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ARTICLE

The Value of Teaching the Public Arts: A View from Public Musicology

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Abstract

Some humanities fields, understanding the growing importance and relevance of public work, have been relatively quick to incorporate teaching public work into their courses. But the arts have been slow to catch up, for example, the relatively recent fields of public musicology and public music theory. However, teaching students how to do public work and why it is important is often removed in favor of course coverage. The reality is that teaching students to do public-facing work can enhance a course's coverage while also teaching valuable workforce skills, in or out of the arts. At a time when applied careers in the performing and visual arts are dwindling, it is crucial to include the pedagogy of public-facing work in one's arts classroom to show students what careers are possible using their disciplinary knowledge. In this manifesto, I discuss the importance of teaching public arts methods with a view from my own field, public musicology. As a case study, I will show how teaching public musicology can be both incorporated into stand-alone courses and built into programs, as I have done in the only public musicology undergraduate program in the United States.

Keywords: music; public musicology; music history; community engagement; career planning; public scholarship

The rise of public scholarship in humanities fields has prompted many to understand the growing importance and relevance of public work, even though there is a lagging recognition for this kind of work in academia. Faculty in some fields, such as history, have been relatively quick to incorporate teaching public work into their courses, while others, including arts disciplines, have been slow to catch up. Despite this slow speed, some fields are nonetheless building a public-facing future, for example, public musicology and public music theory.[1] Within the field of musicology, there tends to be an emphasis on the coverage of material rather than practical skills acquisition. Recently, however, academic arts courses —such as music history and theory—have begun to see the value of teaching students how to do public work and why it is important. After all, some might ask, why should we teach students to be able to work with a music-related museum exhibit or discuss a specific piece of music to a group of senior citizens when what they really need to know is the important

[1] There is also a public musicology-adjacent field, public ethnomusicology, sometimes referred to as applied ethnomusicology. Likewise, public musicology is sometimes referred to as applied musicology.

musical literature from, say, the nineteenth century? The reality is that teaching students to do public-facing work can enhance a course's coverage while also teaching valuable workforce skills, in or out of the arts. At a time when applied careers in the performing and visual arts are dwindling, it is crucial to include the pedagogy of public-facing work in one's arts classroom to show students what careers are possible using their disciplinary knowledge. This kind of training is especially important at a time when humanities majors in higher education are decreasing, and the much-dreaded enrollment cliff is approaching.[2] I offer a case study here of how teaching public musicology can be both incorporated into stand-alone courses and built into programs, as I have done in the only public musicology program in the United States as of this writing.

As I wrote elsewhere, public musicology "requires one to activate one's knowledge of music history and culture in order to communicate information about music effectively, whether to novices or experts. But there is more to public musicology than just providing information: it is also about how to engage the public in your work."[3] More succinctly, "the public is anyone outside a scholar's discipline."[4] By extension, Naomi André has written that public musicology is about disseminating "the accepted knowledge of specialists with a less informed audience" while also acknowledging that this is also its biggest limitation.[5] We don't habitually train our students to undertake this work. On the heels of public history, public musicology is relatively new. Laura Tunbridge has attributed its birth to the music appreciation movement in the early twentieth century in which there became somewhat of a goal to provide basic music education to public audiences.[6] Some of the first public musicology courses were offered at the University of Maryland in 2017, and now a variety of universities have been offering public musicology courses, mainly for graduate students. While the first public humanities programs were launched toward the beginning of the twenty-first century, public arts programs and courses in public arts are relatively new.[7] For example, in public musicology, around 2018, Westminster Choir College of Rider University began offering a master's degree in American and Public Musicology, which was recently deactivated as of fall 2022, a casualty of budget cuts.[8] The second public musicology program to be founded was in fall 2022 as a certificate at The Joyce and Henry Schwob School of Music at Columbus State University as an in-person, embedded certificate and expanded to an online-only, stand-alone offering in fall 2024. Columbus State University is a public university located 100 miles southwest of Atlanta, Georgia that is part of the University System of Georgia. On the whole, as of May 2025, the university enrollment is roughly 7,000 students and the enrollment of the Schwob School of Music is 246 students. The Schwob School of Music follows a conservatory curriculum.

Though billed as an undergraduate certificate, the Public Musicology Certificate at Columbus State University is unique in that it enrolls undergraduates from the first semester of their freshman through graduate students who already hold master's degrees. Some students are music majors, some are music minors, and some are neither but have music experience. Within the category of music majors, we have students who are pursuing Bachelor of Arts degrees in Music, Bachelor of Music Education, and Bachelor of Music

[2] Heller 2023, American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2024.
[3] Wissner 2023, 228.
[4] Boyd 2025, 3.
[5] André 2018, 198.
[6] Taruskin and Tunbridge 2018.
[7] May-Curry and Oliver 2023, 5.
[8] Levin 2022.

