

**Pitching Your Creative Idea: Advancing Artistic Agency and the Creative Project**

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### **Pitching Your Creative Idea: Advancing Artistic Agency and the Creative Project**

In an evolving arts industry, emerging artists must be equipped to enter the industry with adaptable skills for flexible arts careers (Slaughter & Springer, 2015). The Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University seeks to address this in part through a project-based grant writing course, *Pitching Your Creative Idea*. This article first reviews the impetus for and development of this course as part of a core professional skills curriculum at Peabody and offers a brief literature review to support the need for the course and the educational theory that forms its foundation. The subsequent sections describe the course, how its success is evaluated, and discuss future opportunities for iteration, including expanding the course content into an open educational resource.

#### **Course Context**

In 2017, Peabody launched the Breakthrough Curriculum, a suite of classes covering core professional competencies for early-career musicians and dancers—including verbal communication skills, audience development, programming, community connectivity, and career planning—to adapt Peabody students' educational experience to the evolving demands of the arts industry. The plan for the curriculum was developed by a team of industry experts and institutional stakeholders in response to findings from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) (Frenette, 2020). The Breakthrough Curriculum's sequence of three required courses for undergraduates and two required courses at the master's level is designed to prepare Peabody graduates with essential skills to develop satisfying and sustainable careers in the arts. Supported through integration with Peabody's LAUNCHPad career services office, the curriculum serves hundreds of students annually. It has reached 2900 students within the first six academic years, as detailed in Figure 1 (Peabody Registrar, 2023).

**Figure 1***Breakthrough Curriculum Course Enrollments by Year*

<b>COURSE</b>	<b>17-18</b>	<b>18-19</b>	<b>19-20</b>	<b>20-21</b>	<b>21-22</b>	<b>22-23</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Exploring Arts Careers	78	122	146	137	133	121	737
Building a Brand and Portfolio	128	302	165	221	194	217	1227
Pitching your Creative Idea	--	110	203	212	199	212	936
<b>TOTAL ENROLLMENTS</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>526</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>2,900</b>
<i>Total Sections Offered</i>	6	30	32	27	29	29	153
<i>Average Student/Section</i>	34	18	16	21	18	19	

Pitching Your Creative Idea (PYCI), the final course in the Breakthrough Curriculum for both undergraduate and graduate students, is a project-based course taught by entrepreneurial artist faculty, where students determine and design an artistic project of their choosing. They learn and apply skills in audience research, programming, collaboration, and professionalism, while building experience advocating publicly for their artistry both verbally and in writing. Students develop a written grant application and verbal pitch, with the option to compete for \$5,000 of project funding through Peabody's Launch Grant. Leveraging our collective backgrounds and perspectives as professional performing artists, faculty, and LAUNCHPad staff, we, the authors, are the primary designers of the course and curriculum and each teach sections of the course annually.

### **Literature Review**

Given the importance of preparing arts graduates for diverse, multi-faceted careers in a 21<sup>st</sup> century industry, arts degree programs must shift their curricula to train adaptable artists who are competent in a variety of non-artistic skills, including grant writing (Slaughter & Springer, 2015). PYCI was originally inspired by findings from SNAAP, demonstrating significant skills gaps in entrepreneurial, financial, and business management skills for arts graduates (Frenette, 2020). With the rise of COVID-19 and its' substantial impacts on the arts economy, there is an increasing need to educate artists on information relating to grants as a means of financial support (Skaggs et al., 2019).

From an educational theory perspective, the course takes a constructivist approach, where knowledge is created by each individual and learning is grounded in action and reflection (von

Glaserfeld, 2005). Furthermore, the content and assignments are designed to be relevant and customizable not only to individual students but also to the real world so that learning happens in a contextual way, in alignment with Wink's (2011) concept of critical pedagogy and transformative learning model. When building the course in collaboration with Peabody's Learning Innovation (instructional technology) team, we utilized research-based best practices from the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2023) to maximize learning opportunities, limit barriers for students, and accommodate diverse learners. Our application of this framework includes incorporating elements such as authentic assessments, student autonomy, peer feedback and collaboration to promote engagement, multiple options for content formats to support representation, and intentional structure and scaffolding throughout the course to facilitate action and expression. Through this student-centered approach, each learner can take away knowledge relevant to their individual artistic pursuits.

