

National Association of Schools of Music

An Advisory for Music Faculty and Administrators:

NASM Standards — The Liberal Arts Degree in Music

NASM supports and reviews the liberal arts degree in music and has done so formally since the 1930s. The Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree in music has a distinguished history of serving students, institutions, and the field of music as a whole. It has distinct purposes and specific characteristics that distinguish it from the professional undergraduate degree in music. NASM equally respects both degree types. However, attention to the inherent differences between them is critical if the purposes of the liberal arts degree are to be fulfilled in student learning.

This advisory addresses issues that may help faculty and administrators interpret NASM standards for the liberal arts degree. It should be read in conjunction with standards statements in the *NASM Handbook* under the following titles: “Undergraduate Programs in Music,” “Admission to Undergraduate Study,” and especially “The Liberal Arts Degree with a Major in Music.” The *Handbook* current at any given time is the only definitive statement of NASM standards.

Standards Summary

The liberal arts degree with a major in music follows the usual pattern for liberal arts degrees with majors in other fields. The intent is to provide broad coverage (a) across the arts, sciences, and humanities—usually designated as general education or general studies, and (b) within the specific discipline designated as a major. NASM standards articulate seven goals for general education that are normally achieved by a distribution of arts, sciences, and humanities requirements. These studies normally occupy 55-70% of the total curriculum.

When an institution offers music as a liberal arts major, NASM standards require studies in musicianship, including the theory and history of music. They also call for a broad acquaintance with musical genres and cultural sources and the ability to develop and defend musical judgments. These requirements normally occupy 20-25% of the total curriculum. The standards also call for the development of knowledge and skills in performance and opportunities to undertake elective studies that deepen musical understanding. The combined areas of performance and music electives normally occupy 10-20% of the curriculum.

NASM recognizes that percentages are not the only indicators of degree content or the primary indicator of effectiveness. However, percentages of total curricular time devoted to specific areas define the goals, objectives, character, titles, and academic currency of all degree programs.

NASM standards require consistency among degree titles, goals and objectives, content, and published materials. To advertise and offer a liberal arts degree is to make a commitment to a program with certain characteristics that distinguish it from other types of degrees.

Multiple Purposes

The liberal arts degree in music is used by students to fulfill a number of purposes. Among the most common are:

- Majoring in music with definite career intentions in music and an intent to pursue intensive studies in music following graduation.
- Majoring in music with potential career intentions in music, understanding that if music is chosen, further study is required.
- Majoring in music with a career intention in another discipline or profession.
- Majoring in music and also majoring or minoring in another discipline with or without specific career intentions that include music, understanding that if music is chosen, further study is required.

Institutions also exhibit a variety of purposes for the liberal arts degree in music through the requirements they set. In music, institutions differ in the overall emphasis they give to such areas as analysis, composition, history, and performance. There are also differences in the extent to which music is studied from perspectives of the humanities, the sciences, the social sciences, or business as well as from an arts perspective. For further information, see NASM *Handbook*: “The Liberal Arts Degree with a Major in Music,” sections on “Titles” and “Purposes.”

Multiple Approaches

NASM does not promote a particular curriculum for the liberal arts degree in music. The basic liberal arts framework provided by the standards encourages many specific curricular patterns and sets of requirements. Within a framework consistent with the liberal arts degree, each institution chooses its own content, approach, time frame, and evaluation methods.

Content Choices

The character of the liberal arts degree is created in large part by its emphasis on breadth. Liberal arts degree programs that sacrifice breadth for in-depth specialization are not in keeping with national academic expectations for such degrees. In order to meet NASM standards, institutions offering liberal arts degrees in music must document all curricular and time-on-task requirements that develop broad general education. They must demonstrate that music studies are comprehensive enough to provide an overview of the field.

Most institutions maintain a set of general education requirements for all undergraduates. Often these are referred to as a “core.” In many cases, these core requirements apply to students enrolled in both liberal arts and professional degrees. Therefore, there is a distinction between offering music degrees with strong core requirements in the liberal arts, sciences, and humanities, and offering a liberal arts degree.

Standing alone, without further study, the core is often insufficient to produce the breadth of knowledge and experience across disciplines usually characteristic of a liberal arts degree. The same can be true for music studies required for music majors. Both general studies and music requirements may need to be supplemented with electives in order to meet the breadth of provisions of the NASM standards for liberal arts degrees.

