

A Student's Guide to Restructuring the Musical Theatre BFA Degree Curriculum

Executive Summary

The Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Musical Theatre is renowned nationally for its rigor, success, and prestige. Students engage in highly intensive training programs through the lens of being a college student. This means students are required to take large course loads and participate in a multitude of extracurricular theatre events, such as masterclasses, rehearsals, and performances. As a musical theatre student myself, I understand the intensive workload of this major can lead to being restricted from outside opportunities, including student organizations, other degrees, and job aspirations. This begged the question “Is this the best design of the BFA curriculum? Or is there a way to restructure the BFA curriculum to make it more diverse, accepting, and ideal for students?”. This is the question I seek to answer through curriculum research from the top musical theatre programs in the country. This paper addresses the problems currently faced by musical theatre students and proposes solutions in the form of recommendations to BFA programs.

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May 12, 2022

Introduction

As a junior musical theatre major at the University of Oklahoma, I have collected my own observations and reflections on the structure of a BFA degree through the experiences of my peers and I. The Bachelor of Fine Arts is a rigorous degree for art students looking to graduate college with a degree before pursuing a career within the arts, where students are often defined as pre-professionals (Penn State University College of Arts and Architecture 2022). This degree for musical theatre majors includes a variety of acting, dancing, and singing training, in addition to the general education requirements. Each aspect of the program is geared towards helping students maximize their education and talent before they pursue a career. Through my own experience, I am a double major, while being involved in numerous collegiate organizations, holding a job, and being a member of the Honors College. The multitude of activities I have piled onto my plate have been extremely rewarding, but quite difficult to achieve due to the structure of the BFA degree. While I have felt my talent has improved, I do not feel that my college experience has allowed for extensive personal freedom or equity. This has led me to question the effectiveness of the design of the BFA degree for Musical Theatre majors. Does the current BFA, across top university programs, equate to high degrees of professional success? Is the BFA as it is now the best option for students? Is the BFA as accessible, affordable, and as equitable as it could possibly be? Or is there a way to improve upon this program to create an overall better experience for the college student?

Research Question

My question is focusing on how to create the ideal Bachelor of Fine Arts curriculum for a collegiate musical theatre student. How can the curriculum be changed to create a more positive

and direct correlation with greater benefits for students? Essentially, how can the degree be changed to lead to more student happiness, accessibility, opportunities, and lower debt? I am seeking to restructure the BFA degree for students in order to improve the output of students who are still passionate about their art and create a more direct throughline of school to job security. My goal is that by answering this question, directors of BFA degrees can start thinking about how restructuring their program may be more beneficial for the students overall. This intent is to not doubt the validity of the BFA program, which is consistently valid, but to maximize the effectiveness of the BFA degree, making output for students greater than input. Thus, this research should not be viewed as an efficiency study of a BFA degree. This is a mere question focusing on curriculum evaluation and opportunity analysis with the goal of creating the most beneficial and healthy collegiate experience for students as possible.

Literature Review

To help establish the need for this piece, I conducted research across a variety of sources. Musical theatre in higher education is under researched and underdeveloped, thus much of my work originates from personal experience. However, multiple sources proved beneficial for establishing my research.

The first of these sources is the book “Art in the College Program of General Education” written by Ernest Ziegfeld. Ziegfeld discusses the philosophy behind general education in combination with the integration of arts into society. By discussing both of these fields in the first two parts of his book, he is able to integrate the two to analyze the purpose and problems of a college arts program. One takeaway from Ziegfeld that is key to my study is that he writes that students must play an active role in planning their coursework and curriculum (Ziegfeld 1953). He states that students work most effectively when able to play an active role in their

coursework's makeup and participate in activities that do not just occur within the classroom. This principle establishes the underlying concept of my paper- that students flourish when they can actively change their coursework and pursue activities of their own choosing.

Additionally, the article "The Benefits of Participating in Extracurricular Activities" by Claudette Christison establishes the benefits of extracurricular activities for students in and out of college. This article discusses how participating in activities outside of classes can have positive social rewards, mental health benefits, and a greater chance for development (Christison 2013). This helps form my argument that the curriculum of a BFA needs to be modified in order to help students have more time to engage in activities and events outside of a musical theatre class.

Another crucial resource for my research comes from a plenary on diversity and equity conducted at the ATHE's 2016 Committee Conference. A variety of speakers spoke on behalf of DEI within higher education theatre to then be published in the newspaper of John Hopkins University, under *Theatre Topics* (Howe et al 2017). These speakers suggest multiple ways to promote diversity and equity within a higher education theatre program, including diversifying hiring, programming, admissions, etc. These points helped me form the impetus for my research: to make musical theatre programs in higher education more accepting and equitable through curriculum changes. The changes I suggest draw directly from the ideas presented here to make BFA programs more inclusive of all different types of students.

