institute of Music and currently serves as Percussion faculty at Welch College. Chester Englander is an artist endorser for Pearl Drums/Adams Percussion, Freer Percussion Products, and Zildjian Cymbals.

LEADERSHIP, GENDER, AND CURRICULAR CHANGE: BALLET PEDAGOGY WITH MEASURED ADVOCACY

In recent years, higher education institutions across the United States have faced intensifying political and cultural pressures that challenge inclusive teaching practices, particularly within the performing arts. At the same time, gender has emerged as an increasingly politicized and divisive topic in public discourse. Ballet in higher education, rooted in a historical legacy of rigid hierarchies and binary gender expectations, sits at the nexus of these tensions.

Our research examines how such tensions unfold within a university ballet curriculum through a site-specific case study. Drawing on a broader program of inquiry spanning five years and previous IRB-approved studies, we analyze how gender-expansive curricular design functions as a form of measured advocacy — one that seeks to expand access and belonging while strategically challenging disciplinary traditions and institutional policy. In this sense, our approach to leadership is understood through the ways change was negotiated, implemented, and sustained amid institutional and disciplinary pressures.

We teach at an open-enrollment, state university serving more than 48,000 students in a county where approximately 72% of the population affiliates with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS/Mormon] (Toone and Walch 2021). The gender binary is central to the LDS religion. The LDS church teaches that, "People are sorted into male and female categories by God prior to birth … According to official Mormon doctrine, gender is thus both fixed and eternal" (Sumerau and Cragun 2015, 53). The dominant religious and cultural framework often upholds heteronormative and binary understandings of gender and sexuality, shaping how students experience identity on campus and in their broader communities. For those who hold marginalized sexual or gender identities, it can have a deleterious effect on their mental health and sense of belonging (Diamond and Alley 2022).

Beginning in 2022, to advance inclusion within our ballet program, we conducted a comprehensive revision of all course descriptions, titles, and outcomes to remove gendered language and expand access. For example, Men's Class was renamed *Allegro*, and *Pointe* courses now welcome any student with the pre-requisite skills, rather than limiting enrollment to "women dance majors." Alongside these updates, we developed *Specialized Techniques in Ballet*, a course designed to reflect the profession's evolving understanding of gender and embodiment.

At the time, although one of us was tenured, we did not hold administrative appointments and had limited formal authority within the academic hierarchy. Nonetheless, we exercised leadership through our roles as full-time faculty by reshaping the programmatic structures that govern daily training. Every single class and every instructor in our ballet program was impacted by these

adjustments. Implemented as programmatic curricular updates rather than public-facing political statements, these changes coincided with gradual shifts in performance practice that began in 2021. Shifts included same-gender partnering and gender-expansive casting in classical repertoire.

Over time, this measured approach to leadership extended beyond the university to influence professional practice. To expose students to historically significant repertoire within our university performance coursework, we initiated a partnership with the Gerald Arpino Foundation. Through sustained advocacy and open dialogue regarding gender inclusivity in performance, we received approval for a male-presenting student trained in *pointe* to perform the "Women's Dance" from *Italian Suite* — marking the first time a male-presenting dancer has performed this role. This milestone reflects not only the cumulative impact of our leadership within the curriculum, but also its capacity to engage professional institutions in reconsidering gender binaries within classical ballet.

Our curricular developments, set against a backdrop of shifting sociopolitical climates and increasingly restrictive discourse around gender, confront tensions between academic freedom, legislative mandates, and student-centered care. In 2024, Utah HB 261, the "Equal Opportunity Initiatives" law, went into effect. It bars Utah public-education institutions and state employers from operating "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) programs, trainings, or offices (Utah State Legislature 2024). In 2025, Utah HB 77 took effect, banning pride flags and other identity-affirming symbols in public buildings (Utah State Legislature 2025). These restrictions underscore the urgency of developing pedagogical models that maintain inclusivity, without using language or symbols that have become politically contested or outright banned.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

To contextualize our research, the following literature review engages scholarship on gender performativity, ballet pedagogy, and leadership frameworks that inform gender-expansive curricular practice. Historically, ballet, a reflection of the cultures in which it has evolved, has reinforced gender binaries through pedagogy and performance. Specific movements remain gendered, with some steps and training practices reserved for men and others for women, and the heteronormative romantic *pas de deux* remains central to much of the classical repertoire (Oliver and Risner 2017; Murray 2021; Alterowitz 2021; Fisher 2021; St. John and Johnson 2023). These conventions contribute to an aesthetic and institutional culture that perpetuates gendered expectations for comportment and performance quality (Zeller 2024).

Queer and sociological theories provide insight into how these gendered traditions are embodied and reproduced. Butler's (1990) concept of performativity frames gender as enacted rather than innate. West and

Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender" similarly emphasizes the active construction of gender through everyday social interactions to meet cultural expectations. These perspectives become especially salient within religious contexts that explicitly affirm binary gender frameworks. Sumerau and Cragun (2015) demonstrate how the LDS Church's repeated instruction around idealized femininity paradoxically reveals gender as performative. They articulate,

> LDS official publications taught women (and men) that femininity could be achieved by developing essential feminine characteristics and obedience … In doing so, however, they demonstrated potential awareness of — if not belief in — gender fluidity by teaching women about the dangers of not living up to these standards, and emphasizing the significance of developing femininity . . . LDS leaders collaborated with Mormon women to define achieving femininity and by extension subordination — as an essential element of Mormonism. (Sumerau and Cragun 2014, 66)

Within layered cultural, religious, and institutional environments, faculty seeking reform must navigate competing systems, often enacting what Meyerson and Scully (1995) define as *tempered radicalism*. "'Tempered Radicals' are individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization" (586). *Tempered Radicals* maintain loyalty to their organization while challenging structures incrementally and strategically from within. This framework offers a productive lens for understanding curricular leadership in contexts where direct advocacy may be constrained by political, cultural, or administrative pressures.

