Project Description:

The music department’s mission is to help students develop their musicianship toward degree completion. It is imperative, therefore, that incoming students are admitted with the greatest possibility for success. There may be tension, however, between what auditioning students demonstrate they can do musically and their prior academic strengths. This study, therefore, is one step toward determining whether the current entrance requirements are appropriately identifying students who will likely successfully complete a music degree (and impact the awarding of music scholarships). The entrance requirements considered are: 1) ACT scores and 2) audition scores. In addition, significant milestones in the music degree, including 1) jury scores, 2) music theory 1 and 2 grades, and 3) aural skills 1 and 2 grades will be analyzed for their impact on learning and degree completion. Finally, participants will be surveyed and interviewed to discover how juries and the new, electronic jury rubric system impact learning.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is really three-fold, yielding three specific objectives: 1) to analyze student audition and ACT scores as they relate to degree completion (and scholarship awards), 2) to evaluate the impact of music juries on the effectiveness of student learning and degree completion, and 3) to evaluate the impact of music theory and aural skills courses on degree completion.

Participants are/were all music majors (N = 282) at a mid-sized university in the northcentral region of the United States. All music majors (BA’s, music education, performance, theory/composition) were included in the study. The majority of the students are still current students in the program (n = 147). Most of the remaining students have graduated with a music degree (n = 71). The rest of the students are no longer pursuing a music degree at this university. There are a variety of reasons, including some who have changed their major (n = 8), but stayed at the university. Some of the students were academically dismissed from the university (n = 26). A few students transferred to other universities (n = 3), and some are simply gone with no additional information available (n = 27).

Data were collected in a variety of ways. The researcher collected: 1) beginning audition scores, 2) music jury scores, 3) ACT cumulative score, 4) ACT reading score, 5) music theory 1 and 2 grades, 6) aural skills 1 and 2 grades, and 7) degree completion success (received degree or not). This necessitated going through each student file (hard copies in the university music office) for audition scores and music jury scores used prior to the new digital forms, looking online into student records and transcripts for ACT scores, course grades, and degree completion success.
Qualitative data was collected from students and faculty regarding their perceptions of the music jury process, the jury rubric (assessment tool), and how juries and the rubric impacts learning and success toward degree completion. This data was collected via an online survey sent to all music majors and faculty. The survey had ten questions, each pertaining to the participants’ perceptions of the objectives of music juries, the alignment of the objectives with what was really happening, and how juries could be changed or improved to better align with the objectives. Data was also collected from students and faculty members who volunteered to be interviewed - to get a clearer picture of the strengths of the process and rubric as well as the areas that could be improved.

Summary of the Results:

According to the analysis, there is a small to medium relationship between students’ entry audition scores and their jury scores. Students with higher audition scores tended to reflect higher jury scores as well. Students, therefore, who have higher entry audition scores are more likely to continue their musical development successfully than those whose entrance audition scores were not as strong.

According to the analysis, ACT scores were not significantly related to degree completion or jury scores. The relationship between ACT composite scores and the entry audition is small to moderate, but it is still larger than the relationship between ACT scores and jury scores.

What was interesting to note, however, is that ACT scores are moderately correlated to grades in Theory 1 and 2 and Aural Skills 1 and 2. These critical, gateway courses form the foundation for success in many of the required subsequent music courses for music majors. Higher ACT scores, therefore, should continue to inform the department’s decision for both acceptance and scholarship funds as well as musical proficiency. Even though ACT scores did not have a significant relationship to degree completion, the early success of music students in theory and aural skills courses most certainly does, thereby making ACT scores still relevant for program admittance.

According to the analysis, the greatest difference between students who successfully completed a music degree was success in music theory and aural skills coursework. Those who were successful in Theory and Aural Skills were significantly more likely to successfully complete their music degree.

Both faculty and students have some positive and negative perspectives and ideas about music juries. The faculty seem a little more unsettled in their feedback, with less alignment than the students. This is likely because there are many more students than faculty, and the amount of data collected is in alignment with this discrepancy. A little less than half of the faculty either filled out the survey or provided an interview. More data would make themes clearer and more relevant to the whole faculty. Nearly all agree that there are ways to improve
the music juries. According to the responses of the faculty, improvements would include having a more consistent standard of feedback. Most faculty felt that the music juries were meeting or nearly meeting their expectations. They agreed that it provided an opportunity to hear and provide feedback to students on a regular basis. Most felt that it motivates students to practice and gives them specific goals for which to strive. A couple of instructors that responded, however, felt the music juries are not meeting the objectives because faculty feedback is not always consistent, and the short performance at the end of the semester excludes much of what the students have been working on throughout the semester. In general, however, it appears the faculty believe the music juries are beneficial and meeting objectives.

