

The Emerging Future of Collegiate Voice Instruction: Updated SWOT Analysis of Current Practice and Implications for the Next Generation

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THE WORLD OF SINGING HAS CHANGED. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects are only beginning to be understood, predicted demographic shifts will bring significant enrollment challenges in higher education, and today's learners demand that we confront our historical biases and the institutional barriers to learning. In the 2014 article that preceded this publication, we asked if collegiate voice pedagogy was adequately serving the needs of our singers.¹ In this piece we present an updated analysis of this question, taking into consideration changes in the current educational climate.

As with the previous publication, we borrow a technique from the world of strategic planning, the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. This analytical format is used by administrators in decision making to weigh internal and external factors that are both positive and negative. Making future predictions based on past performance is notoriously difficult, but we believe there are trends that warrant the immediate attention of those in higher education. It is not all doom and gloom; the authors believe that collegiate voice programs that are nimble and adapt to the needs of today's students will have every reason to expect continued success. And while our field cannot chase every new pedagogic fad, it is also true that if we continue to teach as we always have taught, there may be worrying consequences in the near future.

STRENGTHS (INTERNAL)

In the SWOT framework, the first letter stands for “strengths.” These are internal things that we can control. They answer the question, “What are we doing well?” or—in our case—“What is good about collegiate voice instruction?” The specific strengths we will discuss in this section are as follows: (1) our tradition and faculty, (2) new instructional models, (3) growth of professional organizations, and (4) documented proof that our alumni find work.

Our Tradition and Our Faculty

As we mentioned in the 2014 article, our profession has a rich history. Many American music schools are built upon European conservatory models that were imported in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and most professional classical singers in this country probably were educated in a university music program.² This institutional history gives our field stability; for nearly 160 years we have successfully attracted and educated learners.

The faculty of these schools are undoubtedly a great strength. We have dedicated colleagues who have overcome immense challenges over the past two years during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have experience in adapting to a changing artistic world. Faculty are typically required to hold graduate degrees, usually a doctorate, ensuring that the instructor is qualified to teach music theory, history, literature, and language skills in applied studio lessons and in the classroom. Tenure requirements at many schools require faculty to be active in scholarship that enhances student learning.

New Instructional Models

While modern voice training is deeply rooted in bel canto technique, vocology has led to advances in the understanding of the biomechanics, acoustics, and aerodynamics of the voice. Our tools for vocal habilitation help singers of all styles develop authentic, sustainable, and expressive voices. Modern voice pedagogy integrates tradition with emerging techniques that help singers achieve better vocal results in less time, with lasting effects.³ And, thanks to the pandemic, learners have greater access to instruction through both in-person and online training programs.

Growth of Professional Organizations

We continue to see an expanding community of voice professionals in organizations such as the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), New York Singing Teachers' Association (NYSTA), Pan American Vocology Association (PAVA), the Voice Foundation (TVF), Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance (MTEA), Association for Popular Music Education (APME), International Voice Teachers of Mix (IVTOM), Vocology in Practice (ViP), Institute for Vocal Advancement (IVA),

and in online social media groups found on Facebook and other platforms. These groups have expansive online presences that help teachers to network with colleagues worldwide to share strategies, seek solutions, and offer mutual support. It is worth mentioning that many of these organizations address singers who are traditionally underserved by the voice community. These groups introduce countless singers to professional voice training and increase our cultural relevance.

Our Alumni Find Work

Perhaps most important, our graduates are working! According to a recent survey, two-thirds of arts graduates said their first job after graduation was a close match for the kind of work they wanted, 91 percent rated their education as "excellent" or "good," and 86 percent would recommend their institution to someone like themselves.⁴ It is encouraging that arts alumni report these positive views, though it must be noted that only one percent of respondents in this survey were voice majors. Collegiate programs have additional strengths and there is much to be proud of. However, to ensure the future success of our institutions, we must address areas where we are not yet succeeding.

