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# **“This Rigid Curricular Way”: Evaluating Expectations in Collegiate Music Education**

## **Abstract**

Conversations surrounding curricular reform are abound in music education today. Much of the literature on this topic explores how professors can adapt their teaching practices to the presumed needs of students in the classroom, but student voices are infrequently centered in these discussions.

This thesis examines the study of music in the collegiate setting from the student perspective. Using a survey which I designed and interviews that I conducted, I examine the disconnect between student values and those of the institutions they attend. I then put these student perspectives in conversation with existing literature.

I discovered that student experiences revolve around three main themes: representation, assessment, and burnout. My data suggest that student perceptions of what institutions and faculty value do not align with what student's value. I argue that music departments could address this disconnect in the following ways: increasing representation, reimagining assessment, and managing workload which could enable music institutions to foster healthier relationships with music education.

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“This Rigid Curricular Way”: Evaluating Expectations in Collegiate Music Education

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Sophie Ailsa Lewis

June 2022

Advisor: Dr Aleysia Whitmore

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### Abstract

Conversations surrounding curricular reform are abound in music education today. Much of the literature on this topic explores how professors can adapt their teaching practices to the presumed needs of students in the classroom, but student voices are infrequently centered in these discussions.

This thesis examines the study of music in the collegiate setting from the student perspective. Using a survey which I designed and interviews that I conducted, I examine the disconnect between student values and those of the institutions they attend. I then put these student perspectives in conversation with existing literature.

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## “This Rigid Curricular Way”: Evaluating Expectations in Collegiate Music Education

There is a disconnect in American music departments. The experience that students expect when they enroll in a music program is not the one they end up having. Students are now coming up against value structures and questioning them in their learning environments. Institutions have a narrow understanding of what a successful student could look like in terms of their learning and career objectives – an understanding that does not reflect students’ lived experiences and does not meet their expectations of a productive learning environment.

Dianne, an interviewee, exemplified this disconnect when they explained their definition of success:

To me, that [work/life balance] is what makes someone a successful musician because I don't care how perfectly in tune you are if what you do every day as you sit in the practice room and you play scales for six hours, you have no friends. You forget to eat. You have bad mental health. If you miss a note in concert, you're suddenly like questioning your self-worth and debating why you even exist. To me, that is not successful. That is not sustainable. And I want to be a musician for a long time. I want to sing and share my love of music for as long as I can. And so to be successful, I must have that.

This study was designed to evaluate my hypothesis that the musicological and historic content that students are exposed to does not reflect their lived experiences. I posited that

this oversight was causing a demoralizing impact. What my data suggest instead is that the system and structure of the current music education system – perhaps especially in the USA – is not reflective of the values that students bring to their learning environments. My data outline that student expectations do not align with what they perceive to be the institutional expectations of their studies to be. Further discussion of these topics will outline how these issues intersect with the literature and what this might mean for educators and students going forward.

Results of this research fell broadly into three categories:

- Representation of student identities in curriculum content and classroom spaces is valuable to students.
- Assessment impacts students' perceptions of academic success.
- Students are overworked and their learning is disrupted by burnout.

My data illuminate the often-conflicting value structures that inhabit music education spaces – students do not perceive the institutional and faculty values as aligning with their personal values. There is a disconnect in the experience that students expect and the one that music departments are providing. While institutions and faculty express certain values about Western classical music and the people who can have access to it through curricula, hiring, recruitment, assessment, and assignments, students do not see themselves or their values represented. Students are most interested in: having role

models with whom they can identify, having their identities reflected in curricula, having a healthy work life balance, and sharing their learning in a way that best reflects them.

Based on the data collected in this study, I argue that institutions could address these problems in three ways:

- Increasing representation
- Reimagining assessment
- Managing workload

This study centers the voices of students who have experienced this disconnect firsthand. I posit how music education could mitigate the disconnect between what these students hope to experience and what they experience through individualized curricula, creative assessment, and managing workload. While music education does address the need for individualized curricula, it often leaves student voices out of the conversation. There is also little literature on student workload in music education specifically – a field in which students and teachers negotiate unique pedagogical contexts and challenges. I believe that this study has filled this gap by centering the voices of current students and elevating the experiences of those who are struggling to sustain a relationship with musical study.

## Literature Review

Education scholars show how catering curricula to the identities and experiences of the students educators work could boost self-esteem, foster communal cultural knowledge, and empower students to speak about issues that affect their communities. Geneva Gay and Cindy Cruz in particular outline how individualized curricula and specifically “culturally responsive teaching” engages students in topics that are relevant to their communities, where the lived experiences of students are integrated into the curriculum and students are encouraged to bring their cultural knowledges into the classroom and the work they produce.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Maria Carmen del Salazar builds on Paolo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” to foster her concept of “Humanizing Pedagogy” where the insider cultural knowledge of students is valued in the classroom in a bid to counteract forced assimilation of students into Western education systems.<sup>2</sup> Education scholar Eliot Eisner argues for the importance of embracing different learning styles in the classroom and what encouraging creative expressions of learning can mean

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<sup>1</sup> Cindy Cruz, “LGBTQ Youth of Color Video Making as Radical Curriculum: A Brother Mourning His Brother and a Theory in the Flesh.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43 (4), 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12022>.; Geneva Gay. “Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43 (1), 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>.

<sup>2</sup> María del Carmen Salazar, “A Humanizing Pedagogy: Reinventing the Principles and Practice of Education as a Journey Toward Liberation”, *Review of Research in Education* 37, no. 1 (March 2013): 125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12464032>

for different cognitive processes.<sup>3</sup> He asserts that creative expressions of learning can enable students to express learning and understanding in ways that are natural to them. This could, he argues, help students to engage with subjects which students have felt they are not good at. In the growing conversation surrounding grading, Susan Blum argues for “ungrading” and outlines alternatives for educators to build a more sustainable relationship with assessment and feedback.<sup>4</sup>

Music education scholars have built on this research to show how this individualized approach could be implemented in music specific classrooms. The American Musicological Society has provided a substantial platform for discussing changes to music history curricula and methods to communicate content to students effectively.<sup>5</sup> Music education scholar Karin Hendricks has outlined ways to adapt music teaching approaches to focus less on competition in music classrooms and to focus more on individual musical development.<sup>6</sup> Darrin Thornton, a musician and educator, outlines the

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<sup>3</sup> Elliot W. Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994)

<sup>4</sup> Blum, Susan D, and Alfie Kohn. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> “Spring 2022 Pedagogy Fridays,” *Teaching Music History* (blog), January 19, 2022, <https://www.teachingmusichistory.com/events/s22-pedagogy-fridays/>.

<sup>6</sup> Karin Hendricks. *Compassionate Music Teaching: A Framework for Motivation and Engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018),

systems that keep students from minoritized communities from pursuing careers in music long term and suggests methods for improvement.<sup>7</sup>

These scholars focus on teacher's perspectives and actions to address student needs. I build on this work by adding student voices to the conversation. By placing student voices in dialogue with these ideas, I offer a more student-centered perspective on the issue of education reform and suggest how institutions of higher learning, specifically music schools and departments, can address the unique problems that music students face.

### Methodology

I used mixed methods approach to data collection. I conducted seven semi-structured interviews and a survey with current music students and recent graduates in the USA and the UK. I partnered with Dr Norma Hafenstein of the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver to design and implement the survey. I recruited by sending an email link to the survey to administrators at the Lamont School of Music, as well as thirteen collegiate music departments across the USA and five professional contacts in the UK. This survey link was then emailed to students by administrators and participants took part in the study voluntarily.

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<sup>7</sup> Darrin Thornton, "Why Just Me (Or Few Others) In Music Education: An Autoethnographic Point of Departure" in *Marginalized Voice in Music Education*, ed. Brent C. Talbot (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018),

Conducting this research during a global pandemic restricted my work as I was unable to travel to connect with other music institutions. Consequently, most participants in this study identified as white and were sourced from private institutions across America. I recognize that this participant pool will have a vastly dissimilar experience with music education than those from marginalized communities. As conditions improve over time, I hope that collaborating with marginalized communities directly would become possible. The fact that this participant pool identified such strong reactions to the study of music makes the future study of sustainability in music education even more urgent. If students for whom the education system was designed are still struggling to maintain sustainable relationships with the study of music, what can be expected for those for whom the system naturally excludes?

Future research could elevate those voices by taking the research to them in their own spaces rather than expecting participants to come to the researcher. I acknowledge that many of the people with whom this research should have been conducted, did not have the time to dedicate to this survey and in future research I would hope to make myself more present in the field.

