The Curricular Standards of NASM and Their Impact on Local Decision Making

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The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) is a professional organization comprising 651 institutional members. Included in this membership are music units of all types and sizes from both public and private settings. The standards articulated by the Association in its *Handbook* are consensus-based, broad statements of content that are equally applicable to all institution types, from small liberal arts programs to major, specialized conservatories.[1]

While NASM accreditation involves all aspects of operations, finances, governance, and curricular offerings, most discussions of NASM occurring in local contexts involve degree offerings and curricular design. Various NASM standards are available for review and discussion at all times, but periodic reviews of degree models have also become a standard component of the agenda at annual meetings of the Association.

During my three-year term as president of NASM, we focused on the current state of the professional baccalaureate degree in music, the bachelor of music degree, typically requiring at least 65% music content. The BM degree stands in contrast to the liberal arts degree with a major in music (the BA or BS), a degree with the larger share of its required content dedicated to the liberal arts.

Through the sessions offered at NASM meetings during my presidency, we hoped to provide a greater sense of opportunity for institutions to articulate and implement local solutions to the broad statements of content included in the NASM standards. While curricular models have evolved, a traditional model has emerged over the past few years and has become a typical operating procedure.[2] But this procedure is not the same as the NASM standards. The

1. Available at http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/index.jsp?page=Standards-Handbook.

2. For a discussion of various curricular models for the undergraduate music history sequence, see Matthew Baumer, "A Snapshot of Music History Teaching to Undergraduate Music Majors, 2011–2012: Curricula, Methods, Assessment, and Objectives," this *Journal* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 23–47, http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/165/308.

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NASM standards articulate achievement goals, not procedure. There is room to do things differently.

As we considered how things might be different, however, we all felt the constraints imposed by our tradition-bound curricular model. At the same time, we found it difficult to identify content areas ripe for either a change in priorities or for deletion. We accumulated these areas and our approaches to them for all the right reasons: each area seems essential, and our approaches are time tested.

Over the past few years, however, curricular discussions have started within some NASM institutions. These discussions have not centered on the NASM standards themselves, but rather on how the goals they contain can best be fulfilled in a specific institution, at this time, for students who have a future of work in music ahead of them. This distinction between NASM standards and local approaches and procedures is critical and important to keep in mind.

I would now like to review the sections of the current NASM *Handbook* devoted to the undergraduate music history sequence. The three sections of the *Handbook* presented below represent standards applicable to all undergraduate degree types (Music Program Components), more specific standards associated with the Liberal Arts Degree with a Major in Music, and the additional standards articulated for All Professional Baccalaureate Degrees in Music and All Undergraduate Degrees Leading to Teacher Certification.

Music Program Components (§III.L, p. 83)

Content, Repertories, and Methods (policies that establish a conceptual framework or guidelines for the application of curricular standards)

> 1. NASM standards address bodies of knowledge, skills, and professional capacities. At times, the standards require breadth, at other times, depth or specialization. However, the standards do not mandate specific choices of content, repertory, or methods.
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> 2. With regard to specifics, music has a long history, many repertories, multiple connections with cultures, and numerous successful methodologies. Content in and study of these areas is vast and growing. Each music unit is responsible for choosing among these materials and approaches when establishing basic requirements consistent with NASM standards and the expectations of the institution.
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> 3. In making the choices outlined in Section III.L.2., the institution is responsible for decisions regarding breadth and depth and for setting proportions among them.

> 4. Choices and emphases, as well as means for developing competencies, reflect institutional and program purposes and specific areas of specialization. The result is differences among programs regarding attention given to specific content, repertories, and methods and to various perspectives through which music may be studied.

The Liberal Arts Degree with a Major in Music: Essential Content and Competencies for Musicianship (§VII.D.2, pp. 95–96)

a. Competencies. Students holding undergraduate liberal arts degrees must have:

> 1. The ability to hear, identify, and work conceptually with the elements of music such as rhythm, melody, harmony, structure, timbre, texture.
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> 2. An understanding of and the ability to read and realize musical notation.
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> 3. An understanding of compositional processes, aesthetic properties of style, and the ways these shape and are shaped by artistic and cultural forces.
>
> 4. An acquaintance with a wide selection of musical literature, the principal eras, genres, and cultural sources.
>
> 5. The ability to develop and defend musical judgments.

b. Operational Guidelines. There is no one division of content, courses, and credits appropriate to every institution. These competencies should be pursued through making, listening to, and studying music.

All Professional Baccalaureate Degrees in Music and All Undergraduate Degrees Leading to Teacher Certification (§VIII.B, p. 100)

Common Body of Knowledge and Skills

> 4. History and Repertory. Students must acquire basic knowledge of music history and repertories through the present time, including study and experience of musical language and achievement in addition to that of the primary culture encompassing the area of specialization (see Section III.L.).

To put NASM's position in another light, the following words cannot be found anywhere in the 45 pages of the 2014–15 NASM *Handbook* dedicated to undergraduate degrees: Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic periods, or fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries.

As might be clear by now, NASM advocates for no particular position regarding the overall model for undergraduate music history content. While our traditions and habits tend to move us toward similar models of curricular content, the NASM standards themselves do not do this. Quoting again from standard III.L.4.: "Choices and emphases, as well as means for developing competencies, reflect institutional and program purposes and specific areas of specialization. The result is differences among programs regarding attention given to specific content, repertories, and methods and to various perspectives through which music may be studied."

NASM encourages each institution to make an ongoing practice of revisiting the content and time allocation of coursework provided in music history. Higher education in the United States has always been praised for the broad diversity of institutional types available to our students. Although NASM is pleased to recognize quality programs offering traditional curricular models in the various subject areas, wouldn't it be something if each of our institutions articulated a curricular model that reflected the unique nature of its program, institution, and setting?

And so, perhaps the best way to view NASM is as a friend to music history: articulating standards that ensure an ongoing place for the content area in each curriculum while leaving to local decision making all choices regarding specific content and time allocation to deliver that content. The choices—and challenges—are yours.