WEAKNESSES (INTERNAL)

The second letter in the SWOT framework stands for "weaknesses." We have some control over these internal factors, but they are areas where we are not doing well. The specific weaknesses that are discussed in this section are: (1) accreditation and the pace of change in higher education, (2) diversity in higher education, (3) musical boundaries and singer training, and (4) our decentralized "vocal authority."

Accreditation and the Pace of Change in Higher Education

As anyone who has served on a university committee can attest, change in academia can be slow and accreditation standards may prevent programs from being adaptive. NASM (National Association of Schools of Music) is the accrediting body for many music programs at colleges and universities. Their handbook lists necessary coursework for music majors in music theory, history, and literature, but no mention is made of entrepreneurship,

popular/commercial music theory, CCM styles, or musical theatre courses.⁵ And while graduates will certainly benefit from teaching experience, the handbook only briefly mentions, “pedagogical applications according to the requisites of their specializations.”⁶

Aside from accreditation, why is curricular change so difficult? Credit hours are often the obstacle; these are the currency of academia, and every degree has a limited credit hour “budget.” How we invest those credits can be a difficult balancing act as we simultaneously work to maintain accreditation and prepare students for today’s music marketplace. Forward thinking educators may advocate adding coursework to address students’ emerging needs, but credit heavy degree programs may not have room for additional credit hours.

Diversity in Higher Education

The student body enrolled in collegiate music study is considerably less diverse than the rising K–12 student population.⁷ There are serious consequences for programs that do not acknowledge the need for improvements in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education. One way this need is being addressed is in the development of culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach to teaching nurtures students’ unique cultural strengths, promotes a sense of well-being about the student’s cultural place in the world, and leads educators to confront long held cultural biases.⁸ In singing studies, faculty can consider how music preferences impact student learning, and how we can encourage culturally responsive pedagogy that fully honors our students’ lived experience.⁹ This may also mean modifying audition requirements to be more inclusive of students from nonwhite backgrounds.¹⁰ DEI issues often result in difficult conversations that require reflection, research, and compassion, but failure to address these issues has serious ramifications. In the authors’ opinion, we have a moral obligation to identify and remove barriers that separate our students from success in singing.

Musical Boundaries and Singer Training

Stylistic boundaries in singing continue to shift toward diversification. Professional opera companies are programming musical theatre repertoire more and more frequently in response to current economic pressures.¹¹ Yet NASM guidelines suggest schools emphasize *either*

classical or musical theatre; no mention is made of cross-training both singing styles in a single degree. The NASM handbook suggests that vocal performance majors should, “experience a broad range of repertoire through attendance at events such as recitals, concerts, opera and music theatre productions,” but it goes without saying that merely attending an event will not help students cultivate performance skills.¹²

Church music is also experiencing a shift away from classical-only singing. A recent study of Protestant congregations reported that, while 35 percent of churches use traditional music alone, 30 percent now use blended worship (contemporary and traditional), and 29 percent use contemporary, rock, gospel, or praise and worship styles.¹³ In another recent study, 88 percent of pastors and music ministers said that contemporary band leadership and popular/commercial music theory skills were “important” or “very important.”¹⁴ These skills are neither included in NASM accreditation guidelines, nor found in most music degree programs. Clearly, graduates who intend to serve as church musicians should be trained in a variety of singing styles.

Decentralized “Vocal Authority”

Students no longer need to attend college to have access to content. The rise of YouTube, Instagram and Tik-Tok singing authorities has, in the opinion of the authors, challenged long held assumptions about “vocal authority.” While many college faculty maintain social media presences, few are as actively engaged as these internet “authorities,” and in this Zoomer era of tech savvy Gen Z-ers, “out of sight, out of mind.” Learners now have many options outside academia, usually at reduced costs. Where collegiate programs still excel is in experiential learning; if faculty transition away from content delivery models of the past (e.g., students coming to hear a live lecture), we may see growth that out-competes cheaper, self-guided models.

OPPORTUNITIES (EXTERNAL)

The third letter in the SWOT acronym stands for “opportunities.” These are external, positive factors that we cannot control. In strategic planning we try to position ourselves to maximize the benefits these opportunities present. The specific opportunities that we will

discuss in this section are: (1) cultural diversification, (2) the CCM marketplace, (3) continued public interest in singing, (4) online instruction, and (5) teaching can pay the rent.