Gender-expansive approaches that acknowledge diverse gender expressions and embodied experiences surface within disciplinary debates in ballet. Critiques often emerge from concerns about artistic lineage, technical demands, and equity, rather than simple resistance to inclusion. Dance historians such as Jennifer Homans emphasize that classical ballet is built upon highly codified gendered aesthetics that shape everything from épaulement and allegro to partnering conventions and repertoire (Homans 2010). Scholars in dance science caution that strength and load-bearing differences, particularly around *pointe* work and partnering, justify differentiated training to support injury prevention and technical mastery (Clippinger 2016; IADMS 2020).

Discussion about gender equity surfaced in international discourse following the casting of Chase Johnsey, a dancer assigned male at birth, in a traditionally female role with English National Ballet. In response, Wendy Whelan, Associate

Artistic Director of New York City Ballet, acknowledges that such practices, while artistically compelling, risk becoming "another hurdle" for women in a field already shaped by gendered inequities (Sulcas 2018). The Dance Data Project reports, "Between 2021 and 2025 YTD, men have received nearly double the number of Artistic Director appointments at ballet companies across the world (U.S. and International companies, 52 women, 97 men)." (Dance Data Project 2025). Isabella Bolyston, principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, additionally shares the perspective that equity depends on whether role-crossing is genuinely reciprocal (Sulcas 20218). The gender imbalance in ballet mirrors patterns in other artistic fields, such as orchestral conducting and film directing, where men continue to hold the majority of positions associated with authority. (League of American Orchestras 2023; Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2023). These perspectives frame gender-expansive practices in the performing arts as a site of ongoing tension between tradition, embodiment, and access — raising questions of whether such interventions redistribute opportunity or merely reconfigure it within existing hierarchies.

Methods

In Spring 2025, we conducted a qualitative study in conjunction with the course, *Specialized Techniques in Ballet*. The study was reviewed and approved by Utah Valley University's Institutional Review Board (IRB #1807). The course invites students to embody roles and training traditionally coded as "male" or "female," regardless of their gender identity or sex assigned at birth. Through this structure, students investigate how movement vocabulary, performative choices, and embodied sensations shape their understandings of gender and identity. The course description reads:

> For dance majors and other students with an interest in the professional dance world. Emphasizes virtuosity in a variety of specialized ballet techniques which may include pointe and bravura exercises. Welcomes students who are trained in pointe as well as those whose emphasis has been allegro work. Explores movement from classical and contemporary repertoire. (UVU Catalog 2025)

Learning outcomes for the course focus on students developing and performing specialized techniques at an advanced level with artistic interpretation.

Data Collection

All students enrolled were invited to participate voluntarily, with no incentives. Nine students participated in the case study. Data was gathered through

pre- and post-course Qualtrics surveys examining student experiences. Students were not required to complete all questions. Survey I contained three open-ended and fifteen demographic/experiential multiple-choice questions; Survey II contained eight open-ended, eight demographic, and eleven experiential multiple-choice questions. Prompts invited reflection on gendered training, feelings of belonging or discomfort, and perceptions of embodiment and progress. A subset of participant demographic data is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Sexual Orientation	Marital Status	Years of Ballet Training	Religious Affiliation	Level of Importance
Mia	she/her	18-20	Heterosexual	Not Married	9-12	LDS	Moderately Important
Bianca del Rio	he/they	18-20	Homosexual	Not Married	5-8	None	Slightly Important
Heidi	she/her	21-23	Heterosexual	Not Married	17+	None	Not important at all
Jane	she/her	21-23	Heterosexual	Married	17+	LDS	Extremely Important
Susie	she/her	26+	Heterosexual	Married	17+	LDS	Extremely Important
Ella	she/her	21-23	Heterosexual	Married	17+	LDS	Extremely Important
Jennifer	she/her	21-23	Heterosexual	Not Married	9-12	LDS	Moderately Important
Brie (Mia)	she/her	24-26	Heterosexual	Not Married	5-8	LDS	Extremely Important
Elizabeth Bennet	she/her	18-20	Heterosexual	Not Married	17+	LDS	Extremely Important

Data was stored on secure, password-protected university servers accessible only to the research team. Survey responses were analyzed thematically using inductive In Vivo Coding methods (Saldaña 2021). Both researchers independently conducted first-cycle coding, then compared and refined codes into broader themes through iterative collaboration. Coding tables and analytic memos documented decision-making to support transparency and rigor. Reflexivity was central throughout data collection and analysis.

Researcher Positionality

To mitigate role duality and power dynamics, data collection was conducted by a researcher who did not teach or assess the course, and data was not accessed until after the semester concluded. The course was co-taught by Researcher One, who uses she/her pronouns and identifies as heterosexual, and an instructor who uses he/him pronouns and identifies as heterosexual. Approximately 75% of the course, including all major examinations, was administered by the male instructor, who was not involved in the design of the IRB-approved study or in data analysis. Researcher Two, who uses she/her pronouns and identifies as queer, distributed surveys and observed examinations. Pedagogical variability situates the study as a site-specific case that reflects how curricular intentions are enacted across multiple instructional agents.