The majority of students also seemed to believe that juries are beneficial. This was largely based on the motivation they felt to practice and set/strive toward developmental goals. Most noted that feedback from many instructors was helpful, especially since it was the only time in the semester when they got much feedback from anyone besides their own studio instructor. Many students also indicated that every opportunity to perform was beneficial as a performer. They noted that they learn from performing, and the relatively high-stakes of the juries might be comparable to high-stakes auditions in the future for those who plan to pursue performance.

According to the students, the most notable non-beneficial elements about music juries is linked largely to the stress and timing of music juries. Some of the stress is simply related to performance anxiety – a situation that is not likely to be alleviated without performance experience. Most of their comments about stress, however, pertained to the timing of juries – during finals week when they had many other exams and projects and papers due. With the rigors of the performance schedule leading into finals week, many felt they did not perform well or even do as well on other exams because they spent more practice time on their jury music and less time studying for exams. Some noted they got sick. In addition, the fatigue from the performance schedule leading into finals week and the extra studying affected their ability to perform. The voice students in particular felt their voices suffered from strain, fatigue, and illness associated with the time of the year.

The other prominent suggestion for improvement from the students relates to the feedback from juries. Many indicated they want the feedback, and they would like it in a timely manner. They also noted they would like the criteria for the juries to be clear from early in the semester, and reviewed with some regularity to avoid confusion and help them keep their goals and priorities in mind. Many participants also mentioned their desire for consistency in the rubrics across the areas and the quality and consistency of the feedback from each faculty member.

Conclusions:
Students with higher audition scores tended to reflect higher jury scores as well. Students, therefore, who have higher entry audition scores are more likely to continue their musical development successfully than those whose entrance audition scores were not as strong. As a primary factor in program acceptance and scholarship awards, entry audition scores should be strongly considered for those with the highest scores rather than those whose scores are lower but seem likely to have potential. Those whose entry audition scores were lower, regardless of perceived potential, were less successful on subsequent juries and rate of degree completion, as well.

ACT scores have always played a significant role in both program acceptance as well as the awarding of scholarship funds. According to the analysis, ACT scores, however, were not significantly related to degree completion or jury scores. The relationship between ACT composite scores and the entry audition is small to moderate, but it is still larger than the relationship between ACT scores and jury scores. Perhaps the relatively familiar structure and objectives of lessons for an incoming high school student as compared to other music courses and requirements of first year college students can explain this discrepancy. More of the students begin their music major with experience in the objectives and expectations of individual music lessons than those who come with experience and knowledge of music theory and aural skills – freshmen gateway music coursework.

What was interesting to note, however, is that ACT scores are moderately correlated to grades in Theory 1 and 2 and Aural Skills 1 and 2. These critical, gateway courses form the foundation for success in many of the required subsequent music courses for music majors. Higher ACT scores, therefore, should continue to inform the department’s decision for both acceptance and scholarship funds as well as musical proficiency. Even though ACT scores did not have a significant relationship to degree completion, the early success of music students in theory and aural skills courses most certainly does, thereby making ACT scores still relevant for program admittance.

According to the analysis, the greatest difference between students who successfully completed a music degree was success in music theory and aural skills coursework. Those who were successful in Theory and Aural Skills were significantly more likely to successfully complete their music degree. This is likely linked to the numbers of students who begin a music degree because they love music, love to play or sing, and have had positive music performing opportunities in their background. When they begin the theory and aural skills sequence, however, many students note the complexity of the classes. They love to sing or play, but they may not be interested in the music theory upon which music is based. Their beginning musical skills (demonstrated through their auditions and juries), therefore, may be very comparable to those who complete the degree. Their struggles in Theory and Aural Skills, however, show up as they try to proceed in the degree. The support provided for success in music theory and
aural skills, therefore, becomes critical in the success of students’ likelihood to finish a music degree. The solution may not be in a degree change, but in finding more and better ways to support students who struggle in Theory and Aural Skills – particularly since the only significant difference between students who complete their music degree and those who do not are their scores in Theory and Aural Skills courses. As a department we spend a large majority of our student-contact time throughout the degree in lessons and performance organizations. Perhaps in the first two years, more time should be invested in supporting students through theory and aural skills with tutoring, study sessions, study strategies and tips, perhaps even smaller class sizes for greater individualized instruction. This may also be part of the process of young university students discovering what should be their major versus what they would like to maintain as a hobby.