I enter this discussion as someone who is both a student and educator in a private liberal arts institution. As a student, I have been subject to extreme workload and assessment methods that do not enable me to be successful. As an educator, I have been involved in upholding these systems. As someone who has completed an undergraduate degree in music and is now completing a masters in musicology, I consider myself to be

both an insider and outsider to the field.<sup>8</sup> I have personally experienced a performance undergraduate degree experience. However, in the school where I conducted my research, I am not engaged in performance and as such am an outsider to this specific experience. Consequently, I have had limited engagement with professors of performance and their voices are not as present in this study. I also come from a working-class background which gives me a unique understanding of the barriers to entry faced by other working-class students. I have a personal stake in this research as I have also struggled to see myself reflected in the values of the institutions I have attended.

### Survey Design

The survey featured questions that are graded on a 4-point scale. I selected a ‘to what extent do you agree’ scale of (see Appendix A):

- Completely Agree
- Generally Agree
- Generally Disagree
- Completely Disagree

As these questions work best as a series of statements to which I ask people’s agreement, this four-point scale prompted respondents to take a stance on the questions

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<sup>8</sup> Stock, Jonathan P., and Chou Chiener. “Fieldwork at Home: European and Asian Perspectives.” In *Shadows in the Field*, edited by Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 108-124



asked. This wording of the scale creates a gradient where the differences between choices is clear and easy to understand. Because I asked respondents about their own firsthand experiences, specific content knowledge is not a concern in survey design. While ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ statements often cause issues such as gradient confusion – where the participant is unsure of the difference between response options - this scale proved effective in this survey.<sup>9</sup>

### Interview Methodology

Interview candidates were selected based on their voluntary request to be included in a follow-up interview. Questions for the interviews were pulled from the responses to the survey where I asked participants to clarify and expand on the answers they gave. Additional questions were written to allow participants to discuss topics related to their survey response but that were not included in the original data collection. Interviews were semi structured and lasted an hour. Interviews were recorded for transcription purposes and all participants signed a consent form in agreement to our conversations being recorded and saved. Interviews were conducted both in person and through zoom throughout the month of March 2022. Interview transcripts have been coded for participant privacy.

Interview questions were personalized based on the respondent’s participation in the survey. Questions that were asked to all participants included: How do you define

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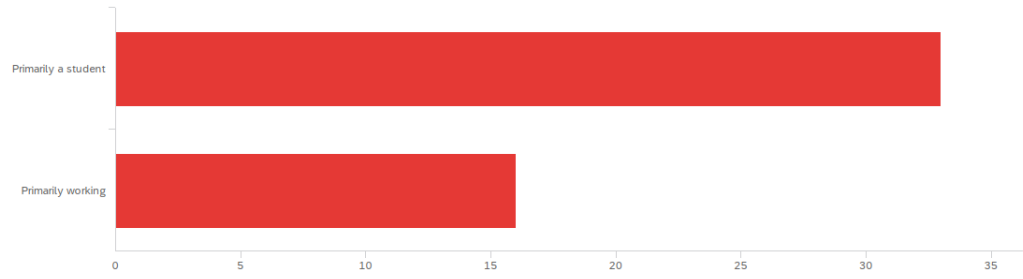
<sup>9</sup> Fowler, Jr, Floyd J. *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 38. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1995), 163.

success? Do you think there is value in assessment in music? What does your relationship with music look like going forward? What could your education have done to better support you in your pursuit of success? On average ten questions were asked to each participant with follow-up questions added where appropriate. These four questions were common to all interviews with additional questions being specific to the participants responses to the survey.

### Survey Demographics

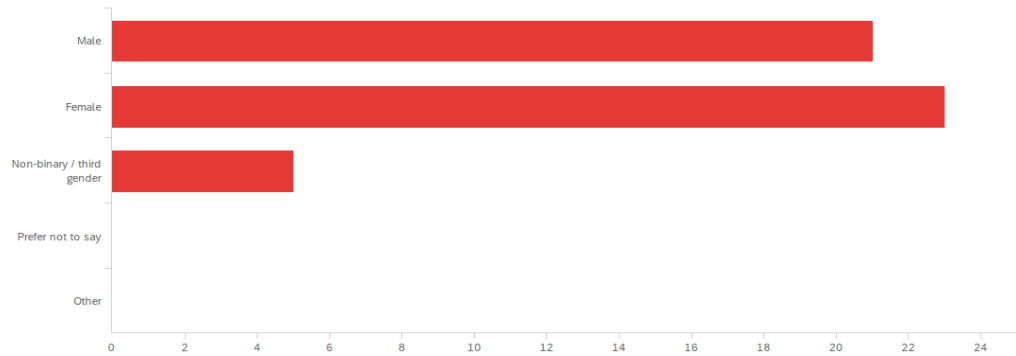
The primary recruitment for the survey happened within the Lamont School of Music of the University of Denver. I sent the survey to thirteen collegiate music departments around the U.S. and to five professional contacts in the UK but, thanks to increased access to contact information, the primary recruitment was conducted at my own institution. There were seventy-two collected responses to the survey, however, only forty-nine responses were completed past the demographic questions of the survey. As such, uncompleted responses were deleted from the collected data. Remaining data were collated and analyzed. All responses have been anonymized for participant safety and IP addresses were not collected to further protect participant privacy.

Q1 - I am currently:



**FIGURE 1 - OCCUPATION DESIGNATION**

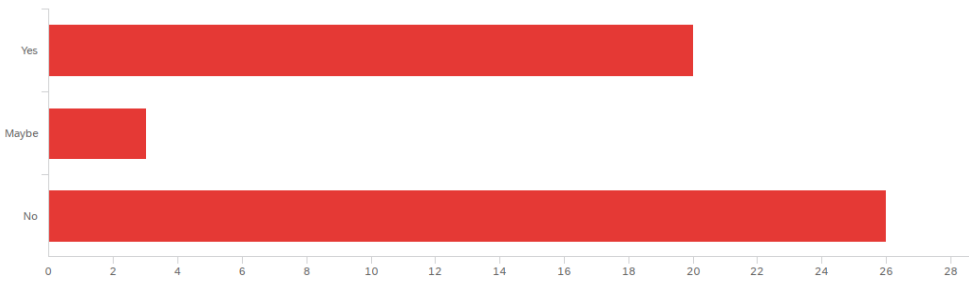
Q2 - My gender is:



**FIGURE 2 - GENDER DESIGNATION**

This study was aimed at the experiences of university students which was reflected in the fact that 67.35% of respondents were ‘primarily students’ (figure 1). The gender of respondents was balanced between the gender binary with 42.86% respondents being male, 46.94% being female and 10.20% representing non-binary or third gender participants (figure 2). The respondents were asked if they identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community to which 40.82% responded yes, 6.12% said maybe and 53.06% saying no (figure 3). The racial identity of respondents was primarily white with only four of the forty-nine respondents identifying as anything other than white (figure 4).

Q3 - I identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community



**FIGURE 3 – LGBTQ+ DESIGNATION**

Over half of the respondents (53.06%) identified as having studied music at the undergraduate level, a further 28.57% identified as pursuing graduate studies in music and 14.29% having studied at the



FIGURE 4 - RACIAL DESIGNATION

doctoral level. A small percentage of respondents (4.08%) identified high school as their highest qualification, but further information showed they are currently studying at the undergraduate level. Finally, the geographic location of where students completed their studies was primarily split between the UK and the USA, but most respondents studied in the USA. This information is helpful to know as it suggests that parallels could be drawn between the UK and the USA education systems.

## Results

Through combining the survey data and the interview transcripts, themes began to develop. For example, the American participants identified an exhausting experience with workload. All participants communicated a conflicting relationship with assessment. There was also a universal desire for more representation in classroom and curricula.

These themes center around value and data suggest that how students assign value within these themes does not align with how they perceive institutions to be assigning value. The results suggest a lack of understanding of institutional values and a disconnect between the values that students bring into learning environments and the values that institutions hold.

What does it all mean? An Evaluation of the Results

These results outline a tripartite model as seen in figure 5. The three themes identified in the survey are inextricably linked and have a compounding effect on one another. The

three themes center around the understanding of value, how it is defined by students, faculty, and institutions. Starting with the need for representation in the classroom and curriculum.