Findings & Discussion

Working within a curricular and pedagogical framework, our coding processes revealed three significant themes: Inequity, Technical Growth, and Gendered Embodiment and Comfort.

Inequity

Survey data indicated that 89% of participants had experienced gendered ballet training, including tempo changes based on gender and steps taught only to dancers of a specific gender. Students also reported other common practices such as a privileged spot in the room, differential scholarship access, disproportionate feedback, and gendered dress codes. These responses highlight how perceptions of equitable instruction are informed not only by current pedagogy, but also by students' prior experiences, identities, and expectations of gender in ballet.

Our program has historically offered separate *pointe* and *allegro* (previously Men's class) courses. Due to low enrollment, however, *allegro* had not been offered in recent years — leaving students accustomed to regular *pointe* training without an allegro counterpart. In *Specialized Techniques*, students studied traditionally male and female ballet techniques and repertoire, with equal time devoted to *pointe* and *allegro*. Despite this structural balance, some students perceived gender inequity and a greater emphasis on traditionally male technique. Elizabeth stated, "The lack of attention to pointe work really bothered me. While I really enjoyed learning male technique, I was constantly frustrated when it was time for pointe because I was lacking in so much strength." Beyond technical concerns, Jennifer wrote,

> It challenged me mentally more than physically. I've always had an issue with male-presenting dancers being provided more opportunities and accommodated more. I felt that this class further reinforced those feelings. Many of the female-identifying students felt as if our traditional female training was being pushed to the side for male training. We also felt this class was made for one student- the singular male identifying dancer in the class. While I recognize that they need exposure to the technique and female students benefit as well, it was frustrating. In a career that is female dominated, it just reinforced the belief that male dancers get special privilege or what they want.

As highlighted earlier by Whelan and Boylston, this response reflects the tension between *equality*, providing the same curricular structure to all students, and *equity*, in which students evaluate fairness through the lens of their own needs, histories, and identities. The student appears to interpret the inclusion of *allegro* as privileging the single male-presenting dancer.

This response could suggest more than frustration with course content. It could reflect the emotional residue of a field in which male dancers often receive disproportionate visibility and professional opportunity (Oliver and Risner 2014). Additionally, in this context, these dynamics may intersect with religiously informed gender hierarchies in which men can achieve greater authority in this world and beyond (Sumerau and Cragun 2014). Even outside explicitly religious contexts, the ballet field continues to operate within a largely patriarchal structure. It invites further investigation because when asked, "If you were teaching a ballet class, what aspects of gendered training would be present in your classroom," a majority of responses indicated that students would perpetuate some aspect of gendered training.

Technical growth

Through exposure to different techniques, students reported technical growth. Eight out of nine students reported improvements in their ability to perform traditionally male technique and either felt the same or improvement in their ability to perform traditionally female technique. Mia stated, "Throughout this class I think that I benefited a lot through the learning of both movement techniques. It helped me learn more about how to teach both styles and find different movement qualities within myself." Student responses revealed a growth in mindset as well as technical ability. Brie commented, "I LOVED being able to explore the depth of my plié in learning traditionally male technique! Because a lot of "male" jumps are higher and faster you must access

the full depth of your plié and I was so excited to learn that I had more to give than I was giving." Similarly, Ella wrote, "Generally in classes we are told we have the option to do a tour instead of a leap, but I usually go the safe route. This class required me to do these steps that I wouldn't normally pick and I didn't have a safe backup option, which is helpful to growth." Student comments and researcher observations suggest technical growth emerged through gender expansive approaches that pushed dancers beyond habitual movement choices into more demanding engagement.

Gendered Embodiment and Comfort

Although technical growth was evident, performing movements, mannerisms, and *port de bras* traditionally associated with a sex other than students' sex assigned at birth elicited mixed responses: 33% of students reported feeling very uncomfortable, while an equal proportion (33%) reported feeling very comfortable. Some participants identified specific sources of discomfort. Ella noted relief that wearing traditionally male attire was optional, because she did not want to "dress like a man" when identifying as female. Bianca (he/they) expressed discomfort performing movements aligned with their sex assigned at birth,

> I want to dance professionally. There is nothing else I want to do more, so it is important that I prepare myself … I want to be able to dance en pointe and be able to do double tours. I believe if anything I have a harder time performing movement within my gender expression. I am not an overtly masculine person and I have a hard time performing that way. I like to dance with grace and fluidity, which is more or less associated with female steps. I think learning to perform both ways is great! I just feel like I have to pretend to be something I am not and that I don't necessarily want to be."

Moments of discomfort could be read as identity negotiation unfolding through kinesthetic inquiry. Bianca also expressed appreciation for the gender expansive approach to training, stating:

> I want to say how grateful I am for a class like this. Coming to UVU, I did not expect nearly this level of respect for dancers like myself, who don't always conform to gender norms expected of us. This class is great because it allows me to feel like I have a place in both the pointe and men's class.

The student responses suggest that gender-expansive training can simultaneously generate discomfort and a heightened sense of belonging, revealing the complexity between personal identity and established ballet conventions.

Conclusions and Implications

Universities across the United States are navigating challenges related to intellectual inquiry, curricular autonomy, and pedagogical practice. Gender has become an increasingly contested topic in public discourse. Within this climate, embedding gender-expansive approaches into existing curricular structures through measured advocacy offers a means of advancing change.

