

National Association of Schools of Music

Notes for Music Faculty and Administrators: Standards for Composition/Improvisation and History/Repertory in Undergraduate Professional Degrees in Music

In November of 2006, the NASM membership approved changes to NASM standards regarding undergraduate degrees in music. This set of notes is intended to assist music faculty and administrators in understanding the basic intent behind two of these standards that apply only to professional undergraduate degrees in music; that is, all degrees carrying the title Bachelor of Music and all undergraduate degrees concerned with teacher preparation that lead to eventual certification as a specialist music teacher, either as part of the baccalaureate degree, or immediately after in a master's program.

The standards stated in their entirety are:

NASM Handbook, Sections VIII.B.3. and 4.:

- 3. Composition/Improvisation.** Students must acquire a rudimentary capacity to create original or derivative music. It is the prerogative of each institution to develop specific requirements regarding written, electronic, or improvisatory forms and methods. These may include but are not limited to the creation of original compositions or improvisations, variations or improvisations on existing materials, experimentation with various sound sources, the imitation of musical styles, and manipulating the common elements in non-traditional ways. Institutional requirements should help students gain a basic understanding of how to work freely and cogently with musical materials in various composition-based activities, particularly those most associated with the major field.
- 4. History and Repertory.** Students must acquire basic knowledge of music history and repertoires through the present time, including study and experience of musical language and achievement in addition to that of the primary culture encompassing the area of specializations (see item III.L.)

As faculty and administrators review their programs against these standards, the following approaches and principles should be kept in mind:

- 1. Focus first on the functions to be served.**

Professional undergraduate degrees in music are intended to prepare individuals for a career in music. Both of these standards seek to ensure that students have basic competence in areas generally thought to be critical to the future development of music, especially in the United States. The purpose is to provide knowledge and skills that constitute a base for future work in the discipline.

The standard on composition/improvisation is based on the belief of the NASM membership that professional musicians benefit significantly from study and experience in the creation of musical works, because the musician's challenge of creating musical coherence requires the integration of knowledge and

skills in performance, theory, and historical styles and practice. It also develops the musical mind, hones analytical capacities, and develops sensitivity to the possibilities of musical structure.

Knowledge of repertory and history has been a traditional goal for all undergraduate music programs. Undergraduates are typically engaged in courses and requirements that expand their knowledge of repertory and provide them with an overview of musical expression. It is clear that in the future, this overview must include attention to a variety of cultures. Given the changing world context for musical activity and the increased availability and interchange among various musics in performance, composition, and scholarship, the professional musician of the future must be introduced to a rich variety of musical works and practices.

- 2. Achieving functions required by these standards need not change the basic goals and objectives of degree programs.**

NASM recognizes and supports a wide variety of goals and objectives for professional degree programs in schools and departments of music. As institutions review their priorities and projections, some will decide to make significant change in the goals and objectives of specific programs, or perhaps for all programs. In other words, an institution may decide to go far beyond what these standards require in either or both areas. This is the prerogative of the institution. However, it is entirely possible for institutions to meet these standards in their degree programs without major changes of goals or objectives.

- 3. Meeting these standards does not necessarily mean establishing new courses.**

In applying these standards, institutions are encouraged to develop a clear understanding of the functions sought before determining methods to be used. Given the need to keep undergraduate credit requirements within reasonable limits, it may be useful to begin by studying the extent to which these functions are already being met in current courses and programs. If a particular function is not being met, whether measured against the baseline competencies required in the standards or against the music unit's requirements that exceed that baseline, then consideration might be given to where competency development can be addressed within existing curricula. Such a review may or may not lead to the conclusion that new courses are needed.

- 4. There are many ways to meet these standards.**

It has just been stated that many course and curricular structures can be used to fulfill these two standards. By the same token, there are an infinite number of specific approaches that can be used. Music units are urged to be creative in matching their specific approaches to goals and

objectives for specific programs. The standards do not presume to state which approach among many an institution should choose. How much time is spent on what, specific areas of emphasis within bodies of content, order and sequence, and evaluative mechanisms are all the responsibility of the music unit. To meet the standards, an institution must demonstrate how its decisions about all of the matters discussed in this paper produce baseline competence in these two areas.

5. The standards focus on artistic and intellectual content.

In all its standards, NASM seeks to focus on artistic and intellectual issues associated with the preparation of music professionals. The NASM membership approves standards based on careful assessments of the competencies needed by practicing musicians. It is understood that standards are placed into effect by the actions of individuals and institutions, each of which reflects a particular mix of philosophical views on all subjects that make up the context for musical activity. The standards do not take sides in philosophical conflicts, but rather state goals for professional competence. They are centered in knowledge and skills development, not in action on behalf of courses or specializations within the profession.

6. The standards on history and repertory encourage creative local solutions.

Taken together, standards and the accompanying explanation provide an extraordinary range of possibilities. Each music unit is responsible for using available resources to address the goals of breadth and depth. Self-assessment may reveal the need for additional resources or changes in the way resources are used, but the key goal is work with and exposure to a large body of music. Creativity at the local level will necessarily be the key to achieving this goal, and no two institutions will do so in the same way.

7. The standards may be a catalyst for faculty development.

As an institution reviews its programs against the standards, needs in faculty development may appear. Such a result is consistent with the interest of NASM members to promote responsible, cost-effective evolution and innovation.

8. The standards promote rigor and high achievement in individual music units.

The standards are intended to serve as a foundation for individual music units as they determine what students should know and be able to do in various courses and at the completion of the professional undergraduate degree in music. All music units constantly engage questions of whether specific material should be studied in-depth or as part of a survey, presented for purposes of acquaintance, suggested for future attention, or left alone. Issues of rigor are critical to ensuring that such decisions develop student competence.

9. The standards encourage growth and development on local timelines.

The field of music, including work in professional preparation, continues to evolve. Overall, instant change is rare. Although these standards restate old goals for changing times, music units will continue to search for answers about education and training in musicianship and repertory and history. In the course of this process, some units will make large-scale, time-specific changes. Others will manage change in a more developmental way. Therefore, the standards do not promote instant conversion to any particular approach, but rather promote thoughtful change reflecting needs in the preparation of future professionals. Meeting these standards involves demonstrating that these basic needs are being met more than providing evidence of change, whether instant or developmental.

Music units working with standards issues, either specifically or comprehensively, may find benefit from reviewing sets of questions provided in an NASM publication entitled *The Assessment of Undergraduate Programs in Music*.

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

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