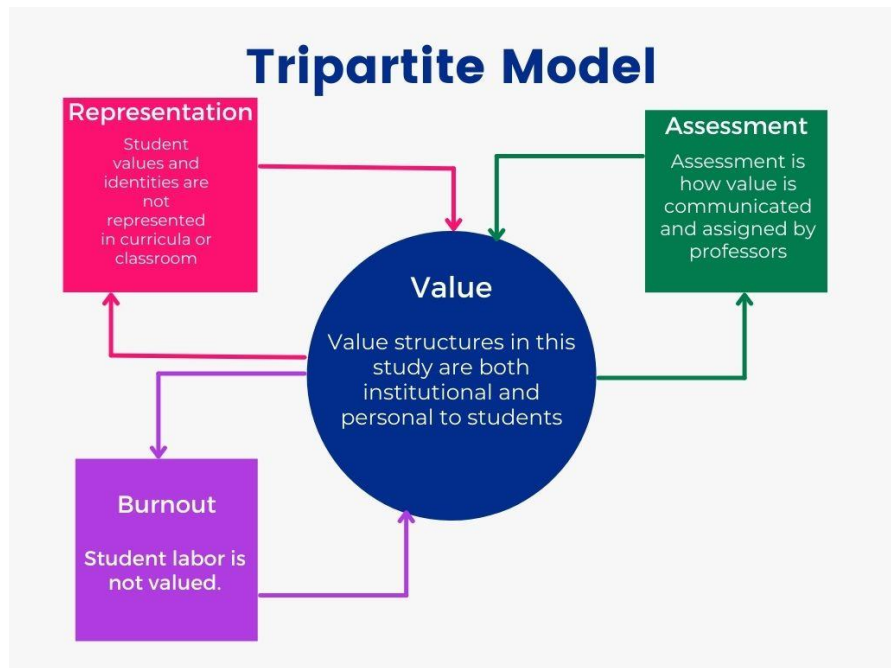


FIGURE 5 – TRIPARTITE MODEL

Students are not seeing their own identities and ideas being valued in their curriculum

and classroom and as such do not feel valued in these spaces. Institutional value structures communicate to students the content they value by outlining curriculum that is required for graduation. They also decide who will teach in these spaces thus further communicating the kind of people the institution values. These institutional values do not align with student values as they identified taking classes that do not feel relevant to their intended careers. This is then compounded by the fact that traditional assessment methods explicitly assign value to the work that students produce. This is also the primary method of communicating value between faculty and students and often is communicated in the form of numerical grades over dialogic feedback. Having their work and labor reduced to a grade often indicates a disconnect between what students' value and what music faculty value. The final element of the model is burnout. Student labor is often overextended, and the reality of student workload is underestimated. Students are not being financially compensated for labor that they are doing and as such, they do not feel that their labor is valued. Students report being overworked, and they do not see that work being valued by institutions or faculty. This can often be demoralizing and encourages students to leave the study of music. Students are mis-attributing discontent to academic classes when in fact, the data suggest that they are not seeing their values represented in the mandatory curriculum. A key contributor to the issue of burnout is the institutional value placed on ensemble performance where the act of performing is highly regarded but the institutional credit given to these classes does not reflect the time and labor students commit to the activity. Especially for first-generation, working class, and



students from minoritized communities, a lack of monetary value on their labor can mean that remaining in education is not financially possible. As such, the current model filters out the diverse perspectives and value systems that students desire in their classrooms bringing the model back to the first theme of desire for representation. In its current state, this model is causing a disconnect between what students want to experience and what they experience. This causes students to feel de-motivated and unsuccessful. With adjustments to how each theme is addressed, a system that helps students to thrive and remain engaged with learning music beyond the college level could be formed.

Theme 1 – Representation

Q13 - d) Curriculum Content and Success

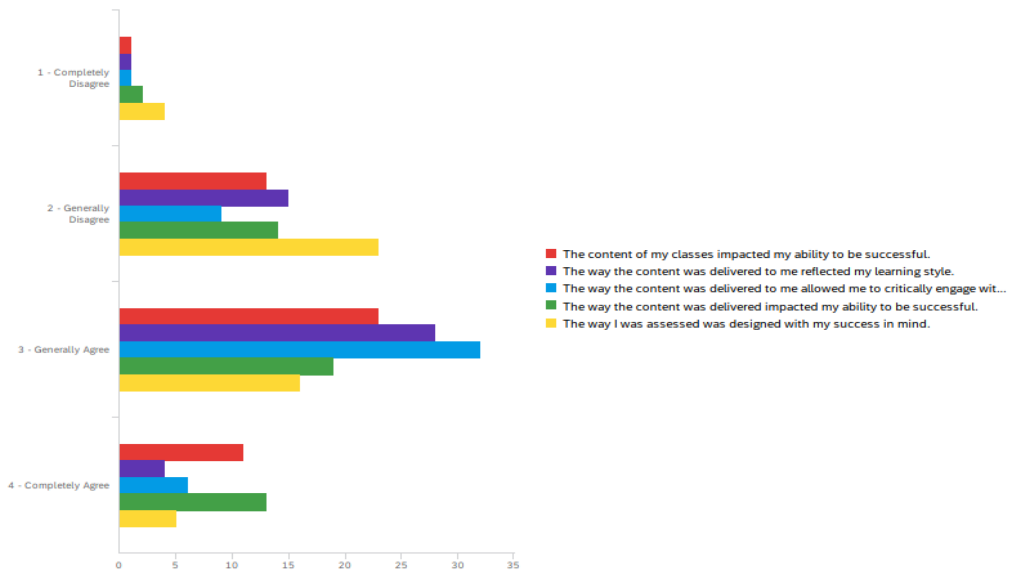


FIGURE 6 - CURRICULUM CONTENT AND SUCCESS

The data show that around 70% of respondents agreed that the curriculum content they were exposed to impacts their perceptions of a successful career in music (figure 6). Over 70% of respondents indicated that seeing their music cultures and seeing people like them in the curriculum was important to them and 52% saw themselves in the curriculum. Since most respondents identified as white, this number is unsurprising in music schools dominated by Western classical music. When asked to expand on their responses to this question, respondents mentioned feelings of being the only person of color in the space or the conflicting experience of seeing their race reflected but no other important identities. As one survey participant stated, “As a white woman, I tend to see my whiteness reflected in musical curriculum, but not always my gender. In my field of study, I notice that male dominance pervades.” This is compounded by the fact that not only is the typical curriculum dominated by white men, but student and faculty populations are too.<sup>10</sup> This gives students who do not fit into this mold no one to relate to and identify with.

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<sup>10</sup> Overland, Corin. “Gender Composition and Salary of the Music Faculty in NASM Accredited Universities: 2000–2014.” *College Music Symposium*, no. 56 (2016). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26574424>.

#	Field	1 - Completely Disagree	2 - Generally Disagree	3 - Generally Agree	4 - Completely Agree	Total
1	I find it easy to identify role models whom I can relate to in the curriculum.	20.00% 8	30.00% 12	35.00% 14	15.00% 6	40
2	I find it easy to identify role models whom I can relate to in the classroom.	12.50% 5	27.50% 11	42.50% 17	17.50% 7	40
3	I can see examples of people like me achieving similar levels of success to which I aspire.	17.50% 7	25.00% 10	40.00% 16	17.50% 7	40
4	My teachers can help me to connect with people like me in the industry.	10.00% 4	27.50% 11	40.00% 16	22.50% 9	40
5	I have been able to learn from people with similar life experience to me.	7.50% 3	32.50% 13	50.00% 20	10.00% 4	40

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

### FIGURE 7 - ROLE MODELS AND CURRICULUM

My data show that while role models are important to students, this is a more complex topic as respondents all look for different identities in a role model. 60% of students surveyed agreed that they could easily find role models in the classroom (figure 7). Music educator - Darrin Thornton – outlines, in a series of personal anecdotes, the profound impact both having - and not having - a role model had for him.<sup>11</sup> As the only Black man in most educational spaces he occupies, he routinely asks the question, “Why just me?” He explains that for students of color, financial privilege does not counteract generations of racism and identifies lack of representation and role models as a pertinent influence on career success.<sup>12</sup> One recent study has shown that when students from minoritized communities are exposed to role models who students perceive to be similar to them in terms of ethnicity or gender, they are more likely to make choices in academic

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<sup>11</sup> Thornton, “Why Just Me (Or Few Others) In Music Education: An Autoethnographic Point of Departure” in *Marginalized Voice in Music Education*, 54-56.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54.

settings that will enable them to be like that role model.<sup>13</sup> This could mean taking the same classes as an alumni who has had a similar career path to that which the student wants.<sup>14</sup> Combining the findings of this study with the lived experiences of Thornton implies that if students are exposed to role models that exhibit similar identities and career objectives to those they have, then they will be more motivated to pursue academic options that will help them achieve similar career or learning goals. The lack of role model was particularly damaging to Thornton as he was trying to visualize a path forward in music education and could not see anyone like him in the spaces he wanted to occupy, thus inferring that someone like him – a Black man – did not belong in those spaces.

Respondents to the survey made similar observations about the study of music where race, gender, and social class were clear barriers to the study of music. One white male participant in my study explained that while he has a role model in his instrumental instructor, that instructor has a different socio-economic background making him feel as if the financial pressures that he faced as a student were not understood. He told me,

Speaking from a financial standpoint, it doesn't seem like he's [the professor] ever super hurt for money, and sometimes comments he makes about what kinds of mallets and sticks I do or don't have are really hard to deal with because I just can't afford that, I have to spend my money on bills and staying alive, not 100 dollar pairs

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<sup>13</sup> Allen, Evelyn C. & Brian Collisson. "Do aspirational role models inspire or backfire? Perceived similarity mediates the effect of role models on minority students' college choices," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 30:2, 2020. 221-238, DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2020.1723780.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

of timpani mallets. That is definitely one of my biggest struggles, which along with other things has made me reevaluate what I want out of music school and how I can better achieve that.

