Reimagining the Academic Performing Arts Center:
Supporting Global Students and Institutions

Kate Preston Keeney

College of Charleston
Arts Management Program
66 George St.
Charleston, SC, 29424
keeneykp@cofc.edu
843.953.0719

Abstract

Performing arts centers are instrumental in the training of students and the production of the performing arts at colleges and universities. This research explores performing arts centers in a reimagined context—one in which higher education institutions are responding to both increased competition and rapid globalization. Colleges and universities are now using performing arts centers to facilitate campus-wide arts-based learning initiatives and promote cross-cultural understanding. Through a discussion of current initiatives and examples, as well as qualitative interview data, I suggest an expanded role for the contemporary university arts center in the U.S. context.

Keywords: performing arts centers, higher education, globalization

1. **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to position the role of performing arts centers on college and university campuses in a new context--a context that considers both the changing higher education landscape and rapid globalization. To be sure, academic institutions support and serve artists, educators, students, and their surrounding communities. Yet, we see the role of academia, and specifically related arts programs, changing over time (Ross 1977; Pollak, Hager, and Rowland 2000; Biemiller 2011). Higher education continues to evolve in the face of national structural and funding changes and rapid globalization. The U.S. population and enrollment at academic institutions will look very different in the future. Additionally, our future labor requirements will demand new knowledge and skill sets (Dixon and Jordan 2018). As such, it is imperative that societies nurture environments that promote creativity and cross-cultural understanding. Of course, the arts offer one way to engage in creative pursuits and understand cultures different than our own.

Despite existing knowledge related to the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of the arts, and the historic development of both the visual and performing arts on college campuses, we continue to experience tension around investing in arts education. On one hand, scholars have observed the continued interest of colleges and universities to invest in arts facilities through a cultural building boom between 1998 and 2001, where 22 percent of cultural facilities projects were academic owned (Woronkowicz et. al 2012). On the other hand, academia is wrestling with questions about disciplines and majors that may leave students with high amounts of student debt, few career opportunities, and limited potential income. As such, the appropriate role of the arts in comprehensive higher education remains a gap in the field. This paper offers new insights on how we may consider academic performing arts facilities and programs in this climate.

This research expands on findings from a larger study completed in 2014 that investigated the role of performing arts facilities in public higher education. Previous findings from these data reported on why public colleges and universities make financial investments in arts facilities in an economically challenged climate (Keeney 2018). In this research, I revisit the interview data through the lens of globalization. I first discuss the current landscape, then review the research method, and conclude with major observations that position these unique arts institutions in new and important ways. Ultimately, I employ qualitative and descriptive data to highlight the ways in which colleges and universities use performing arts centers to facilitate campus-wide arts-based learning initiatives and promote cross-cultural understanding. Both of these initiatives advance higher education, and specifically the arts, in response to national and international changes.

This research has implications for practice. Higher education administrators may use this knowledge to make strategic investments in campus-based arts activities.

2. Context: National and International Trends Impacting Higher Education

Because of the long-standing relationship between the arts and higher education (Dempster 2004), it is necessary to examine both fields simultaneously. Both higher education and the arts share aspirations related to human development. Higher education institutions have historically trained generations of art students and support practicing artists. Yet, a shifting

national and international landscape affects the ways in which we may value and operationalize these institutions and professions.

2.1 National Trends and Implications for the Arts in Higher Education

Even though academic institutions are expanding to address complex social issues and the needs of diverse students, public support for higher education has been unsteady. Political, governmental, cultural, and institutional forces affect state support for public research universities (Weerts and Ronca 2006). Perhaps most importantly, higher education funding is tied to states' overall economic climates. After the 2007 recession in the U.S., colleges and universities experienced deep funding cuts across the country (SHEEO 2011). More recently, states have seen some improvements with 3.7 percent more funding in 2018-19 than the previous year (Toppo 2019), although state support per student remains lower than pre-recession funding amounts (SHEEO 2018).

Unlike ever before, public universities are competing for and needing to generate new resources within a fiscally constrained environment. Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource interdependence theory is applicable to higher education and is particularly useful in this climate. In an open environment, "interdependence exists whenever one actor does not entirely control all of the conditions necessary for the achievement of an action or for obtaining the outcome desired from the action" (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, p. 40). An unfortunate consequence of both a reduction in state funding and increased growth to higher education, is that costs have shifted to students and families through increased tuition (Breslauer 2016). The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (2018) reports that "twenty-eight states relied more heavily on tuition dollars than on state and local appropriations to fund public higher education" in fiscal year 2017.