Cultural Diversification

The UNESCO report “Rethinking Education Towards a Global Common Good” suggests that today’s youth have accelerated the demand for cultural diversity.

The more than one billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in the world today are the most informed, active, connected, and mobile generation the world has ever seen. . . . They spend considerable time on social media exploring and sharing the results of this exploration. This generates an environment of greater awareness and understanding of other cultures and an engagement with issues of aesthetics worldwide. Cultural diversity has become increasingly relevant as a source of invention and innovation; it is today a valuable resource for sustainable human development.¹⁵

Our programs have introduced students to Western European masterworks for well over a century. We now have an opportunity to broaden our scope and serve more learners than ever before. If we create additional opportunities for blues, R&B, gospel, jazz, hip-hop, pop, rock, country, and world music styles, we could see increased interest in our programs, and positive benefits to enrollment. Artistic diversification can help our institutions better reflect the richness of our varied cultural identities.

The CCM Marketplace

CCM programs in higher education have grown since our 2014 publication, but the market is far from saturated. While NASM lists 371 universities with vocal performance programs, only twenty-eight universities currently offer degrees in commercial music despite strong interest in these singing styles.¹⁶ However, creating appropriate CCM programs for these students is more involved than merely finding appropriate teachers for students’ private lessons. We need to reexamine ensembles, history, theory, the audition process, juries, recital requirements, and a host of style-specific curricular issues. Though beginning new programs can be daunting, particularly in the absence of NASM accredi-

tation standards, it can be done. The Association for Popular Music Education (APME) and dissertations by Jeffrey Kirk and Kat Reinhert may be useful resources for those who wish to expand in this area.¹⁷

Continued Public Interest in Singing

As reported in our 2014 publication, public interest in singing in the United States continues to be very strong. Millions watch television reality programs that feature singing: the penultimate episode of *The Voice* had 7.28 million viewers, and *American Idol*, 6.8 million.¹⁸ A study published by the National Endowment for the Arts suggests that as many as 25 percent of adults participated in some type of singing activity in 2017, more than 54 million Americans sing in school, church, and community choruses, and a staggering 33.5 million persons are engaged in some form of informal music study.¹⁹ When we compare these figures to the 13,397 students enrolled in university voice studies in 2019 (music education, BM, MM, and DMA combined), it is clear that collegiate programs have tremendous potential for growth.²⁰ Our society values music: millions of Americans sing and are interested in improving their singing, but only 0.02 percent of these singers are currently enrolled in collegiate voice studies.

Online Instruction

Prior to the pandemic, geography limited instruction and many were skeptical of online education. This clearly has changed. In one recent study, 73 percent of students said they “somewhat” or “strongly” agreed that they would like to take fully online courses in the future.²¹ A discussion of best practices for distance learning is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that independent voice teachers have taken advantage of remote teaching opportunities, and universities are quickly following suit. Online education can help us serve nontraditional learners in ways that were previously not possible.

Teaching Can Pay the Rent

The SNAAP survey found that 57 percent of arts alumni have worked as teachers, and entrepreneurial skills were crucial; “more than six out of ten were self-employed, and 14 percent had founded their own company.”²² The singing population (54 million) far outnumbers current

NATS membership (7,276),²³ suggesting a prime marketplace for our services. A recent NATS study during the COVID-19 pandemic reported annual incomes of voice teachers ranged from \$45,000 to \$54,000, a figure that exceeds salaries of beginning K–12 educators (\$41,770).²⁴ While few will become wealthy as singing instructors, if we widen our concept of “success in the arts” to include teaching and entrepreneurial skills, we could better communicate the career potential of a degree in music.