His experience studying music as a working-class student was not being valued in that space, a clear example of the lack of representation in the tripartite model. Despite seeing his race and gender in his learning environment frequently, this student found the lack of understanding of his financial circumstances to be demoralizing. Thus, the identity that he valued was not reflected by the institution or faculty member he was working with. Psychologist - Penelope Lockwood - outlines in her study of role-models and gender that female participants were more dependent on having a role model of the same gender to map out a career path than males.<sup>15</sup> Lockwood explains that for female participants, it was easier to picture a successful career in traditionally male dominated spaces when they had a female role model to map their progression on.<sup>16</sup> A female music student in my survey illustrated this phenomenon stating:

I don't know what a successful jazz singer looks like!! I cannot imagine what it's like for female jazz instrumentalists at this school. Actually, they've told me—it is deeply challenging for them. The lack of role models here is one of my biggest issues. I

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<sup>15</sup> Penelope Lockwood, “‘Someone Like Me Can Be Successful’: Do College Students Need Same-Gender Role Models?” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (1) 2006: 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00260.x>.

<sup>16</sup> Lockwood, “‘Someone Like Me Can Be Successful’: Do College Students Need Same-Gender Role Models?”

genuinely believe that I have been held back from big opportunities because there is such a lack of representation.

I also found similar phenomena amongst students who did not identify as white.

Francis, a survey respondent who identifies as a mixed-race woman explained:

To be honest, I never found a role model with whom I identified in classical music generally, and especially one who played my instrument. There was no one who resembled me in my cultural background or upbringing or reflected the musical values I held. I didn't see myself succeeding professionally in the particular musical field I was studying, I was not supported in any way by my performance professors. So I left.

In a follow-up interview, Francis spoke of her experiences as a mixed-race student attending a predominantly white institution. While the lack of a role model was clear from her survey response, Francis elaborated further on the microaggressions she experienced when engaging with curriculum content at her institution. She mentioned that in her first year of study she had found a piece written by a composer who was also mixed-race, a collection of Spirituals that had been arranged for piano. Francis spoke of finally being able to bring music from her culture into the learning environment. This music being accessible to her instrument and elevated in the educational space was important to her. However, she was made to feel like this piece was a "a concession," as though this were the "easy piece" that she was playing. While Francis did acknowledge that she has seen attitudes towards this musical exploration shift - she has been exposed

to more Black and mixed-race composers through her education - her exploration of music of her culture has still felt like “a side project” in her performance studies. This devaluation of Francis’ music culture alongside other isolating experiences where her creativity was stifled pushed Francis to leave the institution she was attending and transfer to another institution.

Similarly, interviewee Carly – a Black woman – explained that in school, “growing up, anything basically outside of the Western canon was considered other music or not real music.” As an educator and student, Carly argued that for many students, a college degree no longer feels relevant thanks to platforms like TikTok and SoundCloud where their music and experiences will be valued more highly – spaces where they can feel as performers. Carly argued:

We have to stop saying that music that people experience in their homes, in their communities, like their first interactions with music, we have to stop saying that that's not real music or that those experiences are not valid because it's those experiences that actually draw people into music. How can we tell people that those experiences that made you fall in love with music are not valid? That does not make sense.

Here, Carly points to Salazar’s ideas of Humanizing Pedagogy - an educational philosophy that advocates for the lived experiences of students as they come into classrooms, rather than expecting all students to engage with material from the same

perspective.<sup>17</sup> By centering the realities of students and their unique cultural knowledge, educators can begin to mitigate the harm of assimilation that students often experience in a highly standardized learning environment.<sup>18</sup> Especially in educational spaces, assimilation can make students feel as though their unique cultural knowledge is not welcome in the space. It can encourage the regression of language skills as well as damaging the self-esteem of students.<sup>19</sup> In her discussion of Freire's concept, Salazar outlines multiple instances of forced assimilation experienced by students of color in Western classrooms.<sup>20</sup> She goes as far as to say that she herself "came to associate whiteness with success and brownness with failure."<sup>21</sup> Her argument stipulates that by respecting and embracing cultural experiences in the classroom and implementing an individualized curriculum specific to the students, education will be less harmful to these students and affirm their lived experiences.<sup>22</sup> Other education scholars such as Cruz and Gay have also shown the benefits of individualized curricula that reflect the lived

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<sup>17</sup> María del Carmen Salazar, "A Humanizing Pedagogy: Reinventing the Principles and Practice of Education as a Journey Toward Liberation", *Review of Research in Education* 37, no. 1 (March 2013): 125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12464032>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>20</sup> Salazar, 123.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.



experiences of students and the social change this can have.<sup>23</sup> Music education is poised to implement this individualized curriculum that values cultural experiences.

Individualization may sound like a daunting prospect for faculty. However, professors have been experimenting with different approaches. Dr Gillian Gower - a visiting teaching assistant professor of musicology at the University of Denver – shifts both her curriculum content and her examination methods to be more reflective of student populations. In her undergraduate Classical period musicology class, she introduces examples of woman composers and performers, composers from Central and South America, and composers with disabilities. Students told me that they were exposed to lots of topics they had never thought about before which deepened their understanding of both music and the time period they were studying which they felt was valuable. I have also heard of professors who when teaching a freshman seminar have spent the first class period designing the syllabus with the students.<sup>24</sup> The professor shared a list of potential articles with students and as a class they decided what topics they wished to study. While perhaps this is not individualized to the level of the individual student, this curriculum would be specific to this cohort of students and thus, individualized to suit their learning style and interests. In music studio classes and ensembles, individualization could look like asking a student to compile a list of music that interests them and reflects the goals

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<sup>23</sup> Cindy Cruz, “LGBTQ Youth of Color Video Making as Radical Curriculum: A Brother Mourning His Brother and a Theory in the Flesh.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43 (4), 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12022>; Geneva Gay. “Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43 (1), 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>.

<sup>24</sup> This information was shared in an interview with Dr Petra Meyer-Frazier on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2022.

that they want to achieve musically. This could then be compared to the repertoire that the teacher has in mind and through open discussion of the goals and musical values the faculty member has for that student, a middle ground that includes both the music of the student and the music of the professor could be reached. Similar approaches could be used in ensemble spaces too where students could be polled to see what music they would like to have included on concert programs. Incorporating Humanizing Pedagogy into the music classroom does not mean changing an entire undergraduate sequence of classes, merely being open to music that students bring with them and supporting them in their discovery and pursuit of more music that reflects them and thus teach material that is meaningful to their aspirations and experiences. This might help address the disconnect between student expectation and experience.

Recruitment and retention could also help address the mentorship and course content issues that students point to. By diversifying student and faculty populations, students may more easily be able to identify the role models that they have identified as important in this study. This could also show students that institutions they are a part of value people like them in this space.

Interviewee Amy – a student - noted that in the field of music specifically, having a broader understanding of qualifications could help draw more diverse faculty candidates. They argue, “the structure of music institutions is deeply flawed, and the people who are given opportunities to teach have to have master’s degrees and have to have PhD’s. Who can afford to get a master's degree or a PhD?” While it is not always the case that faculty

positions are given only to those with master's degrees and PhD's, Amy raise's a key point here about the accessibility of post-baccalaureate education. Often, requirements for employment communicate specific institutional values which filter out diverse applicants.<sup>25</sup> This results in less faculty diversity which means that students do not see themselves in their learning environments. This can mean that students do not want to come into these institutions or do not want to stay reducing student diversity. This disconnect between institutional values and student values is pervasive and contributes to the theme of representation seen in figure 5. To diversify student populations, a concerted effort needs to be made to provide living stipends for students from under-represented communities, including working-class and first-generation students. This would indicate that institutions value the experiences of these communities by making the study of music affordable.

Fostering this dialogic process, however, can be challenging. Francis was unable to engage in dialogue with her professors about her concerns about how her music culture was sidelined. When they went to the head of their department to discuss this issue, they were reprimanded for not talking with their private instructor directly. Reporting a complaint was a difficult task for Francis – a task made more difficult by their professors' insistence on adhering to hierarchies. Francis, on the other hand, was reluctant to confront their private instructor because she had to maintain a close working relationship with them and felt as though her report would sour that relationship if the complaint was made

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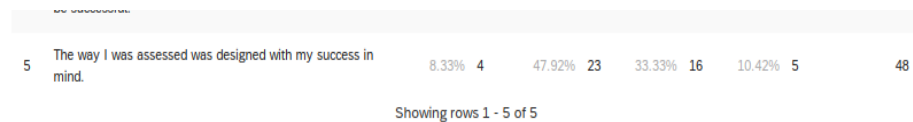
<sup>25</sup> Damani K. White-Lewis. "The Facade of Fit in Faculty Search Processes." *The Journal of Higher Education* 91, no. 6 (2020): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1775058>

face to face. Managing this intense power dynamic is a uniquely difficult experience to the study of music and being criticized for speaking to someone who was not in direct control of their learning felt like the safer option to Francis. Peers have since guilted Francis for choosing this option as it looked bad for their professor which further exemplifies the isolation that students who are struggling to find their place in the study of music face. Elucidating these power dynamics and providing students and faculty with various resources to engage in more equitable collaborative dialogue could help to expose the different value structures that exist in learning spaces which could prevent harm from occurring due to incorrect perceptions of what those values are.<sup>26</sup>

## Theme 2 – Assessment and Success

Survey respondents were not able to see a correspondence between assessments and their own goals. When asked to respond to “The way I was assessed was designed with my success in mind.”