### Course Summary

PYCI is a two-credit course delivered in a hybrid format spanning 15 weeks. The course rhythm interchanges between comprehensive workshops, remote section classes, and personalized one-on-one instructor interactions with students for assignment feedback. Seven core learning objectives, chosen in response to insights gathered both internally and from national research, including the SNAAP reports, underpin the course:

- 1) Articulate who you are and why you create.
- 2) Research a target audience and audience needs.
- 3) Synthesize audience research into project design that accounts for social impact, diverse experiences, and community involvement.
- 4) Craft a detailed and thorough grant proposal promoting your artistic goals.
- 5) Develop multimedia assets that showcase your artistry and contributions to the field and community.
- 6) Collaborate with and integrate feedback from peers, stakeholders, and mentors.
- 7) Advocate publicly for yourself and your artistry.

In pursuit of these objectives, the course is designed in alignment with UDL principles to foster a student-centric learning environment.

- **Engagement:** Our approach is holistic. Students are given autonomy to select their projects, which can have tangible outcomes like real grant funding. This approach, a form

of authentic assessment, emphasizes real-world applications of skills and knowledge, thereby enhancing student interest and motivation. The course design also allows students to choose instructors whose expertise mirrors their domain, ensuring that the instruction is tailored to individual needs. Peer pitch sessions, combined with a flipped classroom model where didactic materials are presented outside of class sessions, not only sustain interest but foster a collaborative learning environment.

- **Representation:** PYCI is committed to diverse learning modalities. Materials are accessible in multiple formats ranging from auditory to visual, with added options like transcripts for videos, ensuring an inclusive learning atmosphere that resonates with varied learner profiles.
- **Action and Expression:** PYCI incorporates practical exercises to crystallize learning. The coursework is structured to offer scaffolding of grant elements over the semester. This is complemented by the iterative process of drafting individual grant components. Video assignments allow students to build proposal components while also catering to various learning objectives, from conceptualization and public presentation to multimedia production and logical sequencing of ideas. Personalized sessions with faculty further support goal delineation and progress tracking.

The course utilizes a mix of assignments and ongoing feedback from faculty and TAs to reinforce these objectives. Early on, students craft artistic statements, audience profiles, and short video narratives about fantasy projects to foster ideation. The primary project involves developing components of a grant proposal, including a project description, budget, timelines, and work samples. By the culmination of the course, students are ready to champion their projects in the juried rounds for funding and bring their skills to external grants. Notably, a graduate composition student earned a New Music USA Creator Development Fund Grant a few years after being awarded a Launch Grant in PYCI.

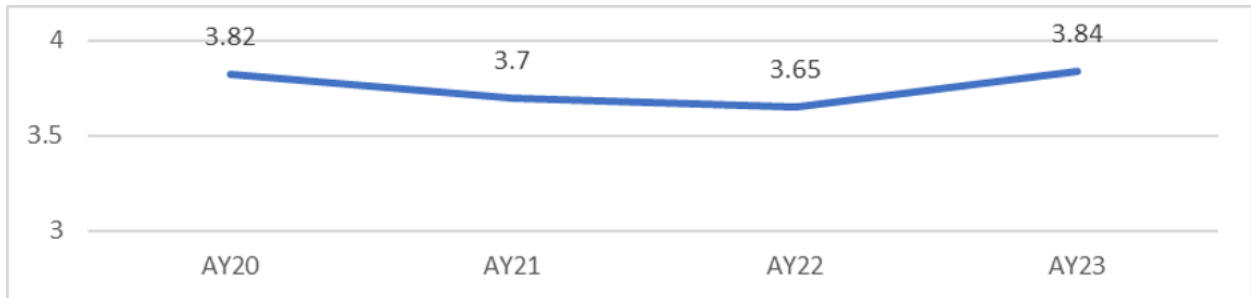
### **Evaluation**

The PYCI course has been incredibly successful. For students, progress toward course objectives is evaluated through the course assessments, the majority of which build up to students' final project pitch and proposal. Additionally, students are required to complete end of semester course evaluations. PYCI has consistently received significantly positive ratings and feedback from students and performs well in comparison to other required courses. Figure 2

shows the trajectory of overall course quality over the past four academic years (Peabody LAUNCHPad, 2023).