Faculty and students have some positive and negative perspectives and ideas about music juries. According to the responses of the faculty, improvements would include having a more consistent standard of feedback. Based on their responses, perhaps jury feedback could be discussed and forms of feedback and training for valid feedback would be helpful – for the sake of consistency and strength of the feedback.

According to the students, the most notable non-beneficial elements about music juries is linked largely to the stress and timing of music juries. Finals week is ideal for the logistical facilitation of juries – at a time when all faculty and student schedules can be aligned to schedule juries. It is also the only time in the semester when performance spaces are available for the amount of time required for juries. From a purely logistical standpoint, there is no other time in the semester when room availability and faculty/student schedules will work for juries. On the other hand, perhaps it is time to re-examine the timeline and brainstorm viable options for juries at an earlier point in the semester – before the rigors of all the final performances, papers, projects, and exams shortly before and during finals week. In addition, it would give students time to implement suggestions from the faculty and enable students to perform at a high standard without the fatigue and stress of final exam week.

The other prominent suggestion for improvement from the students relates to the feedback from juries. Many indicated they want the feedback, and they would like it in a timely manner. This can be addressed with the new jury management system now in use in which students should receive feedback from each faculty member the moment it is submitted. They also noted they would like the criteria for the juries to be clear from early in the semester, and reviewed with some regularity to avoid confusion and help them keep their goals and priorities in mind. Transparent criteria can become standardized and utilized throughout the learning process in the semester, not solely for the final (jury) assessment. Perhaps the rubrics could be used with some regularity in the studios or studio classes throughout the semester, so students are very familiar with the rubric and may even use it for self-evaluation throughout the
semester. This would need to be discussed amongst the faculty and guidelines for disseminating jury criteria standardized and reviewed.

Many also mentioned their desire for consistency in the rubrics across the areas and the quality and consistency of the feedback from each faculty member. This issue may be a more difficult issue for several reasons. The rubrics do need to be tailored to the different areas, at least to a certain degree. A more standardized and well-crafted rubric can provide clear and detailed feedback to students. The technical facility of a piano student on his/her instrument has some significant differences to the technical requirements of a singer. Perhaps there could be alignment in some of the aspects of the rubrics – aspects that would be expected of all musicians, universally. This may include concepts like pitch and rhythm accuracy, intonation accuracy (although intonation won’t pertain to piano students), tone quality development – a need in all areas, although it requires specific characteristics in each area. Perhaps there is some sort of compromise that can be made in the alignment of rubrics – some shared concepts like the aforementioned, and some categories that are specific to the development of musicianship in the area.

Finally, the matter of the feedback itself – consistency and quality. There is an element of subjectivity in the musical feedback, particularly as it pertains to interpretation and expression. Background experience and expertise in each instrument/voice also varies amongst the faculty, so feedback should be different. Perhaps the need, then, is to explain to students that feedback may (should) have some consistencies in the areas of the more objective categories (like pitch and rhythm accuracy), but the interpretative, expressive, and even strategic suggestions of the different faculty will be based in their own background, experiences, and preferences. If the students know there will be some of each type of feedback, they may be able to sort out what is non-negotiable – out-of-tune playing/singing is out-of-tune and needs to be addressed. That type of feedback gives students a specific issue to work on with specific goals in mind. Interprettive suggestions, however, may be weighed and tried as a viable option rather than a punitive necessity. In addition, faculty members can benefit from some mentoring or training in the scoring of the rubrics and have found that feedback is quite consistent with just a little intentional discussion to that effect.