47.92% of respondents



**FIGURE 8 - ASSESSMENT AND SUCCESS**

said they generally disagreed and 8.33% said they completely disagreed – a total of 56.25% (figure 8). When asked to expand on this topic, respondents noted “there weren’t

<sup>26</sup> Howe, Christine, Sara Hennessy, Neil Mercer, Maria Vrikki & Lisa Wheatley. “Teacher–Student Dialogue During Classroom Teaching: Does It Really Impact on Student Outcomes?” *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28:4-5, 2019. 462-512. DOI: 10.1080/10508406.2019.1573730

a lot of opportunities to showcase what I know and what I have learned,” “I feel my education was overly concerned about grades and rapid project completion and less concerned about what I would do with what I have learned,” and “I just hate when you can’t experiment and get things technically wrong.” On the infrequent occasions that students shared positive experiences of a particular assessment method, they reported that the experience was positive because a particular professor provided them with an alternative way to share their learning. More frequently, students said they felt their creativity has been “stifled” by assessment methods. Chasing letter grades and trying to fit into the academic definition of success has left students feeling “demoralized,” “distracted,” and “exhausted,” a clear example of the disconnect between institutional understandings of student learning and students’ lived experience – the second theme in figure 5.

In follow-up interviews, participants routinely identified assessment as something that felt detrimental to their learning experiences but still found value in it. Georgia – a music teacher and student - told me that in assessment, “there has to be value because we’ve made the value, but I don’t think that there is value outside of proving that there’s value.” They allude here to the fact that assessment is a central part of how institutions communicate and assign value. Georgia felt assessment did nothing other than say a student could move on to the next exam in the system. Assessment, to her, is only valuable in these settings because institutions have made them the key component of ranking students. Students often felt as if assessments were testing students’ ability to

regurgitate content that they have been exposed to throughout the learning experience. However, educators are keen to use assessment as a tool to encourage critical and creative thinking.

This disconnect may emerge from professors' feelings that, especially in the academic music classroom, they must perform a certain degree of rigor in their instruction.<sup>27</sup> Students have come to expect that exams and written papers are the standard and most rigorous way to be assessed at the university level. Indeed, among student populations, rigor is conflated with difficulty. One study identified that "fast pacing, high workload, unclear relevance to their lives and careers, and low faculty support" were key to students' definitions of rigor at the beginning of their learning.<sup>28</sup> This same study identified among upperclassmen that "cognitive complexity" became a key competent to their definition of rigor.<sup>29</sup> Dr Gower, who struggles with the perception of rigor from a faculty perspective, asks what about asking a student to discuss concepts about their learning is less rigorous? What about allowing students to express their learning creatively is less rigorous? Gower – along with other music education scholars – points out that many students may struggle with traditional assessment methods,

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<sup>27</sup> With thanks to Dr Gillian Gower for discussing this concept with me at length in office hours.

<sup>28</sup> Wyse, Sara A, and Paula A G Soneral. "Is This Class Hard? Defining and Analyzing Academic Rigor from a Learner's Perspective." *CBE life sciences education* 17, no. 4 (2018). DOI: DOI:10.1187/cbe.17-12-0278

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

especially those with learning exceptionalities.<sup>30</sup> Further, education scholar Eliot Eisner argues that students would benefit from being able to express their learning creatively regardless of the setting.<sup>31</sup> Eisner states that creative assessment methods engage students with different cognitive processing abilities. He suggests, for example, that students in mathematics could be given the opportunity to express their learning in visual mediums or spoken responses.<sup>32</sup>

The current system does not allow students to feel successful. Multiple participants reported feeling like assessment was merely a steppingstone to the next phase of their education. Brenda identified that instead of being assessed to see how they had progressed, it felt as though taking part in assessment was a check box in the relentless cycle of the undergraduate degree process. This translated to the assessment of performance as she stated, “when all that is left for you to feel about a recital is that you are just checking a box. How can you have... Artistic motivation behind what you're doing?” This was not a unique perspective. Dianne shared an anecdote about a friend who failed a jury because the professor on the panel did not like the bowing they had chosen for a Bach suite. Students often felt that only certain interpretations of certain repertoire are valuable in academia, turning assessment into a box ticking activity rather

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew Baumer, “A Snapshot of Music History Teaching to Undergraduate Music Majors, 2011-2012: Curricula, Methods, Assessment, and Objectives,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (2015): 23-47, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/165>; Erinn E Kynt, “Rethinking the Music History Research Paper Assignment” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 23-37, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/95>.

<sup>31</sup> Elliot W. Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994) 22-4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-4.

than an opportunity to share what they learned. The assessment of performance makes music education a unique subject when considering reform. Students are routinely asked to create personal, vulnerable, and expressive pieces of art. Yet, even though students identify their creativity as the main way to be a successful musician, students are often reticent to take creative risks because of how they perceive assessment and institutional expectations. Georgia told me about the first time she ever received a B in an assessment. She said, “I just remember feeling like I failed so hard because school had always been so easy and I hadn't been set up to fail in that capacity.” This experience made Georgia less likely to take creative risks because she was so demoralized by the experience of what she perceived to be failing. The institutional emphasis on attaining good grades has contributed to the student perception that anything less than an A should be considered failing and - according to education scholar Susan Blum – can reinforce teacher control in the classroom and can encourage students to avoid difficult classes.<sup>33</sup>

The assessment that students experience often strips creativity from what is an inherently creative subject. With students identifying their creativity as the main way to define success in music education, this is counterproductive. Assessment does offer opportunities for growth however. Students who reported positive experiences with music assessment in this study identified supportive mentors and individual approaches as ways for them to express their creativity. One respondent said,

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<sup>33</sup> Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, 13-14.



I had supportive mentors who gave me guidance in exploring complex topics and learning challenging music, but still gave me the space to make my projects on my own. They showed me that it is OK to make mistakes because success is derived from learning from mistakes.

Giving students the space to make creative choices and mistakes has had a positive impact. Dr Petra Meyer-Frazier has reported a similar experience. As an adjunct professor of musicology at the Lamont School of Music, Dr Frazier introduced a 50/50 Creative Project as a key component of her assessment in undergraduate classes.<sup>34</sup> This creative project enables students to not only chose the topic they wish to research but to then share that research in a creative manner. Frazier noticed that this change in assessment resulted in a change in student engagement and the grades students were achieving because, “if you give students latitude to do the thing that they want to do, then they spend the time and the effort on it.” Similar approaches in the study of music performance could include students creating a music video with their recital music.

Dr Frazier’s approach to assessment shows that frameworks already exist for professors to implement creative types of assessment. Students have identified that they feel comfortable being creative when the assessment is particular to them and as such individualized assessment may be a way to address the disconnect between institutional values and student values. Individualized approaches could be as simple as allowing a

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<sup>34</sup> A 50/50 Creative Project is an assignment in Dr Frazier’s undergraduate musicology classes. Students are given the option to complete a creative expression of the content learned – e.g., to compose a piece of music, to create a comic book, to draw a picture. This creative piece is accompanied by a short 3-5-page written explanation of the creative piece. The written portion explains the motivation behind the project, as well as justifying how the work fits into the content of the course.

student to pick which assessment method best serves their learning style. Assessment can still be rigorous while being accessible to all students who enter the learning environment. Indeed, Mark Sorensen in his chapter of *Teaching Truly*, outlines that while students may not traditionally succeed in state examination at the STAR Navajo School in Arizona – they leave engaged with their community.<sup>35</sup> They have been involved in environmental projects, have close interpersonal relationships with fellow students and teachers, and have gone on to receive prestigious scholarship and awards in collegiate study.<sup>36</sup> This school has shown that standardized testing is not the only means of showing success and indeed, it shows the clear benefits of placing value on students’ creative development. While traditional assessment methods certainly do work for some populations of students, introducing greater creative freedom in assessment that is tailored to the individual students’ needs could prove especially useful to students who are neuro-diverse and excel in other communication methods such as visual, musical, or oral.<sup>37</sup>

One possible approach could be to phase out numerical grading systems. In their interview, Brenda indicated that a “universal pass/no pass” assessment method that facilitated more individualized and specific feedback and next steps would be preferable to the current system. The temporary accommodations adopted by many universities

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Sorensen. “The STAR Navajo School Model.” In *Teaching Truly: A Curriculum to Indigenize Mainstream Education by Four Arrows*, 53-4. New York: Peter Lang Press, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Sorensen, 53-4.