Situated within five years of iterative investigation, this case study examines how such approaches function within ballet training under specific cultural and institutional constraints. The findings suggest that gender-expansive pedagogy can support technical development while eliciting critical reflection on the performative nature of gender. As students developed familiarity with movement vocabularies traditionally coded as masculine or feminine, they simultaneously encountered and questioned the binary frameworks that continue to structure ballet.

These findings contribute to broader conversations in performing arts leadership by illustrating how curricular innovation, when grounded in cultural awareness and institutional realities, can function as a site of ethical and strategic leadership. While this study is contextually situated, it points toward the potential for inclusive curricular development to influence training environments in ways that merit further investigation.

Revising curricular language alone, however, is insufficient. Meaningful change depends on how those revisions are realized through everyday pedagogical practice. Future research might examine how such approaches shape identity development and long-term engagement within ballet, and related art forms, particularly as the field continues to grapple with questions of gender, tradition, and change.

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CORPS de Ballet International, and American College Dance Association, with publications in the Journal of Dance Education and the Journal of Utah Arts, Sciences, and Letters. She has choreographed commissioned works for St. Paul Ballet, Utah Metropolitan Ballet, Boulder Ballet II, and the University of Wyoming. She also holds certifications in Yoga and Functional Awareness®.

Christa St. John, MFA, is an Assistant Professor of Ballet, Ballet Program Coordinator, and Artistic Director of Repertory Ballet Ensemble at Utah Valley University (UVU). In addition to directing the company, she teaches ballet choreography, ballet pedagogy, pointe, ballet technique, and dance theory courses, and mentors emergent student choreographers and scholars. Her appointment at UVU follows a professional ballet performance career that spanned over a decade and four years as a division director of an integrated academic and ballet conservatory for pre-professional dancers. St. John is a prolific choreographer whose choreographic and scholarly research centers on interdisciplinary collaboration and the intersection of gender and ballet. Her creative and scholarly work has been presented nationally and internationally through performances, conferences, and invited residencies, and her scholarship encompasses published writing and creative research contributions to the field. St. John holds an MFA in Dance from the University of Oklahoma.

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MARKET FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS AND PERFORMING ARTS FACILITIES DEVELOPMENT: A CASE EXAMPLE

Many higher education institutions (HEIs) develop and manage performing arts facilities for the purposes of supporting academic performing arts programs, generating income, and contributing to the regional arts and entertainment economy. Although such facilities may carry an expensive price tag, their potential financial, economic, and cultural returns on investment make them appealing. Market feasibility analysis can help HEI leaders determine whether the local market for performing arts events can support new facilities and the competitive challenges to their current facilities. This paper will explain how market feasibility analysis reveals the market-based opportunities and challenges, and it will present a case study example of basic market feasibility analysis focused on the University of Southern Mississippi located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Why Higher Education Institutions Invest in Performing Arts Facilities

HEIs must manage tensions between the imperatives of educational, research, and regional development. Many HEIs have significant holdings of land and developed real estate, and they have staff, resources, and institutional processes devoted to developing, expanding, maintaining, and planning their real estate portfolio. Declining public support for HEIs has encouraged them to alternative revenue sources such as by leveraging their real estate assets for commercial revenue generation. It has also driven an increase in investment in large special-purpose facilities that can serve both public and private uses. Facilities such as stadiums, museums, performing arts facilities, hotels and convention centers, and science & technology industrial parks present HEIs with potentially lucrative dual-use real estate opportunities for which they are uniquely positioned to provide.

HEIs have multiple roles which motivate them to invest in performing arts facilities. They use performing arts facilities to support academic programs, including instructional, creative, and research activities. HEIs also use performing arts facilities for commercial purposes which enable revenue generation. HEIs also function as agents of regional economic development, often at the behest of public stakeholders. Through the development of performing arts facilities, HEIs support growth in employment and local business activity, which contributes fiscal impact to local and regional government coffers. HEIs are often a channel for public support for theater services, which they pair with a mission to provide educational, research, and cultural outreach services.[1]

[1] Lluís Bonet and Héctor Schargorodsky. “Theatre management: models and strategies for cultural venues”.” Policy 23, no. 2 (2018): 159-173.

As HEIs increasingly grow in their role as developers of real estate and regional economies, some colleges and HEIs have experimented with using performance arts centers to facilitate arts-based co-curricular educational programming designed to enhance core educational outcomes, boost innovation and creativity, global academic brand-building, and social inclusion.[2] Some envision performing arts facilities as anchors of planned placemaking initiatives focused on creating vibrant mixed-use districts symbiotically complementary to university campuses. As Katherine Keeney explains, public colleges and HEIs invest in performing arts facilities to serve both the public interest in arts programming and their institutional self-interest in resource acquisition.[3] Additionally, with pressure to compete for students, faculty, and financial resources abundant, HEIs leverage performing arts facilities for brand image impact. HEIs seek to enhance brand value to improve their competitiveness in attracting opportunities and resources.