THREATS (EXTERNAL)

Threats are external, negative factors that the voice community cannot control. For collegiate programs to thrive, these difficult issues must be addressed. Every successful university program depends on excellent, engaged faculty and a thriving student population, but there are reasons to believe that the student population in general—and music enrollment in particular—may soon be considerably smaller. The specific threats that we will discuss in this section are: (1) the decline in collegiate student enrollment in general, (2) the decline in music student enrollment in particular, and (3) the economic challenges facing young singers.

The Decline in Collegiate Student Enrollment in General

Predicting future enrollment trends is difficult, but demographics can be a useful tool. If more children are born in a given year, college enrollments tend to increase 17 or 18 years in the future. This demographic approach was used by Nathan Grawe in the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI), with data from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study (ELS). Grawe’s probabilistic model aggregates decades of data from fertility, immigration, and migration patterns, combined with the rapid decline of births from 2007 to 2009 because of the Great Recession. Grawe predicts that after sixty years of steady growth in college enrollment, universities will see an overall 10–15 percent reduction in matriculated students by 2029. This decline will be heavily influenced by institution type, location, and prestige. Enrollments in regions such as the Middle Atlantic, East North Central, New England, and Midwest are predicted to decrease by as much as

20–25 percent.²⁵ Reductions on this scale could present significant challenges throughout higher education.

The Decline in Music Student Enrollment in Particular

When music student enrollment trends are examined, there is immediate cause for concern. According to the NASM Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) data survey, between 2009 and 2019, choral music education and voice performance student enrollments declined 25 and 33 percent, respectively.²⁶ *This decline occurred during a period of general stability or growth in higher education enrollments.* These enrollment trends gleaned from NASM Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) are plotted below in Figure 1.

If voice enrollments follow the plotted linear trendlines, by 2029 we could see choral music education enrollments decline by an additional 37 percent, and voice performance enrollments decline an additional 57 percent. Which is to say, from 2009 to 2029, total voice program enrollments could decline by as much as 45 percent.

These voice-specific declines do not consider two additional potential negative factors: (1) the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrollment and (2) the predicted reductions in demand for higher education due to demographic changes. Nonetheless, if our current practice remains unchanged, collegiate voice programs may face *substantial* reductions in enrollment as collegiate faculty work harder to recruit fewer students.

The Economic Challenges Facing Young Singers

Careers in the arts have always been accompanied by financial risk, especially during an artist’s education and early career. Current economic conditions, however, present unparalleled challenges for young singers. Attending a college has become cost prohibitive for many: adjusted for inflation, all higher education (two-year, four-year, public, and private) tuition rates doubled between 1981–2001.²⁷ As startling as this figure is, in the two intervening decades it has nearly doubled again.²⁸ Which is to say, a collegiate voice faculty member who studied in the 1980s may have paid as little as *one fourth the tuition and fees* in inflation adjusted 2022 dollars compared to what today’s student is paying. When the young singer graduates and enters the music

