

Music Department – Pedagogical Inquiry Grant Report

Organizer: Paul Luongo

Members: Amy Dodds, Gary Gemberling, Doug Scarborough, and Michael Simon

Question 1:

What was the outcome of your project and how did it align with your original goals as stated in your application?

As a result of our PIG process, the Department of Music arrived at four major outcomes:

- A new Statement of Purpose
- New Learning Goals
- A plan for future staffing and long-term line requests
- A strategy to rework the major to incorporate 4-credit coursework

The first component of our process involved a complete reassessment of our Statement of Purpose. Starting from a point of “blank page optimism” we put all ideas out on the table and worked through many iterations. After discussions about our core values, research into peer institutions, and significant group writing, we arrived at this new Statement of Purpose, to be added to the College Catalog this year:

Within a personalized and inclusive environment, the Whitman Music faculty will connect your passion for music with diverse approaches to new ways of understanding. Our supportive environment meets you where you are but also challenges you to surpass your own expectations as you perform, create, critically examine, and advocate for the music that matters to you.

This Statement of Purpose constitutes a new and cohesive vision for the department, its students, and curriculum. The new statement also better integrates our collective belief that music and the Music major should be accessible to all students at Whitman College, regardless of their prior experience or proficiency in an area. It also leaves the door open to explore new areas of study that are perhaps not currently in the department.

From the Statement of Purpose, we then worked to completely rewrite our Learning Goals, focusing on several primary points: the major should be accessible to all, the learning goals should be assessable but not assessments unto themselves, the goals should speak to both a breadth and depth in areas of inquiry. During this inquiry phase, we read many other departments’ learning goals at peer institutions, as well as those of our colleagues here at Whitman. We arrived at the following Learning Goals, to be added to the College Catalog this year:

Students will engage deeply with music through historical, technological, aesthetic, and socio-cultural contexts. The Department of Music pursues a broader, liberal arts approach to music so that students will be able to:

- *Create (music through multiple modes of activity)*
- *Analyze, examine, and listen critically (to music as an object of study)*
- *Collaborate (with other musicians towards a unified artistic goal)*
- *Communicate (ideas through written and oral forms)*
- *Explore (music's broad connections throughout the discipline and beyond)*
- *Develop expertise (in an area of specialization through a capstone project)*

These new learning goals are readily assessable within our current structures, open the door to more varied forms of inquiry, and represent a wide range of our coursework.

In conjunction with this work, the department also discussed long-term hiring and staffing plans, working to better serve our students, allow us to teach more courses in our areas of interest, and stabilize courses that are on rotations. This has resulted in a request for a Tenure Track line in Choral and Voice Studies, which is being searched this academic year. We also have plans to request a Visiting position in theory and composition with intentions to request a tenure track line in theory and composition in the future.

Finally, our work in the PIG project turned to the matter of 3-credit courses vs. 4-credit courses, as brought to our attention by the Curriculum Committee two years ago. At present, most lecture-based courses in the Music Department are 3-credit, and the Curriculum Committee asked us to consider switching to 4-credit courses, for reasons we collectively agreed with, in principle. At the beginning of the process this felt like this might require a complete reworking of the major, but as we further developed our Learning Goals and Statement of Purpose, we were able to develop frameworks for the potential institution of 4-credit courses. One of the main goals we had in this process was to protect student workload while also allowing our faculty to teach the courses in which they have the deepest expertise and enthusiasm. This framework, we believe, accomplishes both those feats.

One example of the types of changes we've outlined in order to make the switch from 3- to 4-credit class is seen in the Music Theory sequence. The department decided that including a 1-credit lab with each Music Theory course would bring each theory course to 4-credits and better reflect the type of work students are already doing in the Music Theory / Aural Skills combinations. This change will also ease difficulties in registration for these courses by making the lecture and lab co-requisites, and also offering Music Theory 1 plus its lab in both fall and spring semesters (currently Aural Skills 1 is only offered in the fall, creating major bottlenecks for potential majors and minors alike).

Other changes, as a result of inquiry into 4-credit coursework, involved better distinction between the various tracks in the majors, and an emphasis on taking elective courses to fulfill major requirements. While there are still some questions to answer, the framework is in place to more fully contemplate, and soon implement, this change.

During the process, a number of smaller goals have come to light and work has begun on such areas as:

- Establishing the need for area directors of major academic areas of study, such as history, theory, so that courses may be more effectively scaffolded in the future
- Discussion around proficiencies in various areas and how to assess these

In summary, we accomplished all four major goals outlined in our PIG proposal, and laid the groundwork for the three areas of further inquiry. Now that we have done the core work, we can turn to making catalog changes to reflect the new efforts as well as making catalog changes to existing courses to better reflect their role in our current curriculum.

Question 2:

What sense do you have at this point that your project has enhanced student learning and what will you be looking at in the future to know whether the project was successful?

