



Overview of Findings

Engaging Next Generation Audiences: A Study of College Student Preferences towards Music and the Performing Arts

By Alan S. Brown

**Research Commissioned by the
Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College**

**Funding for this study was provided by
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**

May 2013

About the Study

With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College commissioned a multi-site research effort in 2012 aimed at gauging how to maximize college students' performing arts attendance and participation, with a focus on the particular challenges of classical music. The study culminated in June 2013 with a national symposium of students, faculty and campus presenters drawn from the Major University Presenters (MUP) consortium to analyze and form action recommendations out of the research.

Research Partners

- Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire (commissioning partner)
- Carolina Performing Arts, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- Hancher, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa
- Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois
- Lied Center of Kansas, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas
- Texas Performing Arts, University of Texas, Austin, Texas
- University Musical Society, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
- UW World Series, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

The research was led by WolfBrown of San Francisco, California, under the direction of Alan Brown. Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard, Rebecca Ratzkin, Kyle Marinshaw and Zachary Kemp of WolfBrown contributed much to the research. We are especially grateful to Julia Floberg, Joe Clifford and Jeff James of the Hopkins Center for their support and significant contributions to the study, especially the case study research.

As part of the study design, Mr. Brown worked with student researchers on each of the eight campuses during the 2012-13 academic year, conducting student interviews and focus group discussions and reviewing and interpreting the WolfBrown research. The student researchers also undertook a range of student engagement projects in order to create a living laboratory, and to situate the research in a practical context. To ensure that the study findings and the resultant Call to Action reflect the views of students, the student researchers attended the culminating symposium at Dartmouth and contributed much to the Call to Action.

Research Questions

To build support and integrate more closely with academic life, campus-based performing arts presenters across the US find themselves giving more thought to student engagement, and considering new ways of inculcating the performing arts into academic life. While campus presenters have a strong interest in increasing



student participation, arts groups of all types often struggle to motivate attendance amongst younger adults, and seek a better understanding of the barriers and incentives that will build demand within this critical cohort, in hopes of awakening an appreciation for the arts and influencing future consumption behaviors.

A good deal of scholarly research points to the important role that arts preferences (especially music) play in the socialization and identity development of teens and young adults. In the arts sector, audience studies conducted for numerous arts presenters and producers indicate strong correlations between arts involvement in high school and college and attendance as an adult. Given the critical importance of the formative college years to the aesthetic development of the marketplace and the overall health of the arts ecology, there is an urgent need to better understand college students' attitudes and behaviors with respect to the performing arts, and music in particular given its dominance and accessibility as a form.

Campus presenters are uniquely situated to offer students foundational arts experiences that stimulate creativity, deepen learning, and open them up to new aesthetic possibilities that may pay lifelong dividends. In commissioning this study, the Hopkins Center and its partners aimed to gain a better understanding of undergraduate students' attitudes and experience with the performing arts, with a focus on classical music. The overall purpose of the study was to inform the efforts of campus presenters in developing new and improved programs and activities for students.

The primary research questions addressed by the study are:

- What preferences, attitudes and past experiences with the performing arts do students have when they arrive at college?
- What types of presentations, formats and settings will attract more students?
- What should campus-based presenters be doing to better engage students?
- Knowing that not all students are alike, what strategies should be employed to attract different segments of students?
- How can students be actively involved with performing artists and the creative process?
- What introductory experiences and access should all students have, as a matter of policy?
- How can presenters work with faculty to make curriculum connections?

Study Products

The research generated four products, which may be accessed separately:

1. **Overview of Findings and Call to Action**, a synthesis of all the research findings, to be combined with a summary of the June 2013 symposium and disseminated nationally;



2. **Case Studies in Good Practice**, a stand-alone report describing a wide range of existing practices in building student participation in the performing arts, from ticketing policies to academic integration;
3. **Consolidated Focus Group Report**, a high level summary of 18 focus group discussions conducted on seven campuses, with a deep focus on barriers to classical music attendance and strategies for surmounting them;
4. **Results of a Survey of Undergraduate Students on Seven University Campuses**, a detailed summary and technical report on a survey of 9,786 undergraduate students on seven campuses, covering arts participation patterns, music preferences and attitudes about classical music attendance.

All products from the study may be downloaded for free at a website set up by the Hopkins Center, at https://hop.dartmouth.edu/online/student_engagement

Questions about the study or its dissemination should be directed to Joe Clifford of the Hopkins Center or Alan Brown of WolfBrown.

