Curricular Innovations in Music Education

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Over the years, Duquesne University’s Music Education Department has enjoyed a vibrant curriculum dedicated to pre-service music educators. As faculty members within the department continued to refine the program, it was decided to update the structure of professional methods and the instructional experiences that precede student teaching. A new sequence of methods—and the creation of a Teaching Laboratory—was the result. In its fourth year, the revised curriculum now serves all music education cohorts.

Two levels of General Music courses (both under the direction of Dr. Rachel Whitcomb) start the sequence of professional methods: “Primary” methods during spring of the freshman year, with “Elementary” methods following the next semester. Once students demonstrate their proficiencies across the two courses, they move ahead into three separate and concurrent courses: Band Methods (Dr. Paul Doerksen); Strings/Orchestra Methods (Dr. Stephen Benham); and Vocal/Choral Methods (team-taught by Mr. David Woten of Carson Middle School, and Mr. Craig Cannon of Fox Chapel Area High School).

The final professional methods course occurs during fall of the junior year, achieving a specific goal of the music education faculty: to provide advanced training for ensemble teaching while allowing each student to choose an instructional track from among band, choral, and strings.

Advanced Choral Methods (Mrs. Christine Jordanoff) and Advanced Instrumental Methods (Dr. Benham and Dr. Doerksen) were created with this goal in mind. Music education students combine for topics such as assessment, instructional delivery, and a special focus (led by Mr. Mike Tomaro) on jazz pedagogy. At other moments, students are found in their “tracks” refining their knowledge and skills related to repertoire, score preparation, and rehearsal techniques. For band students, an added bonus is an extensive unit on marching band (taught by Mr. David Buetzow)—including instruction, practice teaching, and field observations of local rehearsals and regional marching band festivals.

A second goal of department faculty was increased teaching opportunities for music education majors before student teaching. The new Teaching Lab achieves this goal—and more. The lab meets twice each week, directly before Advanced Methods classes. All sophomore music education majors enroll in the course and serve as “students”; sophomores from Elementary General Music Methods,
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and juniors from Advanced Methods, are the “teachers.”

Teaching Lab provides flexibility that links content of professional methods to the development of teaching pedagogy. Over its brief existence so far, the lab has been a jazz class, concert band, choral ensemble, string orchestra, general music classroom, and marching band (on the new McCloskey Field). The benefits are extensive. Music education faculty members introduce and demonstrate concepts within their respective courses before moving students to the lab for teaching practice. For faculty members, the time gained by shifting teaching practice from methods to lab provides time to cover additional content. For music education students, the “teachers” are provided more and longer opportunities in the lab for practice teaching—allowing increased skill development before student teaching. And, the lab “students” (sophomores) constantly move from among diverse settings within K–12 music instruction—further developing their abilities with secondary instruments, while also allowing them to observe and provide feedback to their peers (in the context of teaching activities that they may soon find themselves).

A truly outstanding curriculum for future music educators is a vibrant and evolving framework of shared vision. Music Education faculty members from the Mary Pappert School of Music have designed such a preparation program that continues the legacy of excellence—while finding opportunities for innovations that raise the bar for future music educators.

Dr. Stephen Benham, associate professor of music education and chair of graduate division