Increased tuition, university expansions and partnerships, and even mergers and closings signal the funding and revenue changes in the higher education landscape. Non-traditional revenue sources and strategies to gain efficiencies in productivity are commonplace in today's environment. The "cost" of higher education may also be considered in terms of its long-term value, which may be associated with career outcomes and earning potential. This type of assessment may be particularly problematic for arts degrees which can be costly to run and may result in fewer full-time employment opportunities. As such, this landscape perpetuates the longstanding need for organizations to justify public funding for the arts and arts education. Reimagining the role of the arts in higher education as a benefit to all learners in all disciplines is one way to justify arts programs in this policy environment.

2.2 International Trends and Implications for the Arts in Higher Education

In addition to national the social and economic changes affecting higher education, rapid globalization also is impacting the way in which we operationalize internationalization on college and university campuses. Globalization describes an increased movement of assets across geographic and social boundaries (Kim and McLean 2015). In a 2016 interview, Hazelkorn commented on how globalization is affecting--and broadening--the higher education mission. She noted that higher education institutions have "global reach and significance" and that the demand for higher education is increasing (Breslauer 2016). Complex political, social, and

economic issues like health, food security, climate change, etc. are *global* issues. Informed research and academics consider this international context.

Globalization affects higher education in several significant ways. First, colleges and universities are in competition for international students and must be prepared to educate and support diverse cultures. Second, research partnerships extend beyond domestic institutions to global networks working to address twenty-first century problems. Lastly, all students should be prepared for a future in which global mobility is a part; this may take many forms. For example, students may take advantage of study abroad programs, participate in diverse learning communities, learn foreign languages, and engage with new forms of arts and culture, for example. As these practices become more commonplace, students and campus communities will realize the cultural intelligences (Earley and Ang 2003) necessary to live and work globally.

Hazelkorn remarked on the challenge of appropriately preparing students for this complex world. Colleges and universities not only need to offer global exchange programs, but develop new ways for students to develop cultural awareness and abilities at home.

> The real challenge comes with operationalizing this in a meaningful way—appropriate to growing institutional diversity and diversity among the student cohort. It is unrealistic to suggest all students should have an international experience, when in the United States, for example, 40 percent of students are "new-traditional" (e.g., over 25 years and worker-learners). A concern is that cultural exchange will remain socioeconomically determined. (Breslauer 2016, p. 20)

Given this context and the opportunities and challenges that higher education institutions face, we can imagine a renewed role for the performing arts. An emphasis on the arts as a way to understand international contexts and cultures not only aids in comprehensive academic outcomes, but also provides new justification for arts expenditures in an era of reduced resources and competition.

3. Research Method

This research expands upon qualitative data that I obtained during a study in 2014. In the original study, I employed process research (Langley 1999; Lane 1997) to examine the phenomenon of performing arts facility building in higher education. The process research yielded both quantitative and qualitative data on 13 performing arts centers located at public higher education institutions in Virginia (Keeney 2014). I selected Virginia as the context for this research because it is home to 39 public colleges and universities, and the state had made recent investments in performing arts facilities on these campuses (Keeney 2013). I examined state and institution budgets, websites, and organizational documents in order to develop project histories and profiles for each performing arts center. By analyzing documents, I was able to get a sense of the values and beliefs of the institutions in this study (Marshall and Rossman 2011).

In addition to completing institutional profiles, I employed a purposeful sampling technique (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to complete 24 in-depth interviews with arts professionals and higher education administrators. Interview questions were open-ended and allowed the interviewees to respond openly and in detail without significant researcher interference.

Although each interview was different, similarities of instances and patterns eventually emerged, at which point I ceased sampling (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). I audio recorded each interview which allowed me to be an active listener, and later transcribed each recording. Through the transcription process, I made notes about patterns and themes that would later inform my coding schema. My data analysis process was an exploration of relationships and themes constructed inductively. For this study, I returned to the original interview data to develop an area that had previously emerged related to cultural awareness and globalization.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Organization	Profession	Count (24)
Virginia Commission for the Arts	State-level arts professionals	4
Virginians for the Arts	State-level arts professionals	2
Arts Council of Fairfax County	Local-level arts professional	1
CultureWorks, Richmond	Local-level arts professional	1
Norfolk Commission on the Arts and Humanities	Local-level arts professional	1
Office of the Arts, Alexandria	Local-level arts professional	1
Blue Ridge Community College	Higher education institution administrator	1
Christopher Newport University	Higher education institution administrator	1
George Mason University	Higher education institution administrators	2
Hylton Performing Arts Center, George Mason University	Higher education institution administrator	1
Prince William County Board of Supervisors	Local-level policymaker	1
James Madison University	Higher education institution administrator	1
Norfolk State University	Higher education institution administrators	2
Old Dominion University	Higher education institution administrator	1
Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center, Northern Virginia Community College	Higher education institution administrator	1
University of Virginia - Wise	Higher education institution administrator	1
Virginia Commonwealth University	Higher education institution administrator	1
Virginia Tech	Higher education institution administrator	1