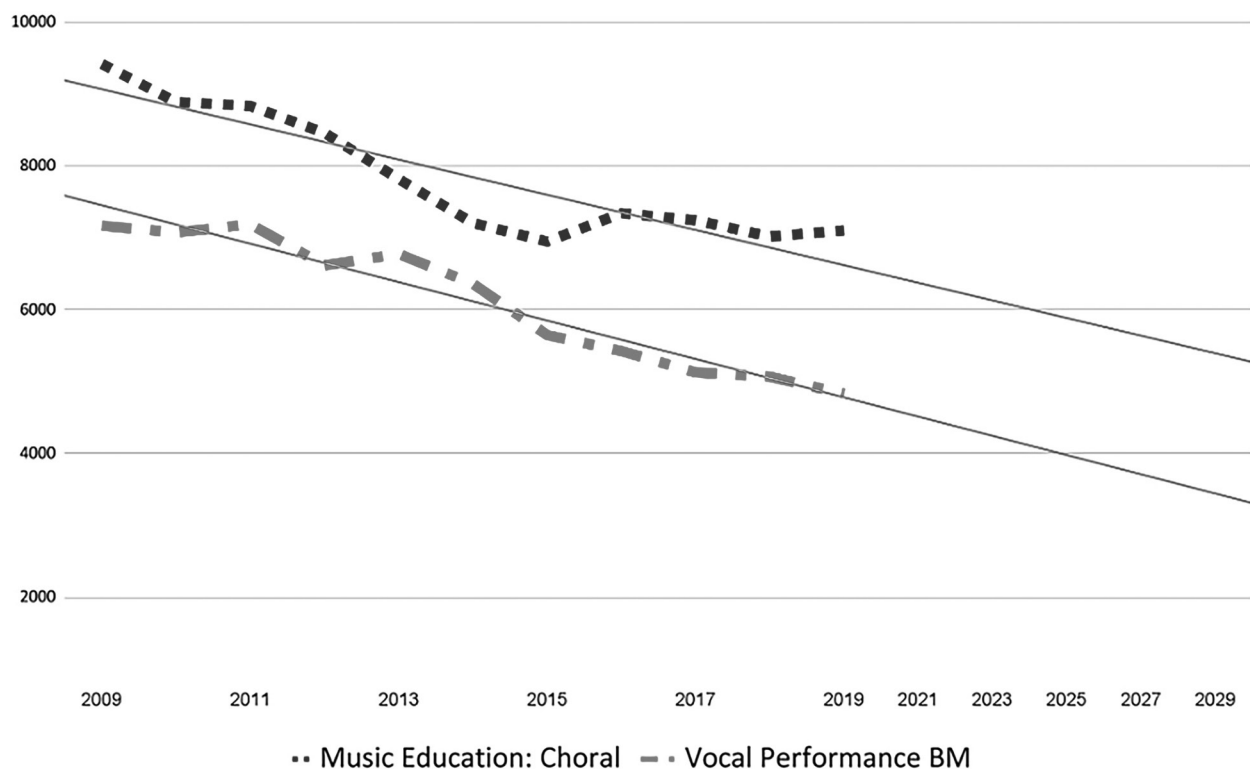


Figure 1. Yearly undergraduate voice enrollment, 2009–2019 and projections through 2029 (Source: NASM HEADS data).

marketplace, they must juggle higher levels of student debt, audition fees, and ongoing voice lesson fees, while seeking low-pay or even pay-to-sing employment. Additionally, the number of consistently engaged opera singers may be declining, and those who are fortunate enough to book prestigious singing engagements are likely offered reduced compensation due to declining ticket sales and current economic pressures.²⁹ According to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), this combination of student debt, artistic work being unavailable, and low pay causes many to leave the arts, especially first generation students.³⁰

SWOT SUMMARY: SOME GOOD AND SOME BAD NEWS

As stated earlier, the outlook for our profession is serious, but it is not all doom and gloom. The authors believe that collegiate voice programs that are nimble and adapt to the needs of today's students will have every reason to expect continued success. Our professional organizations in voice continue to thrive, and teachers

have access to new and exciting pedagogic tools. Our graduates are finding work in the arts, especially in teaching, demonstrating that a music degree can lead to gainful employment. Unfortunately, accreditation standards may prevent curricular changes that would optimally prepare students for life as twenty-first century musicians. For most singers, this reality includes teaching and some knowledge of CCM musical styles.

As we face the greatest predicted decline in higher education enrollment in sixty years, programs need to be adaptive, expand their educational offerings, and attract new learners. If we engage in culturally responsive pedagogy, some who never imagined themselves attending college may find their sense of belonging. Improving the diversity, equity, and inclusion of our programs may reduce barriers to education, artistically enrich our campuses, and improve music enrollment figures.

CONCLUSION

As always, change is constant. The data presented here suggest that maintaining the status quo in collegiate

voice programs will have predictably deleterious outcomes. Therefore, current practices should be seriously reevaluated. As in our 2014 publication, the authors are by no means suggesting the elimination of classical singing instruction, but rather the expansion of curricula to give more learners access to voice education.

The potential to improve our profession is tremendous. Imagine a world where all musical styles are respected equally, where postgenre masterworks are made possible by artistic cross-pollination, and underrepresented artists are fully included. This is the future we can create, and we will all grow stronger in the process.

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