Arguably, the most critical source I evaluated was a dissertation by Elizabeth Anne Gerbi entitled "A 21st Century Model for a Two-Year Musical Theatre Curricula". This dissertation establishes that college culture usually creates pathways for diverse populations of students to pursue a wide variety of college experiences. However, she argues that the collegiate musical theatre programs, specifically for two years' length, do not adhere to this (Gerbi 2021).

Furthermore, these programs are often composed of upper middle class white students and do not often accept students with diverse backgrounds (Gerbi 2021). To combat these problems, she structures her own curriculum with the focus of increasing acceptance. Her own curriculum ideas were key to my research, as both of our work stems from addressing issues of equality and equity within the collegiate musical theatre world.

Measurements and Analysis

The impetus for this research question originates from the personal experiences of myself and my peers within a BFA program. I was drawn to analyzing the BFA when my fellow students across top BFA Musical Theatre programs were experiencing burnout, a lack of equitable opportunities, and dishonesty. Students reported that they felt that the BFA degree prestige was not worth the rigor or the lack of outside opportunities. This idea of students being prevented by the rigor of the program from pursuing outside degrees, opportunities, and work led to my foundational data.

I started my analysis by comparing the degree sheets between the BFA degrees and more traditional degrees. When looking at eight of the top BFA programs within the United States, I sought to understand what makes a BFA unique from a BA or BS. How is the curriculum more or less intense? Where are the majority of hours needed to graduate being spent? I compared three separate degrees to acquire this base understanding of what makes a BFA uniquely rigorous. I compared the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre to a BA in English and a BS in Biology. My findings came from the most recently available online degree sheets from the following universities: the University of Oklahoma, Elon University, Penn State University, the University of Michigan, Texas State University, Florida State University, Ithaca College, and Shenandoah University. I choose these institutions based on their high ranking BFA for Musical Theatre, in

addition to their academic integrity. I needed schools that all measured curriculum in units of hours and that values academic majors, as well as strictly arts majors. In comparing the makeup of the curriculum of these three majors at the above listed eight universities, I found overwhelming statistical evidence to support that the BFA major is more restrictive and demanding, if the level of rigor is measured by how large the percentage of major hours required is out of hours required to graduate. After calculating the percentage of major hours out of graduation-level required hours per major per each school, I found that the average percentage of hours required within the BFA for musical theatre out of the total hours to graduate is 71.5%. This finding suggests that an average of 71.5% of classes that a musical theatre major will take must be within that major. However, the average percentage for the BA in English is 29.63% and the average percentage for a BS in Biology is 42.75%. These percentages show that the musical theatre degree, on average, requires students to take more classes and more hours for their area of study than students studying biology and english. These two more “academic” degrees provide students with less training than the students receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts. This contradicts the stereotype that students pursuing the arts have an easier course load and workload.

Additionally, this provides evidence that Musical Theatre majors have the least availability to pursue classes outside of the major or study additional degrees. Here Musical Theatre majors in general are pigeon-holed into one course of study. This is contradictory to the idea that students often choose the college path to be exposed to a wide array of classes, ideas, and subjects. If a student wants to pursue an outside degree in addition to their Musical Theatre degree, this data proves that they would often have to pile on the maximum amount of credits to

graduate on time. This leaves students with little to no free time for work, social activities, or mental rest.

The high degree of courses required within the Musical Theatre degree itself, opposed to English students or Biology students, led me to question if these arts students were receiving adequate credit hours for their already extensive workload. Of the surveyed schools, only $\frac{3}{4}$ provided any credit compensation for shows, and often the amount awarded for a show would be one credit hour. However, students often pour roughly one hundred hours into a school Main Stage production, or a show that is in process for roughly two months. At the University of Oklahoma, we receive one “practice credit hour” for our involvement in shows, labeled “Performance Practicum” (University of Oklahoma Weitzenhoffer College of Fine Arts 2022). This hour is earned through performance participation in a show, combined with a final paper. However, according to the International Affairs office in the U.S. Department of Education, one practice hour is equivalent to 3-4 hours per week of supervised or independent practice. However, rehearsals often mean students are working on the required show from 7-10 at nights, and at least one 9-5 day on the weekends. This amounts to a 23 hour workload per week, at minimum. Following the guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Education, these shows would be worth a six or seven credit hour course (U.S. Department of Education). However, it is important to take into account that shows often last only half a semester. Thus, it would be more accurate for a show to resemble a lab course, and receive three or four credit hours.