**Figure 2**

*Trajectory of Overall Course Quality (Scale 1-5)*



Drawing from Spring 2023 course evaluations, students commented positively about the flexible, scaffolded structure, collaborative environment, and real-world value of the course (Peabody LAUNCHPad, 2023). A graduate student noted,

I really liked the assignments breaking the grant into small, manageable pieces so that we could build it over the course of the semester . . . I applied for an unrelated grant this semester and it was really exciting to see how I could apply the knowledge from the course, and how I felt confident about what I wanted to present and my ability to do so - it was very empowering and confidence-boosting!

The success of the course is also demonstrated by the impressive Launch Grant project proposals and student winners each year (Peabody LAUNCHPad, n.d.). Since the course was launched, there have been 19 grant winners cumulatively awarded more than \$93,000, including:

- A historical performance major who developed a web series that hijacks the popularity of fairy tales to draw connections between folklore and classical music,
- A dancer who produced a gallery show that subverts common expectations around concert dance in order to question the systems surrounding “fine art,”

- A vocalist who developed an educational program called Prison Pipes, which explores the relationship between mindfulness, meditation, breathing, and singing within at-risk communities, and
- A composer who developed VisualScore, a notation software program designed for creating graphic scores and supporting other forms of contemporary notation.

These projects were not only represented by high-quality written proposals and pitch videos but also demonstrated the application of the course to a broad range of artistic practices. In terms of overall application quality, multiple grant panelists from Spring 2023 noted a marked improvement in student applications compared to previous years.

Through current and future participation in SNAAP survey administrations, as well as incorporating institution-wide first destination survey data, we will continue to gather evidence that demonstrates the long-term impacts of the course for students and alumni. Additionally, LAUNCHPad also tracks the progress of individual Launch Grant winners through a series of report forms and check-in meetings to support their work on their project. Beyond the Launch Grant itself, LAUNCHPad has seen remarkable growth in student applications to Peabody's Career Development Grants. In just two years (from academic year 2021 to 2023), applications increased by 162% (Peabody LAUNCHPad, 2023). This suggests increased student awareness of funding opportunities and agency to apply, which may be supported by skills taught in PYCI, among other factors. Furthermore, the funded Launch Grants facilitate continued independent skill development for winners through mentored project support, as well as provide a variety of community and economic benefits for artists, including creating paid opportunities for students and other local artists, collaboration with community partners and venues, and promotion and publicity for the projects. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this contribution is particularly impactful to provide financial support for independent artistic work through flexible project funding and promote the development of live and virtual artistic activities in a recovering industry.

### **Discussion**

Since the launch of PYCI, we remain attentive to feedback gathered from student course evaluations, TAs, and faculty, prompting several course modifications. One significant alteration is a heightened emphasis on one-on-one meetings. These personalized sessions have garnered

substantial positive feedback from students, underscoring their value in enhancing the overall learning experience.

Although the hybrid course format has many benefits, fostering deep inter-student connections has proven challenging, both within specific sections and across the entirety of the course. While the assignment guidelines permit collaborative projects, only a small percentage of students opt for such endeavors. Collaboration is not merely an academic exercise—it aids in melding diverse viewpoints and offers a practical training ground for networking, a skill indispensable in the arts realm. In response, we are actively exploring a gamut of events, discussions, and activities to invigorate a spirit of teamwork and interconnectedness.

Building on the insights from PYCI, we have curated an open educational resource (OER) titled *The Path to Funding*<sup>1</sup> (Forshee et al., 2022). Designed to transcend the boundaries of our course, this material seeks to uplift the broader arts community. With a keen focus on the performing arts, we aim to recalibrate the prevailing mindset—from simply chasing existing opportunities to pioneering novel ones. This reorientation becomes even more salient considering the hurdles confronting large arts organizations today. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen numerous institutions grappling with issues of sustainability, funding, and cultural relevance. This landscape underscores the urgency for individual artists to cultivate a proactive, adaptive, and entrepreneurial ethos.

### **Conclusion**

PYCI offers emerging artists a scaffolded opportunity to explore their artistic interests and actualize a creative project, while contributing to a recovering, post-COVID arts economy. Drawing on the success of the course at Peabody, expansion of the course content in the form of a broader open educational resource creates potential for more accessible, scalable learning opportunities that empower artists to confidently pursue their unique artistic interests as part of a sustainable and fulfilling 21<sup>st</sup> century arts career.

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<sup>1</sup>To access the book, please click <https://pressbooks.pub/pathtofunding/>.



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