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degrees. Within the graduate population, our students are pursuing Master of Music and Artist Diplomas. For non-majors, we have students pursuing degrees in Information Systems Management, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Psychology, just to name a few. As of May 2025, the Public Musicology Certificate is the largest certificate program at Columbus State University and encompasses roughly 18% of the Schwob School of Music's enrollment.

Providing public musicology training, whether in certificate form, such as the one we offer at Columbus State University, or in stand-alone courses that are part of a music major, presents a value-added approach to music training; that is, students get what they came for —whether a performance, music education, general, music therapy, or other music degree —plus additional training that supplements these areas, showing them other ways that they can use the standard music training in other careers. In fact, research shows that as degree program enrollment is falling, certificate program enrollment is rising.[9] The public musicology certificate and its courses provide students with the core skills of the humanities—critical thinking, writing, and engagement—with traditional music training.[10] This allows not only undergraduates to access this training, but also graduate and post-baccalaureate students. Students do not have to be certificate students to take any or all its courses, as they also count toward the electives for the music major and the music minor, though since the program began, only one student who was not a certificate student who took a class did not decide to enroll in the certificate—all others have. Having the courses offered both online and in person in each semester gives more flexibility to students who might have class, work, or other conflict options for completing the certificate. Additionally, by ensuring that all the course projects and materials are available digitally, students in both sections can do the same projects; the only difference is the delivery method, which ensures accessibility for students in a variety of ways. Its innovative goals and curriculum saw the certificate named by the American Council on Learned Societies as an innovative and thriving humanities program in 2024.[11]

So why is a program like this important? It is no secret that traditional jobs in music are becoming harder to get, either due to a lack of funding or because more people are vying for jobs than there are positions available. The *Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook* cites the job growth for musicians and singers at 2% and music directors and composers at 3% between 2023 and 2033.[12] Some of this is caused by the lack of broad training that leaves our students unprepared for non-traditional music jobs, and this is a problem not just in music but in the arts and humanities writ large, causing the crisis language we often hear.[13] However, there are some people in adjacent fields such as public music theory who are detractors, noting that telling our students that their required academic training in music (e.g., theory and history) can provide them with advantages on the job market and in professional areas, we are contributing to the legitimization of making students take courses they may not want to take or in which they find value.[14] At the same time, we must, in some ways, break from our engrained academic music training to be successful.[15] Though we often think of public-facing training as career-driven, some think

[9] Weissman 2024.
[10] Marshall 2024, 469.
[11] Hartman 2024.
[12] Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024a, 2024b.
[13] Angeli and McNealis 2025, 3.
[14] Belcher, Kim, and Reese 2023.
[15] Tan 2024, 2.

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that it actually may be more effective if it is not because it provides students with only one reason to learn these skills: getting a specific job.[16] But what students don't realize is that these skills are transferable to any job, in or out of music. For instance, the 2023 AAC&U employer survey revealed that 69% of hiring managers find it very important to hire people who can apply knowledge to real-world settings; beyond performance and craft, using disciplinary history and methods in the arts is important in the real world.[17]

While some public musicology classes exist outside of my university, all are targeted toward graduate students; I argue that waiting until graduate school can often be—but is not always—too late. Students must be able to know what they can do with their knowledge beyond the stage and studio and the undergraduate years are the prime time for that instruction. For example, there is a long-standing stigma that if one graduates with a music degree without obtaining employment as a performer or music teacher, they are a failure. This is a notion I am conscious to dispel, not only by providing them with training and skills in the field, but also exposing them to frequent class visits by people who are doing public musicology in their career outside of teaching and/or performing. Teaching students public musicology skills in tandem with the knowledge and skills they already have and will gain as musicians allows them to leave our campuses not saying, "Now what?" but rather "What NOT now?" In each of my public musicology classes, I do metacognitive reflections in the middle and end of semester, and I have frequently received many students—in fact, in spring 2025, almost all of the students—writing that they have learned they can have a successful career in and out of music with the skills they've learned in these classes and that meeting with people working in various areas using their public musicology skills has taught them that there are other successful paths aside from teaching and performing. I believe that it behooves us to expose students to this reality as undergraduates, but it is also helpful to do this with graduate students, too. We should expose as many undergraduate and graduate students to as many kinds of careers outside of the traditional trajectory (by that time, it becomes Plan B if they don't get an academic job with the PhD) and the necessary skills needed to obtain them. This is especially fruitful in the arts, where most undergraduates begin taking courses in their major courses as freshmen, rather than waiting until their junior year as non-arts students often do. One of my student's parents wanted her to leave the university and transfer somewhere else to major in something other than music, but it was only her enrollment in the public musicology certificate that convinced them to let her stay. The truth is, by showing our students what they can do with their skills, we are opening doors to them, and the earlier we do this, the better.