Overview of Findings

College students are an idiosyncratic and enigmatic market segment. On the one hand, college undergraduates in the formative 18-22 age band represent a prime opportunity to develop future audiences. The arts can play a pivotal role in their journey of intellectual discovery and social awakening. They are destined, as college-educated adults, to participate in the arts at much higher rates than those without a college experience. In short, the aesthetic development of young adults is strategic to the future health of the arts sector, and, as some have argued, to the economic competitiveness of the nation.¹

On the other hand, there are major questions as to the reasons why a campus presenter – or any other type of arts group – would invest in the experience of college students. They are an elusive and notoriously fickle customer segment, typically unable or unwilling to pay full price for tickets, and often preferring to leave their options open until the very last minute. Those who are successfully engaged in the arts during their years on campus typically move on to other communities after graduating, and therefore will not become supporters of the arts programs that invest in them. From a short-term “return on investment” standpoint, college students are a losing proposition.

¹ Tepper, S. and Kuh, G., “Let’s Get Serious About Cultivating Creativity,” *The Chronicle of Higher*



The justification for engaging students, therefore, must derive from mission – whether mandated by a university, or through an institutional commitment to integrating the arts into the heart of intellectual life. In offering the results of this study, we do not presuppose that every arts group – or even every campus presenter – has a moral obligation to serve college students, or high school students, or any other constituency. But for those who do have a mandate to serve students, or for those who are curious about opening up their programs to more college students, this study has much to offer.

Performing Arts Background

Many students arrive at college with experience making music. Six in ten undergraduates (not including arts majors) reported at least some high school involvement in band, orchestra, choir or vocal ensemble, according to survey results. Nearly a third reported “frequent” involvement in band or orchestra at some point in their high school years. Not unexpectedly, the study found a highly predictive relationship between high school involvement in band/orchestra or choir/vocal ensemble and positive attitudes about classical music and attendance in college. The seeds of arts participation are planted well before college. Performing arts presenters should do what they can to support high school music programs in their region, since these students are most likely to attend in college.

Arts Participation in College

Music, in general, eclipses theater and dance by a wide margin in the aesthetic landscape of current student participation in the performing arts. Twenty-two percent of students across the seven campuses attend live concerts by professional singers or musicians “frequently,” with another 48% reporting “occasional” attendance at live concerts (any style of music). In other words, concert-going is a familiar activity for most college students. From a list of 21 performing arts activities, the top five activities amongst undergraduate students are:

1. Download or stream music from the Internet (73% “frequent”)
2. Social dancing at clubs or parties (23% “frequent”)
3. Attend live concerts by professional musicians (any style of music) (22% “frequent”)
4. Watch TV shows about music or music competitions (19% “frequent”)
5. DJ or make playlists (13% “frequent”)

The curatorial mode of music consumption dominates. Nearly three-quarters of all students indicate that they “frequently” download or stream music from the Internet, and another 20% do so “occasionally.” This corroborates focus group data indicating a strong interest among students in selecting and organizing music for their own listening pleasure, and in sharing their playlists via websites like Spotify.

Programmatic Points of Entry



In the 18 focus group discussions, student respondents were asked to identify the types of performing arts programs they'd be most likely to attend, and then asked to explain their answers. Results are exploratory in nature and should not be generalized, but nevertheless offer insight into the kinds of programs that might serve as points of entry into the world of on-campus arts presentations by visiting artists. The most promising entry points suggested by the data include:

- Stage plays with contemporary plots
- Orchestra concerts that involve a visual element (e.g., film scores)
- Hip hop dance performances, perhaps involving a social dance event in conjunction with the performance
- Student ensemble performances
- Performances featuring “star” performers
- Performances in informal settings, or featuring unconventional formats

The ability of the human voice to express poetry, emotion and vocal rhythm came through as an underlying attribute driving preference for “contemporary stage plays” and “spoken word” events. The availability of a plot to follow was cited as a common factor associated with preference for both ballet and stage plays, especially works dealing with contemporary issues or themes.²

Interest in classical music tended to be driven by the promise of virtuosity or a celebrity performer. Note that orchestra concerts received the second highest overall ranking, while chamber music received the lowest overall ranking, suggesting that conventionally presented chamber music concerts are not a good entry point for most students. This does not mean that unconventional chamber music presentations (i.e., unconventional with respect to artist, format or setting) will not appeal to some.

A strong finding across the focus groups was the appeal of student ensemble performances, fueled by a personal connection to one or more student performers. Results suggest that student performances can serve as a key point of entry, both in terms of social accessibility and price.