4. Discussion

In this section I combine findings from the arts center profiles and qualitative interview data to offer several major observations for the academic arts centers of the future. Each academic arts center had a unique origin story, but as a group, they shared commonalities. These data and examples suggest that academic arts centers are, and will continue to play, an important role in differentiating institutions and serving the diverse needs of globally-oriented students. Of course, performing arts facilities are often built first and foremost for the specialized space needs of arts training and performance. However, these findings position the role of academic arts centers in a way that serves both higher education institutions and global trends in new ways.

4.1 Arts-Based Learning

The arts can be used as a means to develop leadership skills or advance knowledge in other (non-arts) subjects. Arts-based learning strategies are successful because the arts may appeal to one's feelings and have the ability to evoke emotion through which we might develop new connections and capacities (Brenner 2010). Colleges and universities advance the presence and practice of the arts in support of these outcomes that benefit all students.

Arts integration is "the practice of purposefully connecting concepts and skills from the arts and other subjects (Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017, p. 5). Scholars have reported positive student outcomes associated with arts integration interventions. These may include academic achievement, cognitive outcomes, social-emotional skills, behavioral outcomes, and artistic outcomes (Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017; Mackh 2014). The importance of arts integration is seen in the national Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The Act awards funding to arts integration activities in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 when desired student outcomes can be supported with evidence (Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017).

Despite the benefits of arts integration techniques, others find the approach to be a threat to creative practice. Collaborating artists may question their participation in such a relationship. Mackh's (2014) study on arts integration activities at research universities revealed concerns about how arts integration might improve both understanding in a non-arts discipline and arts practice. However, the same study remarked on the importance and growing trend of collaborative work in higher education. Such collaborations span disciplines and departments and may lead to innovative work, enhanced professional standing, and benefits student learning (Mackh 2014).

In Virginia alone, there are several examples of public university performing arts centers and multidisciplinary centers employing arts integration practice. Specifically, representatives from Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University, and James Madison University commented on the importance of the arts in supporting comprehensive academic goals. Virginia Tech's Institute for Creativity, Arts, and Technology (ICAT) was established as the seventh research institute at Virginia Tech to pursue research at the intersection of arts, technology, and education. The center is located within and is a collaborative partner with the Moss Arts Center. Related to the practice of arts integration, ICAT "is an organization of individuals, teams, and communities that create, innovate, and inspire without regard for discipline boundaries or limitations." (ICAT 2018). The center also works to advance PK-12 education in the region. One

representative remarked that the performing arts center and ICAT would give children and college students greater exposure to the arts. Specifically, that the centers would "strive to work towards the integration of the arts and technology especially in PK-12 in order to enhance critical and creative thinking skills and find ways to use models and programs to teach math, science, social studies, and liberal arts by integrating the arts into it" (Unpublished interview, March 27, 2013). Although this is a goal at Virginia Tech, interviewees also commented on the challenges of integrating the arts into other disciplines, and maintaining a commitment to *all* students, not just arts students (Unpublished interview, March 27, 2013).

In a similar vein, Virginia Commonwealth and James Madison universities remarked on how the arts might support, or reach, students in non-arts disciplines. Related to the aforementioned discussion of increased interdisciplinary work, one interviewee noted:

> If you look at books that have been written in the last ten years, we are coming to understand that you aren't either an artist or a scientist. The fact is that that side of the brain informs my ability to be a good scientist. And maybe vice versa. What we're studying about the arts is probably helping to bring the arts out of their silo. (Unpublished interview, May 8, 2013)

Of course, this position does not address the concerns of "instrumentalizing" the arts that Mackh (2014) found in his study of arts integration in research universities. These data show that higher education is supportive of arts-based education, but perhaps is still in the nascent stages of practice and effective implementation. An additional interviewee noted the importance of considering performing arts centers as a resource for *all* students and disciplines not only to advance academic goals, but also to justify the expense of major academic arts facilities. She noted:

> ...it's kind of hard to rationalize or justify building a performing arts center on your campus if the single focus of that center is just to host performances. You have to go back to that justification, that rationale, to say how it will be used to further your academic pursuits and programs? Not just for liberal arts, but across the board. How is the center going to benefit the university in general? (Unpublished interview, May 6, 2013)