This is important to consider when looking at the structure of a BFA degree as it proves students are not being academically rewarded for their time commitment and their hard work. With a multitude of physical hours equating into only one credit hour, the BFA forces students to fill these “missing” hours with other required courses it sets in place. A vicious cycle is then

created whereby students are forced into a higher number of courses and practices without compensation. Hereby students do not have time for extracurriculars or outside opportunities. The lack of proper crediting students for their work keeps students restricted to their singular degree and college. This sets an inherent systemic precedent of students being taken advantage of within the BFA degree.

Results

From this limited data from the degree sheets and credit hours of top BFA Musical Theatre programs, it is evident that Musical Theatre students have a high workload and high expectations on their plate. This is validated by the overwhelming majority of classes being mandatory within the major, the lack of proper credit hours for time and effort, and the large number of credits needed to graduate within four years. These high demands create a rigorous mindset where students must always be “pre-professionals” and never simply college students (Penn State University College of Arts and Sciences 2022). In fact, BFAs often pride themselves on this idea of a prestigious, demanding atmosphere where students are treated as professionals. However, is this what is best for the students? Due to the inherent mentality and structure of the BFA, students quickly fatigue, lose their passion, and experience an increase in negativity. This can lead to burnout (The Best Schools 2021). They do not have time to participate in student-organizations, gain work experience, or advance in outside subject areas. This leads to students emerging from BFAs no longer wishing to pursue performance, but having no other degrees or interests to fall back on. My argument is that in an institution where students are paying the faculty for their education, the main goal of the program should be to create the best experience possible for these students. I believe there is a healthier, more flexible way for BFAs to be structured to more positively impact the students (Gerbi 2021). The following

recommendations are based solely on my previous research, student expression, and my own personal experience. These are not meant to be taken as hard and fast mandates, but listened to as a conversation starter for changing a system that is hurting our students.

BFA programs and students have shared values and goals that make adjusting the curriculum ideal. Both students and professors alike exist in the BFA program to help students have professional careers and grow into passionate artists. These goals are based on shared values for success, creativity, and positivity. Professors seek to create the healthiest, most beneficial environment for students as possible to become full-fledged adults, artists, and working professionals. Students, similarly, desire a positive college experience that leads them to these results. These shared interests lead to a common desire to make the BFA as beneficial as possible. With this logic, both students and professors would benefit from an improved BFA curriculum and should embrace new ideas.

Recommendations

There are a multitude of ideas from both students and professors to alter a program and create improvements, often focusing on faculty changes, show suggestions, or mentality adjustments. The alterations I propose focus specifically on altering the curriculum to make it more accepting, equitable, healthy, and fruitful for college students pursuing a BFA in Musical Theatre. These changes aim to make the BFA the best it can possibly be for students paying for the college experience.

The first adjustment I propose is the concept of Required versus Recommended. In my current BFA Musical Theatre program at the University of Oklahoma, there is a heavy emphasis on required aspects of the program, such as additional masterclasses, show participation, or auditions. Opposed to students having the ability to choose which extracurricular musical theatre

opportunities they participate in, often students are forced to join shows or classes they do not have time for. Or often worse, these required activities can prevent students from engaging in outside opportunities. If instead students had the ability to choose which activities they participate in rather than being forced, this would lead to students being able to pursue other opportunities that may benefit them more. Additionally, the individuals who choose to participate will be more engaged and committed to the activity, having voluntarily chosen to be active. This will lead to more fruitful results in the form of individualized attention and direct communication for those participating than if everyone who did not want to attend was required to be there. This mindset will be the foundation for my following recommendations to curriculum change.

One idea is the establishment of tracks. Tracks are different paths students can elect to take to fit their goals and specific needs. Possible musical theatre tracks include a Composition track or Choreography track. Students who choose to take such tracks within a degree then have different major requirements than students on a different track or none at all. Essentially, the track serves as a minor degree that allows students to become experts in their chosen field. Tracks can be beneficial in that they help students with a clear idea of what kind of performer or artist they want to be by giving them a direct path to more intense training in that specific area. If some of the current required dance courses or music courses for all students become only required for students in a specific track, then students without a track have more flexibility and free time to pursue other opportunities. All of these classes would still be recommended for all students, but only required for students with a track. For example, a student who wants to be a composer would be required to take 2 full semesters of piano and music theory, while students without this focus would only be required to take one of each. Or students who want to flourish in dance would take multiple semesters of tap, jazz, hip-hop, and choreography, while outside students

would only be required to take one semester of each dance style. These instances allow students with specific interests in musical theatre to thrive within a track specific degree, while other BFA Musical Theatre students who do not elect to take a track have more time for other aspects of their lives.