We believe that our new learning goals will have a significant positive influence on our student learning. The goals will help focus our curriculum on the broader skills of a well-rounded musician as opposed our previous focus on specific content sets. Among other benefits, this change allows us to think about the learning process in multiple musical styles and traditions. The evaluation process of students pursuing various tracks within the department is evident and transparent with each learning goal and each student will gain a better understanding of their development and success. The learning goals will empower the student as well as the faculty, who have a vested interest in each individual's progress, with identifying areas of strengths along with a particular learning goal(s) needing attention. This has the potential to generate more student awareness and possibly more student involvement majoring in music. We look forward to assessing our new learning goals in the coming years to better understand how this new system has shaped our curriculum and student learning.

As well, we believe that an adjustment to a 4-credit model will better reflect our students' time commitments in their music courses and situate their workload more equitably. This will allow them time to better focus their efforts and succeed in their courses.

Question 3:

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

Part of the challenge of participation in this PIG project was the navigation of important visionary ideas while being constrained by multiple smaller elements, both within the dynamics of our necessary discussions and also the ongoing logistical work it takes to run our department. We were interrupted in our work multiple times, which also necessitated the repositioning of topics to regain our breadth and depth of inquiry. Our overall lack of adequate time without substantial gaps in between, and our planned departmental searches plus the sudden appearance of still more needed searches, combined to make completing our work more difficult.

As stated in our proposal, the majority of the work for the PIG was quite likely to take place among the five core faculty members listed on the application. Our intention was to also engage with outside expertise, including that of multiple visiting faculty members, but it turned out that in-depth engagement with our visiting faculty was not especially workable for two reasons: we did not quite progress into areas that required their specialty expertise; and, there seemed to be subjective considerations of their personal situations that could influence the dynamic of the discussions.

The other primary limitation on our process took shape in the form of time-consuming searches for the following positions:

1. Staff collaborative pianist (search successfully completed)
2. Late search for a VAP in Choral Activities (first offer failed; search eventually successfully completed)
3. Last-minute need for yet another search, as our VAP in Voice took another job, necessitating a need for us to organize temporary adjunct appointments until we can do a proper search for a position

Given these considerations of timing, one might almost conclude that our main error was in attempting this PIG right now. However, as our department has learned so many times, we have to progress with our work a step or two at a time to hope to achieve our long-term goals. At least one of our searches was unexpected, but other unexpected events could have occurred instead. It might have been wise to earmark some time in the summer farther in advance, but of course we didn't know we would need it until closer to that time. Overall, as we worked to build a lasting, cohesive vision for the department, it took some time to feel comfortable that discussion of varying perspectives did not have to be threatening to the different areas within the department. It was helpful to refer to shared values that we have identified in the past. Even though we have more work to do in item #4 of the first list below, we made substantial collective progress through some of the conversations that will be implemented down the road (see second list, below). The work we have accomplished is a good foundation for those future endeavors.

1. *Establish new learning goals that respond to our changing curricular identity and encourage new areas of growth.*
2. *With new learning goals, refine our understanding of our current staffing needs and develop a long-term vision for upcoming line requests.*
3. *Address our current 3-credit system and follow necessary changes that may result from these decisions.*
4. *Reconsider the definition of our major and minor with particular attention to the above two areas of inquiry.*

From this foundation, the Music Department intends to lay the groundwork for later areas of curricular inquiry:

1. *Changes to individual course descriptions and development of new courses to respond to our new curricular identity.*

2. *Establish a framework that guides our scaffolded courses (Music Theory sequence) and our chronological connected courses (Music History sequence) for aligned and cohesive instruction.*
3. *Establish a framework that guides our performance assessment systems (Music Juries) across our areas of performance activity (Jazz, Piano, Strings, Winds and Percussion, and Voice), identifying areas of necessary cohesion and areas of deliberate individuality.*

Question 4:

How do you envision sharing the results of your work with other colleagues at Whitman (or elsewhere)?

We are excited to share our new statement of purpose on our website and other promotional/recruiting materials. This statement of purpose helps to shape our internal thinking but it also speaks to prospective students about the values of our department. As an external facing message, it begins the conversation with our future students about their possible musical experiences at Whitman College. As well, the clarity of this statement and the various focal points surrounding diversity, inclusion and expectations within the supportive environment of the music department will generally inform all students, from first-year students to graduating seniors, what they can expect from a team of music professionals who have the best interests of each student in mind.

Of course, the college has well-established systems for disseminating information about each department's learning goals. We look forward to sharing these new goals with our prospective students, current students, and colleagues through these channels.

Finally, the Music Department looks forward to the important future task of adapting our curriculum to a four-credit model. While undertaking this process, we will share our work with the curriculum committee and, eventually, all of our colleagues through department meeting votes on our curriculum changes.