4.1.1 Diversity in Cultural Institutions

Although interview data did not explicitly address the issues pertaining to the lack of diversity in arts and cultural institutions, arts-based education in the higher education setting has implications for this systemic problem. The BoardSource and the American Alliance of Museums (2017) reported that only nine percent of museum attendees are minorities and that minorities make up only twenty percent of museum staff. To be sure, arts organizations are being asked to reconsider the ways in which they prepare and present arts programming in light of these concerns (Skorton 2019). Funders are bringing awareness to these issues by making investments in related research and the cultivation of diverse leaders (Pogrebin 2018). The lack of diversity in cultural institutions is of national concern--a topic that was at the center of discussion at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in 2019 (Skorton 2019).

Educational opportunities offer a direct policy solution to this crisis in the arts and culture field. It is not enough, however, to support artists already on their paths toward professional careers in the arts sector. Instead, educational institutions can focus on arts-based education that reaches all students no matter their background or selected discipline of study.

4.2 Preparing for the Future of Work

A second benefit to extending arts practice to non-arts disciplines relates to the pronounced demand for new skill sets and creativity in the workplace. The World Economic Forum (2016) reported that by 2020:

> ...more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today, according to our respondents. Overall, social skills—such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others— will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills, such as programming or equipment operation and control. In essence, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social and collaboration skills. (p. 3)

Others have remarked on creativity as being the key to competitive business and essential to organizational leadership now and in the future (Brown 2016). To be sure, all artists may be considered entrepreneurs. The artist's ability to work within a process that may be defined as "messy" with unknown outcomes, risk, and failures, is a skill that may translate and benefit the business environment.

It was clear that higher education performing arts centers in Virginia supported the notion that participating in the arts may promote students' creativity and critical thinking. Interviewees from Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Old Dominion University remarked on this phenomenon. One interviewee noted:

> Universities are beginning to understand even more the importance of the arts. And the fact that through the arts you are gaining creative and critical thinking skills. If you look at business and industry today, what they are saying is that they need people who are not just good managers, but they need individuals who can think critically about the problem or a business decision. (Unpublished interview, March 27, 2013)

Yet, academia may not yet fully understand how to achieve the leadership knowledge, skills, and competencies that are required for the future. Demanding creativity of leaders is quite different than effectively developing this complex trait. One administrator noted:

> The one thing that we still probably have in the U.S. as a strength is that we educate a pretty good creative group of people. But we understand that that's not enough. All the businesses that I talk to say they want new, creative, free-thinking, out of the box thinkers. They want young people who understand the new horizon in business and industry. But nobody exactly knows how to do that very well. So I think they are looking at the arts as potential contributors to that. (Unpublished interview, April 10, 2013)

In addition to serving arts students and hosting performances, it is interesting to note the increased attention that academic arts centers are placing on arts-based education in service to all students. To be sure, administrators realized the potential that the arts may have in supporting non-arts academic outcomes. Yet, these institutions have yet to discover all of the "gains" to artists in the arts integration relationship, and how to appropriately teach creativity outside the arts disciplines. A continued emphasis on, and reward for interdisciplinary work is one approach to supporting arts integration efforts in higher education.

4.3 Cross-Cultural Understanding

In an area of rapid globalization and change, the arts play an important role in understanding plural cultures and identities. Demographic projections show that the U.S. is on course to be more racially and ethnically pluralistic in future decades (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Although international student enrollment at U.S. institutions has declined, colleges and universities have prioritized international recruitment as a revenue generating strategy (Choudaha and Chang 2012). As such, higher education institutions have a responsibility not only to expose students to cultures different than their own, but also to serve the needs of diverse student populations.

Individuals will require new forms of understanding in order to succeed in this diverse environment. *Cultural intelligence* describes one's capability to successfully adapt to new cultural settings (Earley and Ang 2003). Earley and Mosakowski (2004) discuss three components of cultural intelligence that include recognizing a culture's shared understandings, adapting behaviors to mimic another culture, and being motivation to respect and understand another culture despite potential obstacles. Alon and Higgins (2005) note that emotional intelligence--the ability to monitor one's feelings and emotions--is necessary to develop cultural intelligence. Of course, these intelligences, or skills, or needed in plural societies, labor forces, and institutional settings. Additionally, we require specialized communication skills to navigate an increasingly diverse world.

Cultural and emotional intelligences develop in different ways, but may not be taught through traditional methods. The arts are an exceptional avenue to develop *cultural knowledge*, or the "learning about diverse cultures and groups, the nature of institutional power in various cultures, and the availability of resources to facilitate culturally appropriate referrals for services" (Rubaii and Calarusse 2014, p. 287; Rice and Matthews 2012). Through experiences with the arts, one may not only learn about another culture, but also develop empathy for people and experiences unlike their own.