According to the analysis, the music juries have a relatively smaller impact on degree completion than, for instance, Music Theory and Aural Skills classes. This could be because the quantitative data cannot speak narratively. When given the opportunity to talk about juries, students and faculty participants had a lot to say. Most of it was in support of juries and their benefits. There were certainly suggestions for changes or improvements, but the relatively smaller quantitative impact seems to be refuted by the impassioned responses of the participants. Juries are largely beneficial to musical development, and therefore, toward degree completion. Operationalizing some of the ideas generated in the study may make the jury process stronger and more helpful.
Music juries as an assessment strategy in universities is a common practice. The practice of music juries can still be adjusted to fit the needs of each program and the constituents therein. In this instance, there are many positive aspects to the jury system currently used. There are, however, some steps that could be discussed and aspects that could be changed to improve the system and enhance student learning.

Contribution to Assessment at UW-Whitewater:

The information gained from this study has already had an impact on the music department. Most specifically, at the beginning-of-semester faculty meeting in January, the faculty engaged in a lengthy discussion about how to best support students in Music Theory and Aural Skills. There will be a new section (diagnostic testing for rhythmic reading skills) added to the audition process as well as a sort of checklist of items auditioning students should work on prior to beginning college in the fall. For instance, if it is noted that an auditioning student struggles with the new diagnostic rhythmic assessment, the faculty listening to the audition will check off a box on a form given to the student indicating we would recommend they spend some time working on rhythmic understanding and skill development. It will include links to several websites in which students can work on honing those skills prior to getting to UW-Whitewater. This will encourage students to come with the entrance skills needed for success in theory and aural skills, as well as a variety of other musical skill suggestions and resources. Additionally, the faculty brainstormed strategies for support during the first and second semesters of theory and aural skills to include some form of required “study halls” for students who receive a quiz/test score below a B- served by our music theory and aural skills tutors. There were other ideas discussed that will be implemented as well, but these two are examples of how this study will impact incoming students readiness for the collegiate courses that have the greatest impact on their likely successful degree completion as well as support for the same courses once the school year has begun.

Jury rubrics are also under review. One area is just beginning to look at revising their rubric to have clearer criteria, so students receive better feedback. In addition, it will make the rubric in this area much more aligned with the rubrics in the rest of the areas — addressing the concerns noted by both faculty and students about the differences in the rubrics across the areas, and therefore, the consistency and validity of the feedback.

Challenges:

The greatest challenge during the study was accessing data. Because juries and auditions have been done paper/pencil up until Spring 2018, many of the forms have simply disappeared. I had originally wanted to track jury scores all the way through their 6-8 juries, but it quickly became apparent that there were far too many forms missing for this to be viable
and valid. Now that jury scores are input and stored digitally, this should be viable in the future.

Another challenge was the participation of faculty, in particular, in the survey. All of the faculty have perspectives of the juries when we discuss them. It would have been very helpful in a small department to have more data from faculty to get a clearer analysis of the value and needs associated with juries.

Future Plans:

This university needs to do further research into their jury scores with the new and comprehensive data secured through the new jury system. More research should be conducted regarding what specific musical (and/or non-musical) competencies students need to be a successful music major. The research to this point seems unclear or incomplete in the specific college-readiness factors that impact music majors although it seems equally clear that there are music-specific factors that are relevant. Finally, it seems particularly important to do further research into how to best support new college music majors in their first interactions with Music Theory and Aural Skills coursework. It appears this is the strongest factor impacting students’ successful completion of a music degree. Support for the building of musical skills seems to be a strength of the “music academy,” but it seems that Music Theory and Aural Skills may still be the area in which students struggle the most. If we can discover why they struggle in these courses and the best ways to support them, particularly those who struggle academically, the music department may build and develop even stronger musicians, composers, and music teachers for the future.

Deliverables:

- Poster – presented at Assessment Day, UW-Whitewater
- Conference proposal sent to Society of Music Teacher Education, Conference in September – awaiting response
- Article – sent to Research in Music Education – awaiting response
- “Presentation” of Assessment Grant to music faculty, Jan. 17, 2019
- New audition checklist for auditioning students – musical and academic skills/needs prior to start of college – department initiative in progress
- New support structure for students in Theory 1 and 2 and Aural Skills 1 and 2 – “study hall” – hoping to implement by Fall 2019 – department initiative in progress
- Ongoing assessment analysis with new jury data – Sharri VanAlstine