<sup>37</sup> Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, 31-4.

during the pandemic have provided students with an opportunity to see how assessment could function. Brenda explained that she and other students felt that GPA was prohibitive and said,

You don't give the audition panel your report card. Once you're out of the education stage, it is purely based on yourself and your talent and not your grade point average. So why wouldn't a music education reflect that same sort of thing? It's about the individual. Rather than, again, the grade point average.

She felt that instead of striving for a numerical grade, detailed feedback about what has changed about her work between assignments would help her to identify weak areas for improvement and provide her with tangible examples of success that would help to motivate her. Already, concepts such as “un-grading” and “the un-essay” are proving to be successful tools in university instruction.<sup>38</sup> Institutions such as Harvard Medical School are already implementing a “pass/fail” grading system in their students’ principal clinical years to enable students to focus on becoming leaders and focus less on class standing which removes the pressure to attain exemplary letter grades and allows students to focus on engaging with the content being learned.<sup>39</sup> While adopting this approach would require an industry wide shift, data suggest it might help foster more effective

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<sup>38</sup> As opposed to the traditional 10-page paper, the “un-essay” is a creative research project that allows students to present an argument in an alternative format. Cate Denial, “The Unessay,” *Cate Denial* (blog), April 26, 2019. <https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/the-unessay/>

<sup>39</sup> Preston, Carrie, Sarah Madsen Hardy, Davida Pines & Deborah Breen. “POV: It’s Time to Upgrade to Ungrading,” *Boston University*, May 11, 2022. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/pov-upgrade-to-ungrading/>

communication between faculty and students to create more learning focused environments.<sup>40</sup>

To make assessment feel worthwhile, music schools could move away from ranking and competition in assessment. As Karin Hendricks outlines, while competition can be a useful motivator in terms of goal setting, it is also destructive when students feel that their efforts are not recognized in the space.<sup>41</sup> A “compassionate music teacher” instead gives voice and agency to the student about what music they wish to learn, who should play solos in peer learning environments, or removes competition entirely from the learning environment.<sup>42</sup> Student experience show that competition in learning may not foster creativity and expression in the long run. One survey participant said that their definition of academic success was, “being able to learn and collaborate with other musicians” and this was a common theme among respondents. Collaboration and competition seem antithetical to students in this study. Students confront value structures in educational spaces and are questioning what this means for them. Since assessment is the most direct way for faculty and institutions to communicate the value of student work to students, it may be important to address the conflicting value structures that exist in this theme as part of the tripartite model. Transitioning to a form of assessment that centers feedback could help to provide students with the experience they desire and may

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<sup>40</sup> Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Karin Hendricks. *Compassionate Music Teaching: A Framework for Motivation and Engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 129-132.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

allow faculty to better get to know their students, students' values, and cater to their individual needs more accurately.

### Theme 3 – Burnout

Though I did not ask about burnout in the survey, it came up enough in the results and organically in the corresponding interviews. Workload is a key part of the tripartite model. One survey respondent, when asked how their education had allowed them to express themselves and the content they had learned stated:

In general, I feel that my education has held me back from being able to achieve all I want in school. All of my non-performance classes take up so much time *that I am left exhausted, mentally and physically*. This means that my practice is never as much or as productive as I would like it to be. As much as grades are not important to me, *I do not have it within me to not try my absolute hardest on everything*. This is reflected in me not sleeping and trying to be perfect at everything. This is a major set back [sic] in my ability to function as a performer who is so dependent on [their] body (emphasis my own).

In interviews, students mentioned the popular Internet meme which depicts a triangle where “good grades,” “enough sleep,” and “social life” are in different corners and the viewer is instructed to “choose two” (figure 9). They mentioned how true this meme was to their experience of music school. Participants detailed a typical day of studies which involves hours of classes and rehearsals for ensembles and trying to fit in among that

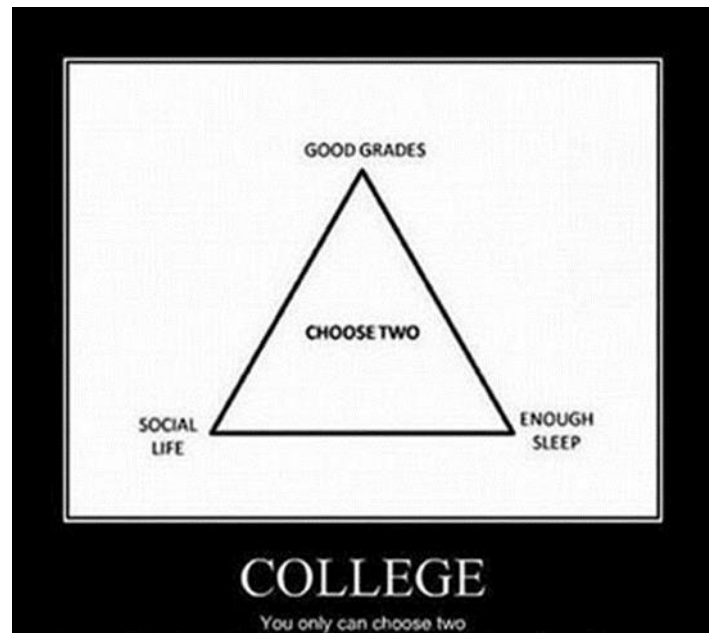
enough time to practice, do homework and often work at least one job. This rehearsal and practice workload has not only taken a toll on the mental health of students, but the physical health. Overworking could cause injuries for students that could preclude them from having a performance career in the future. For some participants, it has been too

much to take. Dianne shared, “I was constantly going and constantly going, and my stress levels were through the roof because I had deadline after deadline after deadline. I was not feeling like I was seeing the progress I wanted in my voice, and so I was getting discouraged.” Dianne ended up

taking a leave of absence to

preserve her mental health. This experience was not unique to Dianne. Brenda, who has taken an extra year to complete her degree and to give her the space and time to rest in their studies, still feels as though five years was not enough. She said in her interview:

Despite how burned out I feel, I've gotten to this point where I feel like I just need to trudge through... because as I'm going through my education in this moment, I find myself asking why? At far too uncomfortable of a frequency. Like, it's so often that I



**FIGURE 9 - POPULAR INTERNET MEME ABOUT BURNOUT**

will just come home from a day of classes and be like, what am I doing here? What am I getting out of this? Why is it worth tens of thousands of dollars?

Students like Brenda and Dianne often enter the education system with a passion for music, and an enthusiasm for the subject they are studying but increasingly are feeling overwhelmed and burnt out by the actual experience of studying. One survey participant added,

I've learned a lot and gained a lot of knowledge and skills but the effects of burnout have definitely been apparent, doing all my required music with no real time to do something I completely want to do is hard.

The pandemic has contributed to the feelings of burnout experienced by students with many having to work to support their families while continuing their studies online.<sup>43</sup> Combining this issue with the fact that assessment often lessens the value of students' learning experiences and that their individual musical passions and cultures can often be devalued, it is not surprising that students feel unable to complete their studies. For the modern undergraduate student, there is a pressure to continue with your studies and achieve regardless of your physical health. Brenda spoke of the difficulty a lot of students face when trying to prioritize physical health as, in many cases, scholarship funding is linked to participation in ensembles. As Brenda points out,

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<sup>43</sup> Krupnick, Matt. "More College Students Are Dropping out during Covid. It Could Get Worse." *The Guardian*, February 10, 2022, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/10/college-students-dropout-covid-pandemic>.

My instrument is something physical that I can't see and something that I can injure and something that can be injured beyond repair. And when I am asked to have four hours a day of singing, singing, singing, singing in this rigid curricular way, and then I'm also expected to practice myself.

One survey participant also added that, "I feel compelled to take on every project, but this ultimately leads to an intense burnout." Consequently, students feel as though taking time out from school or reducing performance commitments to make the workload easier could jeopardize the funding that is paying for an expensive education. While administrators at the Lamont School of Music have confirmed that injury is not a reason for students to lose funding, this perception still exists among students, indicating another disconnect between institutions and students.

This experience is often exacerbated by a disconnect between professors of performance, academic topics, and general administration in music schools and the work they assign. Amy told about her workload as a BA student where music is not her major. She said, "We [candidates for a BA] have more requirements on our plates because we're BA, so they [institutions] assume we have more time. So, like BM's are allowed to choose between language and science. I have to do both." As a result, Amy said "I'm frustrated by the fact that as a BA, I'm held to these equally high standards and ask anyone, and they'll say I'm the busiest person I know. My musicianship has suffered and it's because of these expectations." Amy shows here the disconnect between the workload that institutions believe students can manage and the actual experience they are having.



