



# Do-Overs or Do-Betters

BY PENNY DIMMICK

“I wish I could start college over—take all of my courses again because I know now why they are important to me as a teacher, and when I took them the first time I really didn’t get it. I took those classes because they were required and I needed to check them off the list in order to graduate. I didn’t really learn all that I could have and should have learned. I just wish I could do it all over again—knowing what I know now.”

An interesting statement made by a student teacher upon completion of her semester of student teaching. Of course, starting over again for her was not an option, given the commitment of time and finances for her college education. Most people are in that same situation. An undergraduate education is a one-time opportunity and a privilege, and therefore, it is important to both make the most of it and to *gain* the most from it—to “Do better” from the outset.

In most universities the undergraduate music education program is large, complex, and often bursting at the seams with requirements and expectations. Given the breadth and the depth of both the skills and the knowledge needed to be a successful teacher in a music classroom today, the demands of the program are to be expected. However, just recognizing the programs’ challenges does not necessarily help in negotiating those challenges—a strategy is needed. There are many articles and books written about how to be successful in college but a better approach might be to ask those who have actually been there, especially successful music education students who have gone on to be successful in their music classrooms. Here are their suggestions.

First of all, field experiences of all kinds, are among the most beneficial experiences for anyone considering a career in education. While most music education programs require various types of these experiences, just sitting in a K–12 classroom does not guarantee that you will get the most out of that experience. Embracing every opportunity to participate in the classroom and taking the initiative to go above and beyond the requirements and the required hours will pay huge dividends in the long run. While the insights gained in these settings are extremely valuable, the networks that are established through these experiences are also

quite valuable. Many times these connections lead to employment opportunities later on.

It is also important to acknowledge that students’ approach to field experiences, to school, and to “learning” throughout their college years will greatly impact what they get out of their education. For instance, consider those “General Education” requirements, which are often approached as a type of “beat-the-clock bingo.” Far better to treat those requirements as invitations to explore subjects outside your comfort zone, chosen on the basis of the professor’s reputation, the course’s reputation, your interest in the topic, graduation requirements, and convenience—in that order.<sup>1</sup>

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These courses can not only enrich students’ education in the present but also their future classrooms and perhaps even their long term career path when they are approached in this way. This same strategy can also be applied to music requirements that may seemingly have nothing to do with one’s ultimate goal of teaching band, choir, orchestra, or general music classes. Realize that you should not only be learning content in these courses (e.g. music theory and history courses, sight singing, lessons, and ensembles), but you should also be learning the teaching techniques and approaches that your professors use to teach these courses. Jotting down simple exercises, unique phrases, and/or helpful hints given in these classes will greatly assist you in your future classrooms. Take advantage of all of your professors’ experience and expertise throughout your college career; there should be no such thing as a wasted class!

Other suggestions for “doing better” or “getting the most” out of one’s college career that were consistently listed by our successful teachers included managing and using time wisely, organizing and prioritizing one’s

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activities, and making wise and informed decisions regarding both curricular and co-curricular activities one participates in. With regard to time management, realize that one hour of focused, concentrated, and uninterrupted studying or practicing is much more valuable and fruitful than two or three hours of unfocused, disorganized, and interrupted studying or practicing. While it is certainly much more fun to study with a group of friends or to visit with the person in the practice room next door, it is even better to spend time with these friends when your studying and practicing is done and the time is yours. According to Harry Wong, “what matters is not the number of hours that you put in but how much you put into those hours.”<sup>2</sup> Avoiding Facebook, Twitter, and texting while studying or practicing will also significantly impact the accomplishments gained during that time.

In addition to being successful managers of time, successful music education students are also organized—in their work, their play, their practicing, their studying, and their life in general. This is also true of successful music educators; organization is an essential element in any successful school music program. The good news is that organizational skills can be developed and strengthened through practicing deliberate and intentional procedures that will become habits over time. For those that struggle with organization, see the article “Organizational Skills 101: The Second Piece of the Puzzle” that appeared in this column in September of 2009 for strategies in strengthening this part of your life.

Co-curricular activities are another aspect of college life that can have long-term implications for one’s career, both during and after college. These activities are often chosen at the annual College Activities Fair, but not necessarily for the right reasons or with much thought. In considering options for involvement, membership in the collegiate chapter of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) at your school should be at the top of your list. The value of the professional opportunities, the experiences, and the leadership skills that can be gained through participation in NAfME cannot be matched by any other organization on campus. In the event that your local chapter is not active, seize the opportunity to reactivate it and build a strong and sustainable program to support all the music education students at your university.

Last, but certainly not least, successful music educators stressed the importance of developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It is impossible to do well in school without taking care of yourself physically,

emotionally, and spiritually. Prioritizing healthy habits and the above mentioned strategies in your life from the outset of the academic year will enable you to not only “do better” in college, but to do your best in all areas. The long-term ramifications are exciting.

Learning without thinking is labor lost, and thinking without learning is dangerous.—Chinese proverb

## ENDNOTES

1. Feaver, Peter and Anne Crossman. “5 Myths About the Best Years of Your Life”, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/30/AR2008043001216.html>.
2. Wong, Harry K. and Rosemary Tripi Wong. *The First Days of School*.

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