By developing performing arts facilities, colleges and HEIs may exercise catalytic leadership of arts-based regional economic development strategies. Generally, art spaces of all types are influential instruments of community and economic development, serving as anchors of local and regional cultural economies and creative industries.[4] Cultural economies feature industries focused on the production and distribution of cultural artifacts with educational, entertainment, or symbolic representational value such as media, design, and the visual and performing arts.[5] These industries are typically prone to cluster formation

to achieve advantages in access to specialized talent and infrastructure.[6]

Additionally, cultural industrial clusters are often anchored by local place-based institutions such as schools, unions, and trade groups that play a vital role in maintaining collaborative and information-sharing networks.[7] Collaborative

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[2] Keeney, Katherine Preston. "Public higher education institutions' investment in performing arts centers." The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society 48, no. 1 (2018): 44-56.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Carl Grodach. "Art spaces in community and economic development: Connections to neighborhoods, artists, and the cultural economy." Journal of planning education and research 31, no. 1 (2011): 74-85.

[5] Chris Gibson and Lily Kong. "Cultural economy: a critical review." Progress in human geography 29, no. 5 (2005): 541-561.; Allen J. Scott. The Cultural Economy of Cities: Essays on the Geography of Image-Producing Industries. Sage Publications Ltd.(2000): 1-256.

[6] Michael E.Porter. "Location, competition, and economic development: Local clusters in a global economy." Economic development quarterly 14, no. 1 (2000): 15-34.; Allen J. Scott. The Cultural Economy of Cities: Essays on the Geography of Image-Producing Industries. Sage Publications Ltd. (2000): 1-256.

[7] Kong, Lily. "Creating urban spaces for culture, heritage, and the arts in Singapore: Balancing policy-led development and organic growth." In The politics of urban cultural policy, pp. 154-164. Routledge, 2012.; Keith Bassett, Ron Griffiths, and Ian Smith. "Cultural industries, cultural clusters and the city: the example of natural history film-making in Bristol." Geoforum 33, no. 2 (2002): 165-177.; Caves, R.E., 2000. Cultural Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA.

networks of arts practitioners cluster around arts facilities, sharing knowledge, equipment, and spaces, and creating local social capital.[8] Beyond the formation of social capital, such facilities create shared cultural capital for communities. Through their architectural design and programming, cultural facilities convey symbolic value about their host community's cultural identity and experiential offerings. Formal arts districts are often the product of strong leadership, a clear and compelling community vision, and an initiative to develop a specific anchor project such as cultural arts facility.[9] Both formal arts districts and arts-related educational institutions have positive neighborhood level effects on job creation in arts industries.[10] Many mid-size cities rank high on cultural economy rankings because of high local concentrations of cultural production assets.[11] Real estate development follows a process of ideation, planning and assessment, public approvals, construction, and operational management. Feasibility studies are at the core of the project planning and assessment phase. Feasibility studies enable real estate developers to manage risk and to make decisions based on rational projections of the likely return on investment. Feasibility studies have multiple facets including market analysis, site analysis, financial analysis, and political feasibility assessment. Feasibility studies are used recursively as a part of the process of planning development projects, helping to refine understanding of the commercial, spatial, environmental, financial, and political conditions around a project. In turn, these factors affect the viability of project plans, which may be revised in light of the new information.

Market analysis is an important tool for decision-makers to acquire and assess information about the market risks and opportunities for prospective real estate development projects.[12] It focuses on studying supply and demand conditions in the local market area.[13] Market analysis enables project planning, financial feasibility analysis, assessment of commercial potential of a real estate product, attracting investors or creditors, and improving the quality of the product, and gaining public support for the project.[14]

[8] Elizabeth Bucura. "Bonding and bridging: Perceptions of social capital in community music." Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts 9 (2022): 1-27.
[9] Karen Chapple, Shannon Jackson, and Anne J. Martin. "Concentrating creativity: The planning of formal and informal arts districts." City, Culture and Society 1, no. 4 (2010): 225-234.
[10] Shiri M. Breznitz, and Douglas S. Noonan. "Planting the seed to grow local creative industries: The impacts of cultural districts and arts schools on economic development." Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space 50, no. 5 (2018): 1047-1070.
[11] Jessie PH Poon and Christine A. Lai. "Why are non-profit performing arts organizations successful in mid-sized US cities?." Urban Studies 45, no. 11 (2008): 2273-2289.
[12] Philip Kotler and Joanne Scheff. Standing room only: Strategies for marketing the performing arts. Harvard Business School Press, 1997.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

Market analysis enables strategic management of performing arts organizations, including HEIs, by helping them form marketing strategies. Alland Schargorodsky argue that performing arts organizations simultaneously manage three strategic projects to achieve their mission, including an artistic project focused on creative programming, a production project focused on business operations and logistical coordination, and a territorial project focused on community development and relationship management.[15] These projects are helped by strategic marketing solutions that performing arts organizations adapt themselves to the preferences of their prospective customers and the competitive challenges posed by their competitors. Evidence from Opera America suggests that over the past two decades, independent for-profit classical music venues have faced rising revenue volatility and shrinking operating margins, and a decline in private donation support. As a result, such venues may have to pursue additional revenue streams beyond ticket sales and other traditional funding sources.[16] Under these pressures, many performing arts organization leaders do not see community development and placemaking as natural components of their organizational mission, but market analysis can help them to identify ways to integrate these functions into their mission. Performing arts facility development informed by market analysis can result in performing arts buildings capable of being an ideal "two-way street" integrating the performing arts organization and the surrounding community.[17]

Case Study: Performing Arts Center Feasibility in Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Market analysis begins with the definition of a primary market area, which includes the geographic area from which the facility will draw its customers. This paper uses a simple radial distance method to define concentric primary, secondary, and tertiary market areas centered on a hypothetical performing arts facility located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the University of Southern Mississippi. As shown in Figure 1, the primary market area is in the radius range of 0-100 miles, the secondary market area is in the radius range of 100-250 miles, and the tertiary market radius range is 250-500 miles. The market areas capture mutually exclusive populations and potential customer bases, each differentiated by the likelihood of purchasing tickets for events in Hattiesburg. The primary market area includes most of Central and South Mississippi and substantial parts of the metropolitan areas of Jackson (MS), New Orleans (LA), and Mobile (AL).