This is especially pertinent to music majors. Music students are often taking the maximum number of academic credits possible while also taking on zero – or one - credit ensembles that are not reflective of the time spent rehearsing and performing. Thus, they are often forced to prioritize, and this could mean that academic music classes will become the least important part of their studies. This creates a cycle that is, no doubt, frustrating on all sides. There is clear desire from students to have more balance in their workload and to be able to focus on projects that motivate them. The data gathered from these students indicate that the expectations on undergraduate performance should not be that of professional workload or indeed, conservatory workload.

Students across institutions are frustrated about how music degrees in the liberal arts system are structured. They report that the relationship between their different commitments is unsustainable. The data collected suggest that students perceive their institutions as valuing performance over any of their other subjects. This could be because scholarship funding is often contingent upon participation in ensembles – placing literal financial value on their performance. Yet institutions and faculty also value the academic classes that students participate in. Dr Keith Ward, the director of the Lamont School of Music, outlined a successful music student as being “Stylistically nimble, technologically savvy, and entrepreneurial” – all skills which can be developed outside of performance spaces. Students in this study identified their non-performance classes as detrimental to their development as musicians but what I understand them to be identifying is a lack of choice in the non-performance classes they must take and the

disproportionate way their labor is valued for these classes. Amy spoke of the discontent that students feel about taking classes that are required for the major but that serve “no purpose” to the students. She said,

I don't want to take a big band arranging course. I'm very glad I don't have to, but I bet there are a lot of BM's who have to take that big band arranging course who are like, Man, I don't respect this music. I don't want to do that. I don't want to waste my time on that. Let me take an independent study where I get to do more small group arranging.

What she identifies here is a lack of flexibility to take classes that students believe will serve them in their career development which sits juxtaposed to the institutional understanding of what will prepare students for successful careers. As outlined earlier, students often feel the need to say yes to any opportunities presented to them but knowing that ensemble credits often do not reflect the time that is required to prepare and participate in them, non-performance classes can often seem like an addition to the workload that is not worth students' time. As mentioned in all the interviews I conducted, students routinely end up trading rest for more practice time which is labor that often goes unnoticed and unvalued. This is increasingly common in music industries as there is an expectation of hiding labor.<sup>44</sup> I understand from my experience working in the musicology department of the Lamont School of Music that professors are aware of this imbalance as it is reflected in the work students put into the materials of the class being

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<sup>44</sup> Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

taught. Thus, I understand burnout to be inextricably linked to the themes of representation and assessment as shown in figure 5. The students are identifying that what they perceive as valuable to a successful career is not being represented in the curricula they are required to engage in. They are then assessed on these topics in a way that does not allow them to communicate their learning effectively and as such, all the labor that they put into the work feels devalued.

This problem is particularly pertinent for students from marginalized backgrounds who often do not have the financial support behind them to be able to attend college without working. All the participants with whom I spoke in interviews mentioned working at least one part time job while completing their studies. The neoliberal culture that is perpetuated in the American system is very present here and impacts every student trying to become financially independent as they complete their studies. For students who are dis-proportionally affected by the previous two themes discussed – representation and assessment – adding this intense level of burnout is likely to prove not worth their time and labor. Indeed, the pandemic has seen an increased dropout rate in students who are eligible for Pel Grants.<sup>45</sup> This is the clearest example of the disconnect between students and institutions of higher learning. The lifestyle of students today is much different to the experience their professors would have had yet expectations of faculty, according to these students, have not shifted.

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<sup>45</sup> Krupnick, Matt. “More College Students Are Dropping out during Covid. It Could Get Worse.” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2022, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/10/college-students-dropout-covid-pandemic>.

This intense issue of burnout brings the tripartite model right back to the very beginning. If those without the means to focus only on their studies can no longer sustain their studies and feel as though they cannot succeed – in whatever form that takes – in this industry, they will leave. This can lead to less people from minoritized populations moving forward into professions like teaching, high level performance, and even administrative roles like serving on education boards. This can reinforce to the next generation of students that they are not able to see themselves in these spaces and thus impacts their perceptions of success as they embark on their educational journey where the model will, most likely, repeat itself.

Addressing the overarching issue of neoliberal work ethic is far beyond the scope of this project. However, I assert that institutions teaching music should consider the health of students in the system. Wellness and mental health should be prioritized in the core curriculum going forward, especially in schools of music where students depend on their physical and mental health to have careers. More dialogue around what a healthy and safe number of hours to be practicing and participating in ensembles could be a solution to this issue. A cap on rehearsal time instituted could reflect that. Especially since students have outlined a financial pressure to say yes to any opportunity they are presented with in school due to their financial aid being attached to their ensemble performance.

The field of music could learn a lot about how to manage these expectations in schools of music from student athletes. The NCAA has several contingencies that are put in place to keep students safe – most recently, they enabled student athletes the

opportunity to withdraw from competition in 2020 due to COVID-19 without any loss of scholarship.<sup>46</sup> If, like college athletes, students in music are to be recruited to an institution and then financially supported for their performance for the institution for which they have been recruited, also like college athletes, perhaps collegiate music programs should be subject to a governing body like the NCAA. Music departments could benefit from emulating athletics in other ways, too. For example, whereas many top tier athletic programs offer psychological support to their student athletes, music departments typically do not provide such services, despite striking similarities in the mental demands imposed by both sport as well as music. While the NCAA is not a perfect structure, introducing regulation to the music field could help promote student health going forward. This could become a requirement for National Association of Schools of Music accreditation.<sup>47</sup>

One immediate change to the work/life balance of students could be the removal of the undergraduate major emphasis. By this, I mean that undergraduate students would not specialize in performance or composition but instead complete a more rounded musical education. Entering the undergraduate system with a preformed idea that you will be one specific thing often makes it harder to consider other pathways to success. There is often

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<sup>46</sup> “Board Directs Each Division to Safeguard Student-Athlete Well-Being, Scholarships and Eligibility.” August 5, 2020. NCAA.Org. <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2020/8/5/board-directs-each-division-to-safeguard-student-athlete-well-being-scholarships-and-eligibility.aspx>.

<sup>47</sup> “NASM Handbook.” April 8, 2022. *National Association of Schools of Music* (blog). <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/accreditation/standards-guidelines/handbook/>.

a focus on one topic and not all the other subjects than can help to make students rounded musicians going into industry.

Another solution could be to lengthen the standard time to degree. Some participants in the study have suggested making the degree a 5-year program instead of 4 years so that students are not overworked every semester of study. The fifth year of study could be a year to spend on getting the emphasis by putting on an extended recital or capstone project, whatever the student wishes to pursue.

A third possibility could be encouraging students to change degree path. Many institutions offer a BA that students can swap to, however, there is a considerable amount of stigma involved with changing degrees from a BM to a BA as students are considered not good enough at performance or made to feel as though they are not cut out for musical study. One colleague shared with me that as a student who excelled in musicology, he considered switching to the BA to be able to engage in the academic side of music more thoroughly but did not switch because he was fearful of the reaction of his peers and especially his professors. Further, Amy shared that her peers are often surprised when she tells them she is not a BM student, and she feels this changes their perception of her. It is not safe to assume that if students are overworked and overwhelmed by a BM degree that they will feel safe in their institution changing to a BA course of study. Explaining to students the different institutional expectations of a BA degree – such as reduced ensemble time – may help to mitigate that stigma and enable student to pursue a broad range of studies. The potential for growth with a more manageable workload is far

greater than it is currently. However, all three themes seen in the tripartite model should be addressed in conjunction for effective change to occur.

### Areas for Further Study

While this study has identified trends in the contemporary music education field, it was out with the scope of this project to fully address how these trends may be rectified. While I have posited some ideas for the future of music education, further study should address the practicalities and realities of implementing change in music schools. What I believe to be of crucial importance for future study is addressing the issue of burnout and the mental health challenges that are synonymous with this issue. Participants in this study have identified that college no longer feels like the only option to pursue music in our modern technological age. Addressing the health issues that are rife among students could be a part of making the pursuit of a music degree more attainable.

Further, the tripartite model also applies to the hiring of staff in academia. While faculty retention and treatment were not discussed in this study, the topic does play a part in the model detailed. The faculty hiring process can filter out diverse candidates which may further aggravate the model and could perpetuate the lack of representation in the classroom.<sup>48</sup> The normalization of burnout in music programs follows faculty into the

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<sup>48</sup> Damani K. White-Lewis. "The Facade of Fit in Faculty Search Processes." *The Journal of Higher Education* 91, no. 6 (2020): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1775058>.; Christine L. Williams, "The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the 'Female' Professions." *Social Problems* 39, no. 3 (1992): 253–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096961>.; Christine L. Williams, "The Glass Escalator, Revisited." *Gender & Society* 27, no. 5 (2013): 609–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213490232>.

workforce. 73% of professors in the US held adjunct faculty positions in 2016.<sup>49</sup> These positions require extensive labor from faculty without the security of a full-time position, benefits, or access to research funding.<sup>50</sup> Healthier learning environments could be fostered for both educators and students if efforts such as equitable dialogue and workload could be considered for both populations. Many of the suggestions in this thesis would require extra labor from faculty and as such I recognize the need to address the issues facing faculty workload too. Future research could explore how these two communities interact and how better working conditions for both could be achieved.

