

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

## 101<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting

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### Oral Report of the President

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We hear a lot about the level of confidence in higher education in the U.S. held by its citizens. For much of the last decade the statistics have not been good...in 2024, Gallup reported that only 36% of those Americans polled had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in our system of higher education and 32% indicated that had little or no confidence. While there has been a positive increase in the same Gallup polling in 2025 where that 36-32 opposition ratio from 2024 has evolved to 42-23, it is important to note that in 2015, Gallup conveyed that as many as 60% of Americans polled had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in our nation's post-secondary education. What does all of this mean for our institutions, our music units, and our community of music schools gathered here for the 101<sup>st</sup> time? What are the implications for us? And do these statistics tell us anything about the way we approach our work that we should perhaps examine?

Besides reviewing statistics that reveal a decline in that confidence in recent years and even the small uptick this year, what are we, in music, to make of the implications of those statistics, especially if the reactions of our music units' alumni, audiences, community music-makers or other stakeholders do not align with those numbers, as I would suspect is the case at the majority of our member institutions? I would contend that in general, American college music units enjoy a purposeful degree of confidence from individuals who are directly engaged with or are even just familiar with our work. If this is the case, it suggests that those general higher education confidence statistics don't really correlate with the work or influence of the music unit or those who are involved.

Does this mean there are not threats to our music units through our institutions that are inherent in those statistics? Certainly not. But beyond being concerned about a specific challenge to music study on our campuses, do these current conditions resulting from this general lack of public confidence present us in this room and our schools with any opportunities? I would suggest that they do—music's positive impact on those who encounter it in most settings presents us in the higher education music profession great occasion to employ music and music-making, through both the efforts of our graduates AND our daily work—to improve confidence, in particular the PUBLIC TRUST our citizens have in our colleges and universities. I believe that each of us can imagine and possibly realize in our own ways and at our own institutions initiatives that would result in such positive effect thus enhancing the confidence held in American higher education by our society. I am also convinced, having learned by serving in numerous capacities during my 38 year involvement with NASM, that the work of the National Association of Schools of Music holds credibility amongst its member institutions and beyond to serve as a catalyst for music's role in the re-building of public trust in American higher education. And I believe this is true not just of the public music units of NASM's accredited institutions', but of all music schools in the US, regardless of their status, affiliation, or reach.

This sentiment is not meant to imply that we in music are not often shaken or derailed by federal or institutional mandates. This is especially evident in recent months as exemplified by various unclear, casually-formulated national mandates, most especially those that appear to assess our quality or relevance and do so using means that do not reflect the greatest treasure music offers humanity. A concern with potentially low alumni earnings outcomes as identified in 2025's HR 1 is a most poignant instance. I also do not mean to indicate that we are not often damaged by budget cuts, threatened in some locations with our very survival as music units, presented

with the risk of what can happen in one-on-one instruction between artist faculty and 18-25 year old students unique to our art and our pedagogy, or even a whole host of other threats. And yet, the study of music, and the applications of its actualization--the power of its outcomes--places us in an enormously influential position among our academic brethren on campus.

But more to the point—I am of the opinion that it is the essentiality of music that places us in the position to both inspire and lead ours and our institution’s efforts to re-build the public trust broadly speaking and to engender greater confidence in the finest system of adolescent-to-adult education ever to exist. Our capability for this kind of effect on our campuses lies, in part, in our ability to manifest so quickly the results of meaningful teaching and learning into practice that enriches lives through a uniquely immediate delivery of music’s capacity for impact—the witness of musical performance; it lies, in part, in our ability to assist young people with talent develop into professionals with refined skill and the personal rewards we feel so deeply when we observe this; and it lies, in part, in our daily routine and our devoted desire to explore the abstract and the unknown, instilling in our students, ourselves, and others a curiosity that motivates, for all involved, a desire to better know, and not just more deeply feel, the otherwise unknowable. This is, of course, the essence of the musical experience.

So, how is it that we can better leverage these great abilities we practice every minute of every day in our collegiate music units into a force for good for ourselves and a force for institutional change when required? And, how is it that NASM can help us do this?

First, we must, each of us, think more about what role music plays on our campuses than we likely currently do. Our jobs as music executives, even at big schools fortunate to have large staffs, are too frequently consumed with the transactional that limits our ability to imagine greater strategies that guide us to know how we can advance the overwhelming positive consequences that musical experiences have on our campus culture and life. Occasions for assuring musical activities that propel larger institutional priorities abound everywhere in American higher education. These vary from the most simple and frequent, like providing music at college and university ceremonies (where we should offer our audiences the chance to join us in actually singing or otherwise making music whenever we can), to the more nuanced, like aligning some degree of our curricular and co-curricular content in music degrees, with articulated presidential priorities for academic excellence. Some of the more common of these latter initiatives include emphases on leadership, entrepreneurship, community and student engagement, “years of the arts” celebrations, or similar contemporary options we know exist throughout the post-secondary landscape. When we in our music units are presented a chance to lead, we must lead.