[15] Bonet, Lluís, and Héctor Schargorodsky. "Theatre management: models and strategies for cultural venues"." Policy 23, no. 2 (2018): 159-173.
[16] Christos A. Makridis, Christos A. "Financial headwinds in the performing arts: Evidence from united states opera, 2005–2023." The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society (2025): 1-20.
17 Jenna Moran, Jason Schupbach, Courtney Spearman, and Jennifer Reut. "Beyond the building: performing arts and transforming place." Washington: National Endowment for the Arts (2015).

Figure 1. Map of the primary, secondary, and tertiary of Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Source: Image generated using ESRI ArcGIS.

Demand Analysis

The potential market for commercial musical arts entertainment can be estimated in terms of consumers and expenditures. ESRI's ArcGIS Business Analyst data platform provides automated calculations of the expected consumers based on custom geographies.[18] A proxy for the consumer market for university-based musical performance is the market for classical music and opera. Table 1 shows the potential consumer market area for various other musical performance genres for the defined market areas. According to this methodology, the potential market for classical music or opera performance in the primary market area is 71,075 adults. Live theater, a genre that includes musical theater, offered the largest segment at an estimated potential market of 206,663 adults.

[18] ESRI. ArcGIS Tapestry. (2025). https://doc.arcgis.com/en/esri-demographics/latest/esri-demographics/tapestry-segmentation.htm

Table 1. Potential Consumer Market for Different Genres of Performing Arts, by Market Area

Performing Arts Entertainment Category	Primary Market: 0-100 miles	Secondary Market: 100-250 miles	Tertiary Market: 250-500 miles
Went to Live Theater in the Last 12 months (Expected No. of Adults)	206,663	708,822	5,118,086
Attended Classical Music or Opera Performance Last 12 Mo (Expected No. of Adults)	71,075	250,323	1,852,499
Attended Country Music Performance Last 12 Mo	131,550	438,864	3,034,192
Attended Rock Music Performance Last 12 Mo	192,053	658,819	4,849,928
Attended R&B/Hip-Hop Music Performance Last 12 Mo	94,878	316,262	1,926,299
Attended Music Festival	126,705	429,415	2,811,691

Table 2 displays ESRI estimates of 2025 consumer spending on all entertainment and recreation and on tickets to theatrical performances, operas, and other musical concerts only. This latter category is a proxy for the total potential market for musical performance. The data indicates the primary market area will have an estimated total expenditure of $80.6 million in current dollars. Notably the total spending on tickets to performing arts events in the primary market area is only 28% of the spending in the secondary market on the same category of items, and only 3% of the spending in the tertiary market.

Table 2. Estimated 2025 Consumer Spending on Tickets to Theatre/Operas/Concerts by market areas.

2025 Consumer Spending (estimated)[a]	Primary Market: 0-100 miles	Secondary Market: 100-250 miles	Tertiary Market: 250-500 miles
Entertainment/Recreation Spending Total	$3,425,208,984	$11,782,369,110	$88,560,726,891
Total Spending on Tickets to Theatre/Operas/ Concerts	80,581,957	281,589,612	2,243,719,801

[a] Projections are based on 2022 and 2023 Consumer Expenditure Surveys produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. ESRI uses the Consumer Expenditure Survey data in tandem with its Tapestry Segment data to model the budget allocation of an average consumer in a given geographic area.

The potential consumer market for musical performance can be translated into estimates of the amount of musical performance-related commercial real estate supportable under assumed ticket revenue scenarios. Table 3 presents the results of calculations of the overall performing arts spending capacity ("Theatre/Operas/Concerts"), the untapped sales potential, and the captured untapped sales under assumed rates of capture. ESRI calculates a *Spending Potential Index* value, which indicates the ratio of area consumer spending for the expenditure category relative to the national household average (expressed on a 100-point scale). The area *Spending Capacity* is the amount of spending that would occur if area sales matched the rate of the national average, and it equals the *(Estimated Actual Sales) ÷ (Spending Potential Index value)*. The *Untapped Sales Potential* equals *(Spending Capacity) – (Estimated Actual Sales)*, and it represents the surplus amount of the area market that is currently not being served. The Capture Rate of Untapped Sales Potential is the percentage of the Untapped Sales Potential that would be targeted for capture by the construction of new facilities. The *Captured Untapped Sales Potential* converts the Capture Rate of Untapped Potential into a dollar figure, and it equals *(Capture Rate of Untapped Potential) × (Untapped Sales Potential)*. The analysis presented in Table 3 finds that at an assumed capture rate of 5% of the untapped potential in the primary market, the weighted average total of the Captured Untapped Sales Potential is $1,740,968. Using ESRI's growth projections for live performing arts ticket sales, the estimated Captured Untapped Sales Potential for the year 2030 is $1,967,172.