While these results might be seen as somewhat of a popularity contest driven by familiarity, there are implications for how presenters might think in terms of points of entry for student audiences. In general, the diversity of findings across sites suggests that presenters should think in terms of offering multiple points of entry for students, corresponding to the diversity of students with respect to cultural tastes and level of experience with the arts. Moreover, the optimal points of entry may vary from campus to campus, depending on the amount of cultural diversity amongst students, and other factors.

² Note that Broadway shows were not tested in this exercise.



Presenters aiming to serve more students must reconsider how students' needs figure into the very core of the curatorial process. Should students' needs be factored into programming decisions, or should student engagement opportunities be organized around programming decisions made for other constituencies?

Music Preferences

In general, music preferences tend to be organized along two continua, one dimension spanning preference for the more traditional genres of music (including classical, world music, jazz, opera, Broadway), from like to dislike, and another dimension spanning preference for contemporary forms such as hip hop and country, from like to dislike.

As might be expected, students voiced the strongest preference levels for “indie or alternative rock” (43% “strongly like”), “classic rock and oldies” (34%) and “contemporary rock and pop” (29%). Preference for classical music is relatively strong compared to other styles of music. For example, “classical music,” as a genre, is “strongly liked” by 21% of respondents, compared to 22% for “rap or hip hop” and 19% for “house, trance or electronic dance music” and 18% for “jazz or blues.” Only 17% of respondents indicated negative preference for classical music, compared to 23% for jazz or blues, and 55% for opera. Results should dispel any lingering fears that classical music is distained by a majority of college students. In fact, survey results suggest that three in 10 students might be considered “classical music prospects” – with positive preference levels and an openness to attending a live classical concert, but not already attending regularly. The study found no evidence of a “smoking gun” of distaste for classical music, although the same is not true for opera, which appears to languish at the very fringe of the taste spectrum of the typical undergraduate.

By and large, the musical tastes of college students are eclectic. In this and other studies we have found that younger adults resist categorizing their tastes in music according to genre categories used historically in the arts industry. Arts groups hoping to stimulate a preference for classical music amongst young adults must therefore think outside the definitional boundaries of ‘classical music.’ Survey results suggest that preference for classical music tends to develop along with an appreciation for an array of music genres including jazz or blues, folk, gospel, world music, and even musical theater. Specific strategies for increasing classical music participation are discussed in the focus group summary report.

More on Preference Discovery

While some students seek out new artistic influences on their own (e.g., through self-guided discovery), the data strongly suggests that taste is socially transmitted amongst college students. In focus groups, undergraduates expressed interest in learning about the musical tastes of people they like, and people they want to know better. Survey respondents described learning about new artists from friends, typically through personal recommendations via social media or music sites.



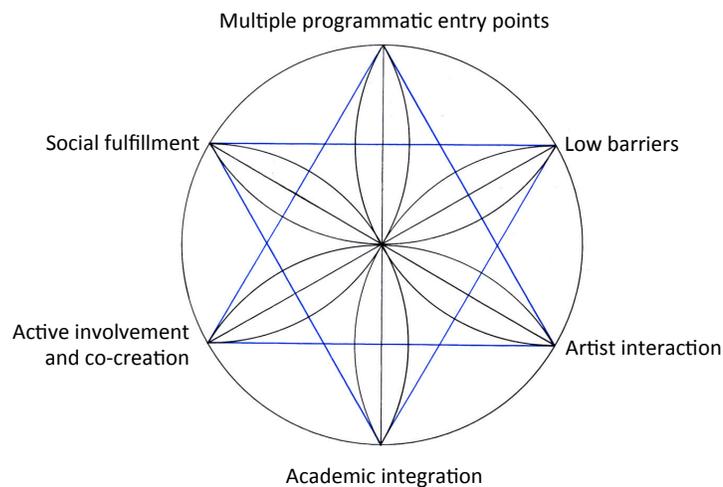
According to survey results, students learn about new or unfamiliar music in three ways: 1) through technology-aided discovery methods (i.e., streaming audio, social media, and playlists – by far the most prevalent channel of preference discovery); 2) through radio and television; and 3) through browsing stores, local clubs, and reading music reviews. The prevalence of technology-aided preference discovery is consistent with social media use patterns and consumption of digital media overall, and again illustrates the critical importance of digital media to student engagement. One might reasonably conclude that arts presenters should attempt to engage students in the streaming audio/video space (e.g., Spotify playlists, Pandora channels and YouTube channels) if they hope to build bridges between live attendance and personal listening, and expose students to a broader aesthetic spectrum of music.