### Conclusions

“I don’t know, success is particular to you.” - Amy

Across the forty-nine responses collected for this survey and the seven interviews, no two definitions of success were the same. All students approach their education with unique perspectives, experiences, and goals. Thus, the education that they engage with should reflect and value their individuality and support them in their pursuit of success rather than applying a one size fits all approach to study. While this appears a daunting task, taking steps to consider the value structures that individuals bring to their learning environment may move institutions towards a more individualized curricular experience.

Alisha Nypaver asserts that the difference between teaching and pedagogy is that

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<sup>49</sup> “Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed.” 2018. AAUP. October 11, 2018. <https://www.aaup.org/news/data-snapshot-contingent-faculty-us-higher-ed>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



pedagogy centers educator reflection and re-evaluation of the work being conducted.<sup>51</sup> Transitioning to a collaborative and reflective pedagogical method has the potential to initiate change in institutions of higher education, particularly in music.

In this thesis, I have outlined the three main themes affecting students in the contemporary study of music at the college level. By valuing individual lived experiences and identities, administering personalized and creative examination techniques, and by re-evaluating individual students' workload, educators can help realign student values with institutional values. While this study mostly engages with students for whom the current education system was designed to benefit, it still highlights an urgent need to change practices to support the future of the industry. Wellness and health are a key component of a successful music student and these topics are valued highly by students. For institutions of higher education to ignore this crisis going forward is irresponsible and dangerous. As students return to a whole new learning experience due to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, now is the opportune time to consider institutional change to better support students. I hope this thesis acts as a call to action among administrators of music schools everywhere for the sake of a sustainable music industry in the future.

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<sup>51</sup> Alisha Nypaver, "Pedagogy of the Stressed" (Keynote Lecture, The Music Society at Temple, Philadelphia, PA, April 9, 2022).

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# Examining Perceptions of Curriculum Content Impact on Success in Music

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## Start of Block: Electronic Consent

### Electronic Consent Implied Consent for Online Surveys

You are invited to participate in a research study of student perceptions of curriculum content impact on success. The purpose of this study is to examine student perceptions of curriculum content and how it impacts their ability to be successful in different areas of their lives. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have studied music previously or are still studying music currently.

If you decide to participate, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. If you decide to participate, complete the following survey. Your completion of this survey indicates your consent to participate in this research study. The survey is designed to examine student perceptions of success in different areas of their lives, from career to academic, and to consider how curriculum content impacts how students understand success in these areas. It will take about 10 minutes to complete the survey. You will be asked to answer questions about your experience with music curriculum and how it has impacted your ability to be successful in academic, career and broader life settings. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to better understand how curriculum impacts the mental well being of students in music study both now and in the future. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you are mild emotional discomfort due to remembering isolating or negative experiences in your education, but they are not expected to be any greater than anything you encounter in everyday life. Data will be collected using the Internet; no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third party. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationships with the Sophie Lewis or Dr Aleysia Whitmore. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time; you may also skip questions if you don't want to answer them or you may choose not to return the survey. Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact me if you have additional questions at: Sophie Lewis, Lamont School of Music, Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Sophie.lewis@du.edu. Faculty Supervisor: Dr Aleysia Whitmore, Lamont School of Music, Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, aleysia.whitmore@du.edu.

If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at (303) 871-2121, or email at IRBAdmin@du.edu.

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Sophie Lewis, Master's Candidate in Musicology/Ethnomusicology  
Lamont School of Music, Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology  
Dr Aleysia Whitmore, Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology  
Lamont School of Music, Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I

can discontinue participation at any time. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age. [Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form.]

I agree to participate (1)

I decline (2)

End of Block: Electronic Consent

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Start of Block: Part 1 - Demographic Information

Q2 This information will be de-identified for respondent safety. Please select which best applies.

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Q1 I am currently:

Primarily a student (1)

Primarily working (2)

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Q2 My gender is:

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Non-binary / third gender (3)
  - Prefer not to say (4)
  - Other (5) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q3 I identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community

- Yes (1)
  - Maybe (2)
  - No (3)
- 

Q4 My racial identity is

\_\_\_\_\_

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Q5 I have studied music at the following level (if multiple, please select the highest level)

- High school (1)
  - Undergraduate Degree (2)
  - Masters Degree (3)
  - Professional Certificate (4)
  - PhD/DMA (5)
- 

Q6 Where geographically did your education take place? Multiple answers are welcome, specific school names are not required

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End of Block: Part 1 - Demographic Information

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Start of Block: Part 2 - Perceptions of Success and Music

Q10 This section will ask you to think about how you define success as it relates to your interactions with music in the academic, workplace and long-term life settings. It will also ask about your experience of curriculum and how this impacted your perception of success. Each subsection will include a few tick box questions where you will rank to what extent you agree with the statements and will end with a brief long form question.

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Q7 a) Academic Success

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
Being able to collaborate well with others is important to my definition of success. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being able to think critically about content learned in class is important to my definition of success. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developing my own personality as a musician is important to my definition of success. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My GPA is more important than the other factors discussed above to my definition of success. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mental well being is an important factor in my definition of success. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8 What does success mean to you as it relates to your time as a music student?

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Q9 b) Career Success

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
If I am not a 'professional' performer, I will consider myself a failure. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My education has given me transferable skills that would make me successful in any career. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been prepared for a competitive industry by my education. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have multiple ideas of what a successful career could look like. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My career path is unimportant as long as I am able to work in the creative arts. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q10 How do your aspirations relate to the work you want to/already do? How does this impact your perceptions of success?

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Q11 c) Life Success

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
Having a lifelong relationship with music, regardless of my career path, is important to my definition of success. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using music to connect with my community is important to my definition of success. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The skills I have learned as a musician will help me to be successful in the future, regardless of my career path. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Performing music with others brings me joy. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Consuming music brings me joy. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 How does music fit into your perceptions of success in life in a broader sense?

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Q13 d) Curriculum Content and Success

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
The content of my classes impacted my ability to be successful. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way the content was delivered to me reflected my learning style. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way the content was delivered to me allowed me to critically engage with content. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way the content was delivered impacted my ability to be successful. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way I was assessed was designed with my success in mind. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Q14 How has your education allowed you to express yourself and the content you have learned? How did this impact your perceptions of success?

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End of Block: Part 2 - Perceptions of Success and Music

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Start of Block: Part 3 - Curriculum Representation

Q20 This section will ask you to consider how your unique life experiences have been reflected in the curriculum you have been taught. This can be anything from seeing musical examples of people from the same race or sexual orientation as you, to being exposed to music that comes from different cultural traditions than you are used to. Consider how this exposure, or lack thereof, has impacted your perceptions of success as it relates to your studies in music.

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Q15 Curriculum Representation

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
Seeing my musical cultures frequently in the curriculum is important to me. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeing examples of people who have had similar life experiences to me in the curriculum is important to me. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is hard for me to see myself in the musical examples I see in class. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I cannot see my traditions explored in class, I will be discouraged. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I cannot see myself reflected in the musical examples I am exposed to in	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

class, I will be discouraged.  
(5)

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Q16 How have your life experiences been or not been reflected in the curriculum you have experienced? How does this impact your perceptions of success as defined in section 1 (Academic Success)?

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End of Block: Part 3 - Curriculum Representation

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Start of Block: Part 4 – Role Models in the Curriculum

Q21 This section asks you to think about times when you have been able to identify role models either in your classroom or your curriculum and consider how this has impacted your ability to achieve your definition of success. Consider the people with whom you have worked or studied and how this has impacted your perceptions of success. You may find it helpful to remember how you defined success in section 1 of this survey.

Q17 Role Models in the Curriculum

	1 - Completely Disagree (1)	2 - Generally Disagree (2)	3 - Generally Agree (3)	4 - Completely Agree (4)
I find it easy to identify role models whom I can relate to in the curriculum. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find it easy to identify role models whom I can relate to in the classroom. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can see examples of people like me achieving similar levels of success to which I aspire. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teachers can help me to connect with people like me in the industry. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been able to learn from people with similar life experience to me. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q18 How does having a role model with whom you can identify make you feel as it pertains to your ability to achieve your definition of 'success'? Please share an example if you feel comfortable.

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End of Block: Part 4 – Role Models in the Curriculum

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Start of Block: End of Survey

Q18 If you would like to be interviewed about your response to this survey, please provide your email below. Further communication with researchers is voluntary.

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End of Block: End of Survey

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