Often students wish for more free time to pursue theatre opportunities outside of school, such as auditions, local shows, and summerstock. With the end goal of becoming a theatre professional, it is important for students to gain experience and connections by working with professional theaters. However, students are often prohibited from doing so due to mandatory school shows and performances. With many programs, if a student wishes to do outside work, they must get permission from the department. This leads to students being prohibited from pursuing work that would benefit their careers long-term. I do not wish to undermine the importance of school shows by stressing the importance of professional work. School shows are key for promoting the program, teaching students basic training, and building students resumé's. Unfortunately, upperclassmen are often ready to fly the nest and test their newfound knowledge in other theaters but are restricted from doing so by the program. What I then propose is a work-study option for the junior and senior undergraduate students within the Musical Theatre BFA. This work-study option would operate under the assumption that upperclassmen were not obligated to perform or audition for the university season if they do not wish to do so. Once again, upperclassmen performing at school would be recommended, but not required. This way if a student receives an opportunity to work at a professional theatre or an internship elsewhere, they can receive college credit for doing so. The option of a work-study program also benefits students who often drop out of college to pursue further opportunities. Just this year, three University of Oklahoma Musical Theatre students had to find arrangements to temporarily or

permanently leave school to accept performance opportunities. With the work-study program, these students would not have to jump through hoops in order to complete their degree while working at other theaters. Underclassmen, on the other hand, would still be required to participate in shows through the university. And if upperclassmen are working outside of school shows, underclassmen, who can easily be looked over, get more chances to play a variety of roles and build up their resumé at a younger age. This recommendation not only provides an opportunity for upperclassmen to gain real-world experience, but for underclassmen to train more intensely in their first two years at school.

One final recommendation relates back to my background research which found that students were not being awarded enough credit hours for the work they are doing for performance classes or shows. I suggest that BFA programs across the board recalculate the hours students receive for participation in shows and performances classes. If students are not being fairly rewarded for their work, it creates a spirit of distrust and resentment in the program, as BFA students are often having to work harder and more hours than other students to fulfill their lengthy list of graduation credits. To help reduce this negativity created by overworking students, I believe programs need to adjust their hours plan to give students more credit for their work. This may result in decreasing the course load for musical theatre students as a result. While this may seem like a con, reducing the course load for musical theatre students would free up time for students to take other classes or get a job.

Conclusion

This research has shown that musical theatre students face more academic pressure in their degree plan than students of other majors, such as English or Biology majors. This can be gathered from the degree sheets of the top Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre programs

across the country, in addition to evaluating the U.S. Department of Education's guidelines for credit hours. The pressure musical theatre students face within their degree can lead to a lack of equitable opportunities, a healthy environment, or activities outside of the department. The current BFA degree traps students in the department academically and prevents them from gaining outside experiences. This can lead to resentment of the program, dispassionate artists, and mental and physical burn out of the students. In a program where faculty and students alike aim to create a safe space for students to grow, students are pressured to handle the workload of being a professional since the first day of freshman year. With this workload, students often miss out on the joys and growth that a full college experience can provide. This entails not having the time to pursue other academic subjects, develop a growing social network, or become financially stable through a job. My curriculum restructuring suggestions, including the mindset of Recommended versus Required, the establishment of tracks, the option of a work-study course, and the recalculating of accurate credit hours for coursework, give students the time, flexibility, and encouragement to have a fully developed college career. The goal of these changes would be to create an environment where a BFA degree does not limit students from other opportunities, and where transparency, equitability, and communication grow. With these changes, students will have less required time within the BFA, and instead can try a dual degree, find outside work (whether in theatre or not), join student organizations, cheer loudly at a football game, socialize with people outside of the arts, and most importantly, follow their own college path, opposed to the restrictive path of the current BFA degree.

I hope to continue this research by acquiring public opinion from students and faculty alike to determine the best changes to be made and how to implement these changes in the future. But in the meantime, these recommendations, founded on statistical research, stem from my own

experience as a musical theatre BFA student and will be sent to the universities studied in this paper. While the BFA in Musical Theatre has long been successful and prestigious, this does not mean there is room to grow and change in order to best support our students. The student voice is expressed in these suggestions, and I urge universities to listen to said voice and allow students to become part of the conversation about what needs to change within a BFA degree in Musical Theatre.

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