Table 3. Calculation of Captured Untapped Sales Potential (Baseline Year = 2025)

	Primary Market: 0-100 miles	Secondary Market: 100-250 miles	Tertiary Market: 250-500 miles	Total
Estimated Actual Sales, Baseline Year ($)	80,581,957	281,589,612	2,243,719,801	
Spending Potential Index Value	72	67	84	
Spending Capacity, Baseline Year ($)	111,919,385	420,283,003	2,671,095,001	
Untapped Sales Potential, Baseline Year ($)	31,337,428	138,693,391	427,375,200	
Capture Rate of Untapped Potential	5%*	0.1%	0.004%	
Weighting Percentage**	90%	9%	1%	
Captured Untapped Sales Potential, Baseline Year ($)	1,566,871	156,687	17,410	1,740,968

* The Capture Rate of Untapped Potential for the primary market is conservatively assumed to be 5%. The Capture Rates for the secondary and tertiary markets are calculated as (Captured Untapped Sales Potential) ÷ (Untapped Sales Potential).

** The weighting percentages are used to calculate the "Captured Untapped Sales Potential" for the secondary and tertiary markets. For example, (Captured Untapped Sales Potential, Secondary Market) = [(Captured Untapped Sales Potential, Primary Market)/(90%)]*(9%)

Table 4 presents calculations of the minimum supportable square footage based on the Captured Untapped Sales Potential estimates for 2025 and 2030. The minimum supportable square footage can be calculated as *(Captured Untapped Sales Potential) ÷ (Assumed Sales Productivity)*. Using a conservative sales productivity assumption of that new performing arts venue space would generate a minimum of $50 per square foot in revenue, the minimum supportable performing arts square footage to capture the targeted untapped sales potential is 34,819 square-feet in 2025, increasing to 39,343 square feet in 2030. Further assuming a conservative seat density ratio of 1 seat per 50 square-feet of venue space, the minimum supportable new seats is 696 in 2025, rising to 787 in 2030.

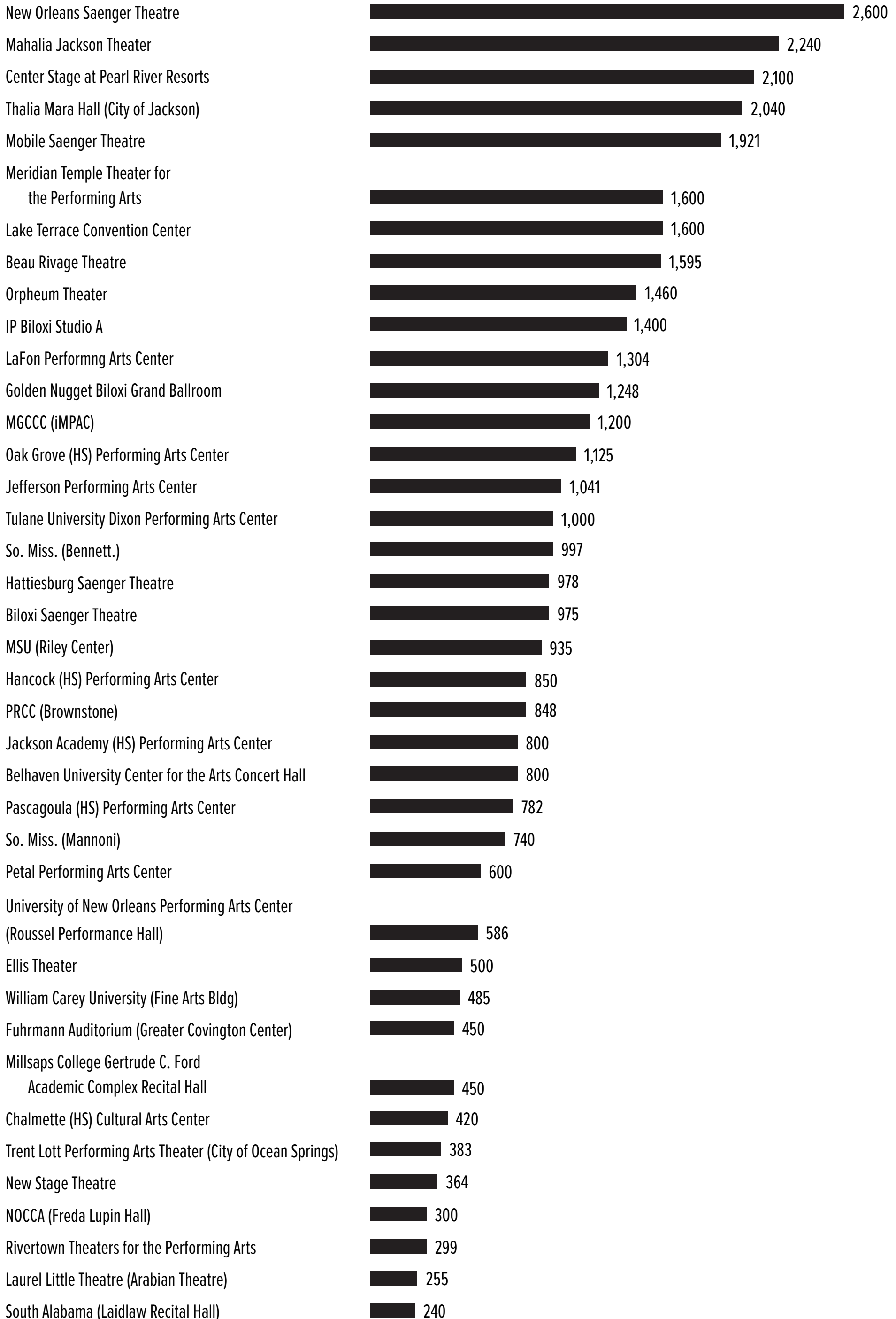
Table 4. Calculation of Supportable Venue Square Footage

