

Association for Theatre in Higher Education
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The Elephant in the Living Room
A Manifesto

Theatre in Higher Education, as we know it, will not exist in 20 years unless we, as faculty and academic leaders, commit to significant changes in a) what we teach, b) how we teach, c) who we teach, and d) our purpose. Here's why.

The U.S. post-secondary educational system is entering a period of transformation akin to the health care revolution of the late 20th century. What emerges will, in large part, be determined by whether the faculty and academic leaders drive the agenda or the agenda is driven by elected leaders and the business community. We have all seen the results of the latter approach in our nation's current health care crisis. A similar approach and outcomes may be seen in the current movement to reform the American K-12 system.

Let's not assume that, somehow, we are immune from these forces. Pressure to reform our post-secondary system is being driven by a bi-partisan movement in Washington, D.C. and many of our statehouses. The business community is rallying as well. The drivers for change include accountability, affordability, and access—all of which are good things.

Of course, the devil is in the details: high-stakes standardized testing, tuition “watch” lists with threats of reduced federal support, guaranteed transfer of credit from proprietary institutions, and accreditation reform focusing on outcomes like employment upon graduation. These strategies, designed to address questions of accountability, affordability, and access, suggest an increasing shift to the factory model of higher education, where success is judged by efficiency, standardization, low cost, and workforce alignment. Theatre education does not perform well under any of these measures.

Private higher education is not immune from these forces for change. After decades of tuition increases double or triple the cost of inflation, family budgets have reached the breaking point. First-generation college students, who increasingly fill our classrooms, are looking for a larger range of education providers—from community colleges through for-profits occupying store fronts or suburban office space. These students work long hours and go to school, too. (So much for that mandatory attendance policy when it comes time for post-show set strikes.) These students are looking at majors that will allow them to work nearly full-time and repay loans quickly. In increasing numbers, these students are eschewing fields like education, social work . . . and theatre.

Other significant factors contributing to the ongoing higher education revolution include rapidly changing student demographics. Theatre, as an academic discipline, has not attracted high numbers of traditionally underrepresented students, particularly those from communities of color. As American higher education becomes more and more diverse, the demographics of our theatre student will need to change or the discipline will decline precipitously.

Technology is transforming educational delivery. Even without the spike in prices at the pump, students are shifting to online education in significant numbers. Theatre training does not work in this environment (although a significant part of the foundation curriculum in theory, history, criticism, and writing, can make this shift).

Competition for students is increasing exponentially, particularly competition for international students. Our current paradigm focuses on U.S. strategies to attract more foreign students to our universities, and our competitors are primarily the U.K. and Australia. However, in the not-too-distant future, English will be the language of instruction in Beijing and Dubai, as well as Dublin and Delhi. We will not only be competing to attract foreign students to North America. We will be fighting to keep our students from going to London or Shanghai or Rome or Athens or Paris, where in most cases they will be able to earn an undergraduate degree in three years.

And what degrees will they earn? They will be multi-disciplinary. They will be international in scope. Chances are they will be focused on the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math), as these are widely considered to be the currency for international economic development. (Many countries, including our own, will be investing huge dollars to compete in this intellectual race for global dominance.) Degree programs will be multi-modal in delivery—on-line, hybrid, short-form, self-paced, low-residency—a panoply of alternative formats and calendars focused on convenience, efficiency, and cost containment.

We are preparing to pass the torch to a new generation of theatre artists and teachers. Most of them have been tutored in the guild model, which has served our profession well for millennia. Nearly all have apprenticed in a conservative system, one that has focused on maintaining the importance of the “live” theatre. Certainly we have expanded our theoretical boundaries to embrace a broader definition of “performance,” and we have diversified our subjects to explore gender, sexual orientation, race, ability, and global perspectives. We have even dabbled a bit with mediated performance. Largely, though, we operate within a framework fashioned by our mentors from the 20’s through the 60’s, a framework designed to preserve and defend the live theatre against threats from upstart entertainment media like movies and television.

Like most post-secondary fields, we aim not so much to prepare students for careers, as to prepare them to be just like us and to serve our needs. We prepare them so that they can help us with our research (i.e. our tenure, promotion, and post-tenure review), teach the classes we don’t want to teach, and provide us with the intellectual stimulation we seek in order to be satisfied in our work. Never mind that there aren’t sufficient employment paths for them upon graduation or, if they do gain employment, they will never be able to earn as much money as we do unless they become just like us, only now academic pre-tenure apprentices. This is our circle of life.

For every theatre undergraduate, underemployed M.F.A. or disillusioned A.B.D. who leaves our departments, three more enter a program in electronic media—film, animation, game design, or other emergent media. These programs are not a flash-in-the-pan. They appeal to students’ mimetic impulse, yet respond to powerful technological and global forces that are redefining culture, community, and performance. They also transcend difference and move us toward cultures of inclusion in interesting ways.

Where is theatre education in this paradigm? Who, in and for our discipline, is thinking about these things besides a few doctoral students at Yale or Northwestern?

Who is experimenting with changes? Who is convening national and international conversations, sharing research results, debating the merits of emergent processes and approaches? Who is setting the agenda for change? And who has the implicit authority to do so?

It is time for ATHE to assume its responsibility for the future of theatre in higher education. Call together leadership from the balkanized theatre organizations that continue to divide the discipline into specialized interests. Bring back more of the senior scholars, teachers, practitioners, and academic leaders, those who think there's more to life than getting hired as an assistant professor or earning tenure and promotion. Craft an agenda for transformative action to reposition our work in ways that will allow theatre education to adapt successfully in response to the tectonic forces that undoubtedly will reshape the post-secondary landscape in our not-to-distant future.