Many of the individuals in this study noted the importance of students' exposure to new or different cultures. Beyond educating students in the arts disciplines, this expanded purpose perfectly aligns with higher education's educational mission. One interviewee remarked that there is "a growing sense that cultural interactions for students are increasingly important. That's part of being human is to explore…What you can learn about yourself by watching performance or engaging in performances or other artistic endeavors" (Unpublished interview, June 4, 2013). This comment connects to both the importance of developing emotional and cultural intelligences today. Another interviewee remarked on the need to develop cultural understanding in a global world that offers us limitless international mobility:

A group of us realized that if we wanted to bring a greater international focus to our students because they're not going to live and work only in the United States. They are going to live and work throughout the word. And it was important for us to start doing everything we could to give them a global focus. Most of our students will never participate in the study abroad program. (Unpublished interview, March 27, 2013)

International study is expensive and not an option for all students. Colleges and universities need to find new ways to offer international experiences. Reduced or free tickets is one way to eliminate the financial barriers many students experience. "That facility is being paid for from student fees. So 500 tickets are made available to students for every performance with the whole idea that those students need to have those experiences--national and international performances" (Unpublished interview, May 6, 2013).

Other interviewees noted the importance of offering international performances and art forms because they suggest prestige to their communities and to the domestic and international students that are considering enrollment (Unpublished interviews, March 20, 2013; May 8, 2013). One example is the Ferguson Center at Christopher Newport University (CNU) in Newport News, Virginia. The mission of the Ferguson Center is "is to culturally engage the community by providing access to the finest artists in the world "(Ferguson Center for the Arts 2018). At the time of the center's inception, the current president "wanted to transform Newport News itself by making CNU into an educational and cultural jewel that would bring the world's best musicians, performers, and scholars to this one-time blue-collar industrial town" (Hamilton 2011, p. 259). A spokesperson of a different institution made a similar statement, "It [the performing arts center] has a wonderful impact on a community in terms of prestige and how people feel about themselves but also in terms of a broadening of understanding among cultures" (Unpublished interview, April 22, 2013). Colleges and universities are competing for students globally. Global prestige and recognition are ways that international students differentiate academic institutions in the U.S. A strong arts presence, and specifically an international arts focus, may distinguish colleges and universities on a global scale.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

Higher education is changing to adapt to the social and political forces of a globalized environment. Related to serving students and academic preparation, academia recognizes that students need new intelligences and skills in order to succeed in an increasingly diverse world. This research shows how colleges and universities are using arts-based education techniques to extend comprehensive academic outcomes, including creativity. Additionally, students may develop cultural knowledge, intelligence, and skills through exposure to international arts performance. These outcomes suggest an important academic role for performing arts centers now and in the future.

As complex institutions, colleges and institutions are experiencing shifts in funding, enrollment, and in turn, general operations. A decline in state support for higher education has led institutions to consider different auxiliary enterprises and enrollment models in order to yield new revenue streams. Performing arts centers signal prestige and cultural awareness, and may influence attendance by international students. Given this climate, the aforementioned academic justification for investing in the arts must be particularly robust. This is why we see an increased

emphasis on arts exposure for *all* students, not just for those focusing on the arts disciplines. The arts have the potential to aid in students' development of twenty-first century knowledges and competencies.

There are several limitations to this research and opportunities for extension. First, although there are many examples of academic performing arts centers in the U.S., I limited this study to arts centers at public institutions in Virginia. As such, the findings may inform knowledge of other contexts, but are not generalizable. Second, some scholars have criticized the process research technique, noting that a historical narrative alone is not enough to understand process (Pettigrew 1992; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). This manuscript relies heavily on interview data and individuals' accounts of history and process. I worked to combat concerns related to interview credibility by confirming data with multiple interview subjects and triangulating findings with organizational documents. The process of documenting all of my research steps through notes, memos, and transcripts, augments the level of accountability for me as a researcher and gives additional credibility to the study.

Future research is needed to understand the outcomes of arts-based approaches and arts programs designed to promote cultural awareness in higher education. My work focuses on the roles of these academic arts centers, but does not track the desired outcomes of program goals. Do arts integration techniques reach all students? Does international arts programming both develop students' cultural intelligence and appeal to international students? Is arts engagement the best strategy for developing students' cultural awareness in order that they may thrive in a complex global world? Despite these lingering questions, this research suggests that the arts *should* and will continue to play a prominent role in the education of global citizens.

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