NASM standards provide flexibilities that enable a great range of specific requirements among institutions offering the liberal arts degree in music. Institutions reviewing their curricula against NASM standards are encouraged to address the functions of liberal arts programs as outlined in the *Handbook* text, and to be creative in developing specific approaches to those functions.

The Preparation of Future Musicians

Normally, the liberal arts degree does not prepare the student for career entry because the time devoted to music study is insufficient to develop the full complement of knowledge and skills needed by professionals in most music specializations. However, history also shows that the liberal arts degree in music can provide a basic foundation for a successful career, assuming that additional study, usually significant additional study, is undertaken. Success in any of the music professions requires extremely high levels of competence. Knowledge and skills are gained over a lifetime of application. The liberal arts degree in music addresses many of these competencies to some extent, and thus enables students to continue intensifying their knowledge and skills in study and through experiences after the degree.

Simply put, future musicians enrolled in the liberal arts degree in music will have spent more time gaining a breadth of knowledge across many disciplines than their colleagues enrolled in the professional undergraduate degree in music.

Clearly, liberal arts and professional degrees in music serve different purposes. There is no hierarchy and NASM has no preference. One degree is not better than the other, although specific students will be more suited to one approach or the other by temperament, orientation, and aspirations for learning in the undergraduate years. Any necessary knowledge and skills, whether in music or in general studies, which are not acquired can and often must be acquired at a later time. As always in music, talent and abilities developed before entering higher education have much to do with success in the field after undergraduate study.

Publication of Goals and Objectives

NASM standards require institutions to make clear distinctions among types and levels of degree programs. This means that institutions are expected to ensure that published materials regarding liberal arts degrees in music accurately reflect the character and purposes of these degree programs. As a rule, the word “professional” should not be associated with descriptions of liberal arts degrees. Published degree requirements and descriptions should reflect the character of a liberal arts degree and thus reflect appropriate attention to breadth of studies in general education and in music.

Institutions offering liberal arts degrees that encompass double majors or a major and a strong minor should ensure that the specific nature of the relationship between the two disciplines is clear. For example, terms such as “interdisciplinary” should be used only when there are studies and/or projects that truly integrate two or more disciplines. Care should be taken to ensure that later professional accomplishments of specific graduates are not conflated in evaluations or public relations with the actual knowledge and skills all enrolled students in the program are expected to acquire.

Institutions do not designate a particular option or area of emphasis as a major unless course work in that specific area comprises at least 25% of the curriculum. One or two courses in a field such as music business are not sufficient to designate that field as a major.

Degree Titles

Normally, the terms “Bachelor of Arts in Music” or “Bachelor of Science in Music” are used to designate liberal arts curricula with a music major. Some institutions are chartered at the undergraduate level to offer only the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree. These institutions may, within these degree titles, offer curricula with objectives consistent with those for professional undergraduate degrees in music.

However, in these cases, standards for professional undergraduate degrees such as the Bachelor of Music or Bachelor of Music Education are applied to such programs. Such degrees are listed by NASM as Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science in Performance, in Composition, in Music Education, etc., rather than Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science in Music.

NASM regards all programs with goals and objectives for the preparation of specialist music teachers for the public schools or music therapists to be professional undergraduate degrees regardless of whether they are titled Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, or Bachelor of Music. These programs are reviewed using applicable professional undergraduate degree standards that include requirements for general education.

Approaching the Standard

As is the case with all NASM standards, the goal is to focus on the development of student capabilities, not to set bureaucratic requirements for the operation of music units. Since accreditation is based in large part on the mission, goals, and objectives developed by each institution, perhaps the best place to start is by determining present goals and objectives for the liberal arts degree in music—in other words, starting with considerations of *what* and *why* before proceeding to *how*. Often, when *what* and *why* questions are answered thoroughly, the *how* questions answer themselves. As numerous NASM institutions formulate and answer these questions in the course of self-studies and other types of reviews, the field continues to be enriched by the diverse approaches and results of liberal arts degree in music and the particular insights of breadth of study that are brought into the world of music as a profession, as a public benefit, and as an element of civilization.

**Music units with further concerns about the intent of these standards
are invited to contact the [NASM National Office staff](#):**

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