By providing students with the kinds of training that public musicology affords, we expose our students to careers they may not have known existed or create ones that don't exist yet. One example is a student of mine who came to our university to be a K-12 music teacher. Her exposure to public musicology, museum-based projects, and newfound interest in accessibility has prompted her to reroute her goals toward making music exhibits in museums accessible to people with various needs. Though she is still pursuing her music education degree, she understands the value of the skills training with which the public musicology certificate is providing her to realize this goal. Another student of mine, who holds a Bachelor's Degree in Music Education is an in-service high school teacher pursuing the online certificate without simultaneously being in a degree program, has remarked that a

[16] Smulyan 2022, 133.
[17] Finley 2023, 17.

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day doesn't go by when she's not using some sort of skill or bit of knowledge that she learned in the program's classes.

The arts are natural fields for public work because they are inherently collaborative and engaged, especially with the publics and communities.[18] So, why have we been so slow to embrace our public-facing possibilities? And how can we train future students to do this work in the university framework we already have without inventing new programs? To begin with, we must remove any deficit mindsets. As Heather Hewett and Stacy M. Hartman write, "focusing on the strengths of your department or program, the types of students and scholars you want to attract and create, and the impact you want to have, and designing backward from there. It means starting with a sense of possibility rather than a posture of fear."[19] For many of us, this requires thinking outside of the traditional box; in music, it means broadening out from the same curriculum we have been using since the nineteenth century, which can be uncomfortable, and much of the reason why it's taken music fields so long to jump on the public humanities bandwagon.

To train students to do public arts work, we must think about what we must teach and how we can enhance what we're teaching to allow students to use that knowledge in a project that will not die in the learning management system, allowing students to move from theory to application and experience.[20] Think about how you can embed projects into your courses, whether the course is public musicology-focused or not. We need to think broadly about what can count as a public-facing project. In public musicology—and I would venture to say this could apply to all of the arts in some way—projects can take the form of digital humanities projects, performance or creative works, and any sort of media that is not targeted toward academics, such as podcasts, exhibit catalogs, or even pieces of journalism including reviews.[21] The ability to interact with and create material outside of the traditional for-the-professor's-eyes-only research paper should be just as engrained in courses as the skills and content those courses teach.[22] I have written elsewhere about how I do this, including teaching students necessary digital literacy skills.[23] In the certificate courses, students learn to do many things from writing the standard set of program notes and giving public lectures to writing children's books and plays, curating museum exhibits (both digital and analog), creating informational Instagram videos, and even coding music notation (the latter of which musicians are especially good for given that they are not afraid to spend lots of time alone and focused, think outside of the box, and find creative solutions to problems).[24]

This kind of work also helps us avoid the temptation to "cling to the written word" as the ultimate medium as not only traditional musicologists but also public musicologists have been attuned to do.[25] For instance, in the second semester of the music history survey for majors, I assigned a podcast and listening guide project that works in tandem with a radio program that airs each Sunday night with recordings by our school.[26] This past spring, I also

[18] Jay 2010, 54.
[19] Hewett and Hartman 2024.
[20] Cho, Curry, and McNeil 2025, 2.
[21] Ford 2023, 215–6.
[22] Arteaga, 2025, 2.
[23] Wissner 2024, 7–16.
[24] Hughes 2017; Columbus State University 2024.
[25] Mosley 2024, 256.
[26] Schwob School of Music Listening Guides and Podcasts n.d.

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taught an honors section of that course, which includes an honors contract component where students will be creating a local music history landmark tour in Clio (we have not yet started, but the app currently has only three sites entered, all dating from 2018, but there many more landmarks exist). For many of us, we have rich communities that surround us with whom our students don't often interact. One student told me that the program interested them because, ironically, as a music major, they felt siloed from the community. We can help our students connect with the community and share their knowledge while also remembering that "what the community teaches us is far more profound than what we teach the community."[27] We also need to consider the communities and organizations with whom our students work and ensure that whatever form their work takes, it is grounded in ethical behaviors and addresses, rather than perpetuates, any inequalities that may exist, especially when working with marginalized populations, through a kind of reparative public musicology.[28]

If we are to rethink the goal of the arts in a society in which they are derided and considered expendable, and parents worry about their children obtaining gainful employment with an arts major, we must think about how we are training our students. What skills can they gain in arts classes that will transfer to other fields? How can we expand beyond content and move toward skills acquisition? In music, at least, it is not only common but also expected that music students spend hours tucked away alone in practice rooms honing their craft, and when they are not, they spend most of their other time with other music students in classes, ensembles, or social settings. They hardly taught to talk to non-musicians. I'll go out on a limb and say this is also the case for students in fine arts, theater, and dance. If we do not train our arts students to use their training to work with the public, then we run the risk of creating a future where we only talk to ourselves.

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[27] Gordon 2016.

[28] Henry 2022, 299.

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