

Executive Summary

Achievement and Quality: Higher Education in the Arts

The arts disciplines are the arts disciplines because each of them deals with content and the human condition in a unique way. Therefore, each of the arts disciplines needs to be considered on its own terms, especially when the purpose is the education of creators and performers.

The Arts and Evaluation

The arts disciplines are virtually synonymous with achievement and quality. Part of the reason is continuous, rigorous evaluation. Individuals create and perform under pressures generated by unremitting, moment-to-moment self-criticism. Peers, teachers, mentors and critics continuously add their perspectives. The pervasiveness of assessment begins early, often in childhood. In higher education, it informs beginnings, middles, and ends of programs. Advanced levels of knowledge, skills, and potential must be demonstrated for admission to professionally-oriented studies in creation and performance, even at the undergraduate level. Following admission, younger or less-experienced artists improve the quality of their individual work by gaining additional knowledge and skills. Public demonstrations of competence are required for graduation. As study continues, expectations rise. *Evaluation Mechanisms in the Arts*

The set of knowledge and skills gained through study and evaluation is not the work or the quality itself, but rather their enabler. Works of art are only partially composed of the knowledge and skills evident in them. This truth reflects another: institutions can nurture and evaluate the development of competencies in individuals, but they cannot produce, and thus are not responsible for, the quality manifested in works of art created by individual uses of the competencies developed. *The Individual as Primary Source; Concepts Associated with Quality in Works of Art*

To work effectively in institutions with these and other facts and complexities, achievement and quality in the arts in higher education must be pursued and assessed in specific terms. Using the term “quality” in the abstract is not useful. Different sets of terms associated with different perspectives on achievement and quality produce different results. It is important not to conflate different sets of terms and perspectives. *Quality as Word and Meaning; Achievement and Quality are in Terms of Something*

Evaluation Perspectives

This set of documents considers the issue of quality and achievement in terms of three perspectives: (a) individual, (b), institutional, and (c) public. Introductory Information: *National Accreditation Standards; Evaluation, Quantitative Methodologies, and Verbalization; Evaluation Perspectives: Individual; Institutional; External Perceptions*

- a. Evaluating individual student learning involves two basic things:
 1. Levels of achievement in acquiring basic professional-level knowledge and skills in one or more of the art forms. These competencies are spelled out in the content standards of the arts accrediting associations. *Basic Competency Index by Discipline and Specialization—Undergraduate*
 2. The individual application of knowledge, skills, and capabilities to works in the art forms that fulfill general artistic goals in unique ways. Often, one such goal is the integration of

multiple elements into an optimum relationship in a single work. However, there are an infinite number of ways to reach this goal. For example, Bach and Mahler each achieve this optimum relationship but the musical results are vastly different. Indeed, there are significant differences in the way integration is achieved from work to work by the same artist. This principle applies to multiple goals across the art forms. *Annotated list of attributes for individual artistic achievement*

- b. Evaluating results and conditions of quality and achievement in institutions involves two basic things:
1. The extent to which individual knowledge and skills (a.1. and 2. above), and work in the arts disciplines are nurtured and advanced by what the institution is and does.
 2. The attributes, priorities, and practices of the institution compared with characteristics normally found where there are significant, continuing aggregations of individual achievement.

Basic necessities and characteristics are found in accreditation standards. *Operational Standards Index by Discipline*

Additional attributes based on decades of experience in reviewing hundreds of institutions are also available. *Evaluating Elements and Conditions for Quality and Achievement in an Institution, School, Department, or Program*

- c. Evaluating public or external perceptions about achievement and quality involves two basic things:
1. The extent to which the institution is successful in areas that produce renown or images of renown.
 2. The extent to which achievements or images of renown are connected to student learning (a.1. and 2. above) and instructional achievement (b.1. and 2. above) at specific points in time.

The sources and uses of public perceptions are fascinating and somewhat seductive. In many instances, renown is developed over time from combinations of individual and institutional achievements. And, to some extent, notoriety can be purchased. But positive public perceptions cannot be the whole story for those with responsibility for student learning.

Institutional renown can neither predict nor generate individual results. No matter how high they are, admission and graduation requirements can define only thresholds, not ultimate individual achievements in any art form.

Further, the images producing public perceptions are often symbolic or surrogate indicators that are not truly connected to substantive individual or institutional achievement, or the future prospects of either. Perceptions of those with little knowledge of the field or the institution rarely provide the basis for effective evaluation of what is being accomplished by individual students at any given time.

The benefits of renown are unquestionable, but renown is a trailing indicator. The arts themselves work from and with this premise.

Evaluating External Perceptions of Institutions

Art as a Mode of Thought

Whatever perspectives or combinations are chosen, and whatever tools are used, effective, useful evaluation of achievement and quality must be based on a particular mode of thought and work used in the arts. Though deeply intellectual, art-making works differently than research or scholarship in the sciences, humanities, or social sciences. One example: in art, discerning, analyzing, or defining technical means is never the whole, but only a few of many critical elements in the creation or performance of a work. Another example: art finds things out by expressing powerfully what cannot be fully known. *Creative Work, Inquiry, Research, and Scholarship*

Art is focused on creation from nothing, or from the basis of such things as choreography, design, musical scores, scripts and so forth. Just as art works with a distinctive mode of thought, individual art forms use these modes of thought in unique ways. *Art as a Mode of Thought*

Over the centuries, a number of concepts associated with quality in the arts have become observable. For example, general rules shape and form each arts discipline, and create frameworks for highly individualistic action and reaction. However, attempts to impose detailed rules usually stifle art. *Achievement and Quality Over Time; Concepts Associated with Quality in Works of Art*

Art-making is based on principles of composition or design. The goal is a specific, successful compilation or aggregation from a virtually infinite number of possibilities. In some fields, the goal is to produce results that can be replicated exactly, or at least verified by following the same research path or using the same facts. At the highest level of achievement in the arts, the result is unique expression.

Conclusion

For individuals concerned about the achievements and quality of arts programs in higher education and how they might improve, there are multiple ways to engage in substantive analysis. But each successful way is centered on the distinct natures and purposes of work in the art forms. Time spent on other approaches is wasted. *Crafting Unique Evaluations; Cautions; Numbers and Evaluation in the Arts*

The most effective education and evaluation systems in the arts in higher education are developed from an artistic rather than a technical perspective. This means that criteria, approaches, techniques, and expectations are crafted uniquely for specific situations while reflecting artistic capability expectations for professional-level work. The institutions that take this approach and pursue it through every aspect of their arts curricula and programming achieve the most over time. Focusing on the substance of arts learning, individual by individual, is the key to success.