Secondly, we should find ways for our daily musical work and offerings to be imagined even more fully as ways to gather persons in our community who need gathering (envision the Bernstein Mass). We musicians know that music has the capacity to unite, but how can we assist others to experience music in ways that promotes appreciation for its collective power and not just its personal meaning to each of us, more consciously, intentionally, and even ubiquitously? The Alma Mater of the University of South Carolina, for instance, begins this way: “We hail thee Carolina and sing thy high praise.” This line demonstrates in a most poignant way, music’s potential for building community around purpose and shared vision. There are numerous occasions when as many as 80,000 persons sing this phrase together as a Gamecock Nation (or even when we just write it down on a commencement program). When we do so, most folks are not as conscious of the meaning of those words as some of us are—we do not “hail Carolina” by solving for X “the high praise” or by buying low and selling high “the high praise” or by first doing no harm “the high praise.” We hail by SINGING and singing together. I often quote this and propel its meaning whenever I feel it is needed or forgotten amongst members of our university community in Columbia and beyond—and it is always effective. Everyone of us has examples on our own campuses like this—of how music brings us together—we just have to find them, develop them, and employ them regularly, but also carefully and always authentically.

And lastly, we must remember this...always...that though science on this matter is only still advancing at this point, it has not yet been able to tell us much about why, we musicians believe, both consciously and intuitively, that music saves. Its power to make us happier, healthier, safer, more fulfilled, and more hopeful is something we musicians experience every day. We believe it deeply. But although we *believe* it, we don't *know* it for sure, and even more purposefully, we don't know *why* music has these effects. Not knowing something for sure and not knowing *WHY* we do not know it is disconcerting absolutely, but I must add that the great part about not knowing *why* music affects us as it does is that we are constantly journeying to learn why and it is through that journey that we learn to hope. I would like to make sure that we always remember, throughout our lives, those of our colleague and student musicians or even just music lovers, *and our university officials and leaders as well*, that there is no greater power for hope in our world than a love for and yearning for music. Even when one thinks profoundly about what promotes hope, it is always hard to determine what it is in our psyches that creates and propels our hopefulness. Yet, striving to turn some intense feelings into something we can know is the greatest etude for feeling hopeful we can undertake.

I recall at the 2008 NASM Annual Meeting in Seattle a speaker referred to music as the “currency of hope.” I suggest this is exactly what music is, although it is also many, many other things as well. We must remember at those moments when we are shaken by federal mandates, or we are damaged by budget cuts, or threatened by any of a whole host of other threats, that the richness of music that has propelled us through the years has the power to sustain all and that one of our great responsibilities as a musician, music advocate, and collegiate music executive is to make this known—to proudly shout it with our voices and with our music—an activity that bring us joy, a joy we often need. Music is the currency of hope, so we must be good bankers and distribute that currency. This will not only improve the lives of the people around us, it will improve ours too.

As it relates to hope, until recently, I always believed that music inspired hopefulness primarily through its uniquely human way of unfolding over time, with tension and release, where listeners or makers of music embrace the tension and hope for the release. When we engage with musical tension and anticipate release, that anticipation is the cornerstone of a kind of aesthetic hopefulness that translates naturally to a whole-life hopefulness much bigger than just music. I still believe all of this to an extent, but through working hard to leverage the impact of music’s inspiration for good on my campus, I have to come know now, with respect to music and hope, there is much more.

Hope is manifest in listening to or making music when we search for meaning where the meaning is obscured in abstraction, just as it must be, just as it cannot otherwise be. I believe that it is during our searches for something knowable in a world of musical sound which can never be entirely known that we practice and perfect the act of being hopeful. The quest, the search, and anticipation for meaning, a meaning we can never fully know but we can always seek to experience more deeply, is what creates the hope and drives this desire for unity. When we are moved listening or making music it is through our witness of beauty, a mystical connection we feel but do not comprehend. The more we know about musical sound, the more context and the greater knowledge we have of the musical stimulus at that moment. But even that knowledge does not help us to understand better why such reactions make us feel more hopeful. Music’s power is not knowable, but could not be more real.

This great organization, NASM, that brings us here today and inspires us in many ways, supports not only the inestimable role music plays in the comprehension of a college learning environment, it also provides us both the pathways and the vehicles to advance music’s place in efforts that can unite us with those who hold common interests for the purpose of improving society, and helping us be more hopeful. The standards of accreditation to which we have all signed on and that we ourselves can and do change and augment as needed, hold musical excellence and essentiality at their core. Our standards guide our current work and our future goals and they do this even more fully in 2025 where civic statistics show that 42% hold confidence in our institutions, than the standards did in 2015 when the positive public perception of American higher education writ large was

at 60%. This inverse proportionality is not lost on me and it should not be lost on any of us. Our college and university decision-makers need to observe the very reasons for this, be aware of them, and witness them themselves. And, it is up to us to deliver the message to them, in whole new ways or with enhanced strategies that provide and share musical experiences that, as noted before, enable us to work to rebuild the public trust in our institutions.

The work undertaken by our hired executive staff in Washington, D.C. to defend our autonomy and the established and regularly-demonstrated excellence of music teaching, learning, and delivery to the various relevant political offices when we must, sustains us in ways in which none of us are completely familiar or often even truly and fully understand. The availability and institutional use of data, statistical and research-based, that is collected from and for us by those in Reston, VA has served to improve the achievements at one time or another of probably every single NASM member institution in this room and likely dozens more not with us today.

And finally, this meeting, and others like it, allow us to share with one another ideas, plans, successful and not-so-successful ventures, and our own aspirations that we hope have led us over the years to greater accomplishment and confirmed successes. The phenomenon of connecting and collaborating as a part of the Annual Meeting is at the heart of NASM and has been since its founding in 1924. It is the greatest gift provided us by our NASM.

For both new and old music executives sitting here today I urge you to get to know the depth and reach of NASM more fully, participate more deeply and more often in NASM activities and discussions, and be ever mindful of the greatest of our purposes: "To advance the cause of music in American life and especially in higher education." I believe that nothing less than a vibrant and impactful future for all of American higher education depends on it.

Thank you.