Much remains to be learned about preference discovery – how and why people “acquire” taste, and what motivates them to try something new. This is an emerging area of research in the arts.

Implications for Engaging College Students

Looking across the case study research, the focus group results and the survey findings, six strategies for engaging college students are implied (Figure 1). These strategies are symbiotic, not mutually exclusive, and are seldom employed individually. In sum, they represent a holistic approach to engaging students in the performing arts.

Figure 1. Fostering Student Engagement in the Performing Arts



1. Multiple programmatic entry points

Attracting students is a significant challenge for campus presenters, whose programs are often curated for an audience of dedicated ticket buyers and donors, many of whom are faculty and alumni. It would be nice to think that the arts are universally appealing, but this is simply not the case. Through the lens of students, visiting artist presentations may look like they are designed for a different generation. Offering a range of programmatic entry points curated specifically for students will increase the likelihood of engagement.

“Entry points” might take the form of alternative venues, programming art and artists that will “speak” to students in a language they are likely to understand (e.g., Hip Hop dance, spoken word events, indie rock artists), student ensemble performances, or subtle adjustments to format (e.g., shorter programs, spoken introductions, visual enhancements). As suggested in the case study research, students might even be engaged in the process of curating events (e.g., Stanford Live’s Opening Acts program).

2. Low barriers

Lowering barriers for students is a critical strategy for increasing engagement. Many campus presenters already offer deeply discounted student ticket prices, as illustrated in the case study research. Uptake, however, depends on the presenter’s ability to effectively promote the offer to the student body (e.g., University of Illinois’s “Push for Art” campaign). Survey results suggest that the cost barrier and social barriers (e.g., “no one to go with”) are most salient amongst students who are already inclined to attend. Other barriers can be addressed through marketing, educational, and programmatic initiatives:

- Time constraints might be surmounted by offering shorter programs at more convenient times for students;
- Social barriers (e.g., lack of social support for arts attendance) might be lowered by working through student groups that provide a pre-existing social context;
- Perceptual barriers relating to setting/venue might be lowered by re-contextualizing the art in alternative or unexpected settings (e.g., dorms, book stores, outdoor settings);
- Perceptual barriers around expectations of formality might be addressed through communications and format adjustments.

The biggest barrier for students without a pre-existing interest in the arts is the anxiety resulting from feeling that they’ll not know enough to enjoy the experience. What can presenters do to mitigate this barrier? According to focus group results, negative experiences at performing arts programs relate to “stuffy audience” experiences, behavioral restrictions imposed by the setting, programs that are perceived to be too long, lack of intimacy in concert settings, and lack of connection with the artists, especially orchestra musicians.



Offering educational activities in conjunction with performances is a good start to deconstructing perceptual barriers, but the answer is not so simple. More likely, the most potent antidote to negative preconceptions is a positive trial experience.

3. Social fulfillment

A good deal of audience research points to an inverse relationship between art form knowledge and social motivations. Individuals with lower levels of experience with an art form are more likely to attach a premium to the social aspect of attendance. The promise of social fulfillment, of course, is what gets a lot of people out the door to arts events, and college students are no different. While a segment of students with higher levels of arts experience might be sufficiently motivated to attend based solely on the artistic offer, the promise of social fulfillment is likely to increase engagement amongst a larger segment of students with only a modest knowledge of the arts. Case study research points to a number of effective practices involving pre- and post-performance social events or educational events with a social dimension, and even the creation of a specially designated lobby space for students (e.g., Univ. of Texas “The Loft” space). But a range of other factors can influence social fulfillment, such as ticket incentives for bringing friends, longer intermissions, more engaging lobby spaces, policies around use of mobile devices, and even the nature of the art itself (e.g., call and response techniques).

Making arts experiences more socially fulfilling is a core issue for the entire arts sector. Campus presenters can be at the forefront of experimentation in this area.

4. Artist interaction

Interactions with artists before, during or after performances, or in the classroom, can be transformative for students, as illustrated in the case study research (e.g., Univ. of Maryland’s “A Chinese Home” project). Artist interactions can be transformative with respect to an aesthetic awakening (e.g., focus group respondents cited personal interactions with artists as a catalyst for reversing negative perceptions of a particular kind of art) or in terms of offering the student a window into his or her own creative process (e.g., Montclair State University’s *Creative Thinking* course).