	Baseline Year (2025)	Long-Term Forecast Year (2030)
Captured Untapped Sales Potential ($)	1,740,968	1,967,172
Assumed Sales Productivity ($/sq.ft.)	50.00	50.00
Minimum Supportable Square Footage	34,819	39,343
Seats (assumes 1 seat per 50 SF)	696	787
Sales Capture per Seat ($)	2,500	2,500
Sales Capture per Seat per Week (40 weeks total) ($/seat/week)	62.50	62.50

Supply Analysis

Analysis of the supply conditions for performing arts venue space in the primary market area is an important component of market analysis. Supply analysis aims to understand the competitiveness of an organization's current facilities versus others in the same market area offering similar services. The primary market area contains a mix of mid-to-large-sized public and private performing arts facilities, defined here having seating in its largest venue for at least 200 people. Figure 2 compares performing arts facilities in the primary market area by seating capacity size of their highest capacity venue. The venues included in this dataset includes public, private, academically programmed, independent commercially programmed, and unprogrammed facilities.

Figure 2. Main Venue Seating Capacity for Public and Private Performing Arts Centers in the Primary Market Area



USM's Mannoni Performing Arts Center, which has a seating capacity of 740, appears in the bottom half of the distribution. For comparison, Bennett Auditorium, a multi-purpose venue outside of the Mannoni Center complex, which is also included Figure 2, ranks slightly higher. A comparison of the academic performing arts venues in the primary market area by age (i.e., the number of years since the original opening) indicates that the Mannoni Performing Arts Center's age of 53 is 30 years greater than the median age of the group, which is 23. Venue age is a basic indicator of the quality of the facilities, which accounts for factors such as structural integrity, quality of building mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, audio-visual systems, furniture installation, navigation systems, lighting, security, and logistical infrastructure.

Discussion

The findings from the analysis presented above suggest USM's current position in its targeted markets faces multiple challenges. First, its limited seating capacity places it at a disadvantage in the primary market area and beyond. The 740-seat building could affect the potential revenue generation of events with high levels of customer demand compared to other venues equipped with larger capacities. Second, it faces vigorous competition within the primary market area from academic and non-academic performing arts venues. The primary market area has multiple commercial performing arts venues with higher capacities, and which are closer to high population centers in the primary market area. Additionally, multiple regional peer academic institutions in the primary market area have invested in new and higher-capacity venues, challenging USM's ability to be the preferred host of choice among academic institutions. Third, it faces maintenance cost risk. At its current age, the Mannoni Performing Arts Center faces the prospect of rising maintenance expense burden and the accumulation of deferred maintenance liability. This growing burden threatens to reduce the ability of the Mannoni Center to invest in other aspects of its operations and strategy, which could make it less competitive over the long-term.

The findings also reveal opportunities for USM to improve its market position. First, upgrading its facilities, either through intensive renovation and expansion or through a complete new-build project, would enable USM to directly address capacity and capability modernization challenges. Upgraded facilities would also enable it to embark on a new event programming strategy to expand its customer base. By expanding programming to appeal to new performing arts customer segments, such as by adding more popular entertainment acts, it could attract larger audiences and generate higher revenue.

Another opportunity involves tactical technology enhancements. Upgrading critical technical equipment and systems and integrating new technologies into facility operations could enable USM to neutralize the advantages of peers' newer facilities. Such technologies could also open up new revenue streams and provide justification for rental fee increases.

Conclusion

Performing arts facilities are multi-dimensional capital assets that support higher education institutions in achieving educational, financial, and community development goals. However, they challenge leaders of higher education institutions to think strategically about real estate development. Market feasibility analysis provides institution leaders and project decision-makers with insight into demand and supply conditions in targeted market areas from which they expect to compete for customers. Equipped with this information, HEI leaders can decide how new performing arts facilities, through renovation or new construction, can enable them to take advantage of untapped market expansion opportunities or reduce competitive threats from peer institutions. Market feasibility analysis is only a first step, however, in assessing the viability of proposed new performing arts facility projects. Other forms of feasibility, such as those related to financial, geophysical site, and political conditions must also be studied in order to judge the viability of a particular project proposal. However, market analysis often serves as the step in the feasibility study process, helping institution leaders to decide whether or not to pursue the others.

…

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The *Journal of Performing Arts Leadership in Higher Education* (JPALHE), published once a year, presents a wide range of topics relevant to visionary leadership in the performing arts in higher education. Topics include, but are not limited to, curriculum development, assessment, goal setting, career preparation, governance, friend raising, technology, retention and recruitment. As a peer-reviewed journal, JPALHE presents articles that are supported by facts and cited appropriately, using the latest edition of *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, by Kate L. Turabian. Articles for consideration are submitted electronically to the editor and must be in the 12-point font of Times New Roman, double-spaced and no longer than 12 pages. The author's name must not appear on the attached article. Submissions from all countries are welcome, although the journal is published in English. Authors are responsible for securing all copyright clearance.

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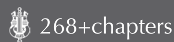

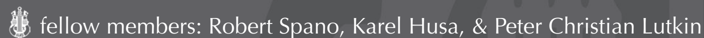

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