

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC  
Annual Meeting 2012

**Oral Report of the Executive Director**

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Attending the NASM Annual Meeting is one of the year's great pleasures. It is always inspiring to see so many institutions represented by so many dedicated leaders. The scope and depth of the artistic and intellectual power represented here affirms our aspirations for music in our institutions and in our society at large.

We are fortunate to love and serve a field that gives so much, that feeds our being and that nurtures our souls. We are fortunate to be in a field that seeks to create, to open new possibilities even when working with ideas and pieces of art that are centuries old.

I want to return to the question of openness in a moment. But first, a quick review of the larger policy context. We all know and have our views about the financial situation. We know that federal spending and taxes are major issues. We have had an election, and the country remains divided, in many cases bitterly so. Yes, this division is over economic systems and issues, but also on a number of other basic questions such as what is the role of the state, what is the relationship of the state to the individual and the individual to the state? Such questions have been debated for centuries.

Various views on these questions are ideas, and it is commonplace but true to say that ideas have consequences.

On an immediate practical level, collisions of ideas about these questions will produce the context for many federal-level decisions that will affect us.

What happens on taxes and tax policy will affect economic growth, discretionary income, charitable giving, and personal freedom. Each of these and all together have an impact on what we do. Various pieces of legislation and regulation will be forthcoming.

What happens on education is important as well. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or *No Child Left Behind*, is past due for reauthorization. The Higher Education Act is due for reauthorization in 2013. The actual schedule is not clear. These large pieces of legislation contain programs authorized to be administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

There is not time or need on this occasion to go into detail about possibilities. But two things are important. First, policy questions associated with federal education bills are not just about funding; increasingly, they are fundamentally about the freedom of individual institutions and teachers to make independent academic decisions. They are fundamentally about local control.

Second, those here who were with us in the Higher Education Act reauthorization battle from 2003 until 2008 know that maintaining academic independence was not easy. It will not be easy this time either.

So as we look at the policy issues that face us and consider various proposals, there are a number of test questions we can use to think about the actual results that various proposals might produce.

I want to suggest one such test. To what extent is the idea or policy a force for openness or narrowness?

Let us look at this test in a bit more detail.

Our schools seek to open minds, expand capabilities, provide access to new content, and enable connections and integrations associated with advanced, sophisticated work.

We see our art and intellectual life in general as a vast territory of fields and specializations, a set of things available for creative action. We are all but lost in the sea of possibilities, and in the wonder of multiple potentials. Most of us are humbled by what we do not know about our own field, much less others. But we keep trying to nurture our openness by learning and connecting and synthesizing. We make choices about what we will do artistically and intellectually from an understanding of and reverence for the creative results that can occur when we are open, and especially when we know how to be open to the realities of different answers, when we know how to use at least some aspects of the vast territory to make new things or make old things new.

This openness is what we do. But we do it in a context that is local, perhaps regional, but certainly national as well. We are trying to enable something, working to help individual students gain power in content, in using the relationships among knowledge and skills to be effective and productive in situations that do not have single answers. We are trying to enable something that has no neat, easily containable specificity. Let's call it capacity, or capability, or competence, or all three.

But what of the policy context for higher education? How consistent is it with what we do? Too often it seems narrow-bore all the way. And it seems to be narrowing. The concept of higher education is narrowed from civilization building to vocational training. The definition of content value is narrowed from the vast array of things that human beings do and are to reductionist rhetoric about science, technology, engineering, and math. Problem identification is narrowed from dealing with complex interactions of multiple factors to simplistic formulations and promotional jargon. The evaluation criteria are narrowed from the richness and sophistication possible with expert judgment to what can be easily counted and understood by all. We are in a strange world where some people with degrees from our most selective colleges and universities are passionately engaged in efforts to run all of education, including higher education, like one vast elementary school. Here vision is narrowed as well, and we are in a situation where increasingly, even in higher education, there is a tendency, as Pierre Bourdieu has said, "to substitute the things of logic for the logic of things."

These conditions and the challenges they create are familiar to us all. They vex us or intrigue us by the puzzles they create. But look at the contrast between what is happening about higher education on the national policy scene and what is happening here. We are spending this meeting opening things out. We are doing it to serve the creativity of each individual here and each institution represented.

The discussions about the undergraduate curriculum are intended to open and widen conversations. The nature of synthesis requires openness. You have approved standards in Sacred Music and Music Technology, and Creative Multidisciplinary Convergence and Technologies that expand familiar territory and open others in newly sophisticated ways. Clearly, we continue to connect, create, and innovate toward openness even though we work in a context that too often narrows.

So what should we do? We should attend to the practical things of policy, service, and stewardships. We should study and speak and act from knowledge. We should warn of dangers we see, and work to keep opportunity open. We will continue to do these things together as we have in the past. But there is more that we can do. Let us think about music itself. It enlarges the heart. It opens the soul. Yes, we live in times when the narrowing forces are strong. To use a biblical phrase, serious education problems are being addressed in ways that “add drunkenness to thirst.”

One response is to feel overwhelmed, or surrounded. Another response is to enlarge our hearts so that our engagements with the narrowness forces are enveloped more than ever in the essence and meaning of what we do. So that our hearts and souls are not filled with narrowness. This is what I hope each of us will do, and that by our example we will lead and inspire others to do the same.

Thank you for your leadership and your continuing hard work, and best wishes.