Faculty, when provided with advance information, can integrate artist conversations or lecture/demonstrations into course schedules (e.g., Dartmouth’s Curricular Connections Guide), and sometimes into curricula (Univ. of Michigan’s *Mavericks and Renegades* course). Artist interactions can be time-consuming to plan and expensive, if artists require additional fee. And not all artists are ideally suited for this work. The Creative Campus Innovations grant program,³ administered by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable

³ See www.creativecampus.org



Foundation, generated numerous other examples of the deep connections between artists and students that are possible when resources permit.

All campus presenters have a unique role to play in orchestrating interactions between artists and students. From curriculum-based classroom exchanges to social dances with members of a visiting dance company, much good work in this vein is already underway. How can presenters, agents and artists work collaboratively to ensure that opportunities for student engagement become a routine part of every campus visit? Innovative uses of technology may lower the barriers to artist interaction in the future.

5. Active involvement and co-creation

Other research points to a shift in value towards active forms of arts participation, especially amongst younger adults.⁴ On a number of college campuses, the value attached to arts-based learning is growing, supported by advances in the learning sciences and the realization that creativity drives global competitiveness. Steven Tepper of Vanderbilt University writes, “As opposed to passive classroom learning, when we learn with and through the arts, we have the opportunity to ‘change something’ – to use our bodies, along with our minds, to transform an object or a space. Doing is learning.”⁵

Engaging audiences through “co-creation” and other forms of active participation is the frontier of audience development. Many arts groups are not yet comfortable with this shift, because it seems to challenge the value system around sitting quietly in a hall and fully absorbing an artist’s work. The case study research illustrates that there are many ways to actively engage students – not just intellectually, but creatively, expressively, and physically (e.g., Cuyahoga Community College’s Project Gilgamesh), and that active engagement can magnify the impact of a live performance. Campus presenters are designing fun and creative student activities that link to artists’ presentations (e.g., College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University’s integration of performing arts activities into its first-year orientation program). But much more experimentation is needed to develop a more robust body of practice in this area.

6. Academic integration

Integrating the performing arts more deeply into academic life is a new mandate for some campus presenters, a long-term goal for others, and perhaps the most challenging of the six strategies for engaging college students. Many aspects of a

⁴ [Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation](#), 2011, commissioned by the James Irvine Foundation.

⁵ [Placing the Arts at the Heart of the Creative Campus](#), 2012, by Alan S. Brown and Steven J. Tepper, Ph.D., commissioned by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters



university's structure and culture stand in the way of broader adoption of arts-based learning, especially when modifications to existing curricula are involved. The challenge is made more complex and more resource-intensive by the ephemeral nature of programming (i.e., different artists every year) and the consequent need to design and implement one-off residencies.

Two approaches to academic integration are covered in the case study research: 1) building curricular ties (e.g., Hancher's involvement in the Univ. of Iowa's faculty training institute); and 2) dedicated coursework that focuses students on the creative process (e.g., Montclair), drawing on the perspectives of a rotating roster of visiting artists. Key to sustaining this kind of activity is establishing renewable relationships with academic partners and identifying recurring curricular ties or "slots" that visiting artists can fill without a great deal of preparation.

This is new territory for most campus presenters. Working with artists and academic departments across campus requires presenters to cast themselves in a new role, doing what Elizabeth Long Lingo and Siobhán O'Mahoney refer to as "nexus work"⁶ – understanding the disparate needs of partners, identifying opportunities for mutual success, and managing complex creative projects. While this may seem like a tall order, campus presenters are well positioned to assert this role and demonstrate a new level of creative leadership.

Summary

The primary outcome of student engagement in the arts is one of supporting pedagogy, offering students a window into the creative process, and broadening students' perspectives on the world. The beneficiary of this work is the student, and, ultimately, the university, by way of heightened academic achievement and higher student satisfaction levels.

The research, in its totality, identifies significant barriers to student participation in the arts, but also offers encouragement. Many students are interested and even passionate about the arts, including classical music. Engaging them more deeply, however, will require additional resources and a re-thinking of closely held assumptions about curating art for a new generation. The sharing of research – and especially the sharing, adaptation and replication of good practice – is critical to the advancement of student engagement in the arts.

For colleges and universities that are serious about integrating the arts with student learning, there are many exciting opportunities for exploring creativity through the performing arts. There is much more experimentation to do, especially looking

⁶ Long Lingo, E. and Siobhán O'Mahony, S. (2010). "[Nexus work: Brokerage on Creative Projects.](#)" *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55: 47-81.



through the lens of scalability and thinking about how to ensure that all students graduate with a baseline level of arts engagement, whether through orientation, academic coursework or voluntary attendance at live performances.

