

The Screening of Potential Music Educators

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Abstract:

Excellence of the educational process is attainable only through excellence and quality of the professional staff of teachers and administrators. The steering committee appreciates the commitment of those throughout our slate who are actively involved in the training of future music educators. The following article details many important facets of the significance of screening areas of music education students which will help insure the desired quality of our future teachers of the arts.

Article:

One of the key words which has surfaced frequently in all the state and national rhetoric concerning education is "excellence." While there are many ingredients in educational excellence, the selection of outstanding teacher candidates is surely one of the more important considerations. The screening of potential music educators is a multi-faceted process and the purpose of this article is to review and comment upon that process.

The first, and perhaps most important, phase might be termed "self-screening." Ideally, a number of experiences ought to guide youngsters into wise and appropriate career choices. Sometimes students in a music education degree program are just not suited for the teaching profession for any number of reasons. Other students might be seeking certification for reasons other than an interest in teaching, such as job security should they be unsuccessful in a performance career. High school students who display an interest in being a music major in college can benefit enormously from early career advice. High school band, choir, and orchestra directors can be especially helpful in sharing both the joys and frustrations of music teaching in a realistic and forward manner.

Thorough and professional advising is also critically important at the college level. A student who merely receives cursory course selection advice from a disinterested faculty member is being grossly disserved. Advisors should carefully review the entire degree program, explain the role of each portion of the curriculum, and spend some time in meaningful dialogue with the student concerning both short- and long-term goals. Difficult as it is for students at this age, they should be encouraged to spend at least some time contemplating life ten to fifteen years after graduation. Granted, few will be able to forecast their futures very accurately, but the exercise will be enlightening.

A third aspect of the self-screening process is early field experiences. Students' most recent experiences understandably provide them with the strongest model of a music program. Field experiences, even as early as the freshman year, if properly structured, give them an opportunity to observe different kinds of programs. Also, they may visualize themselves in the role of the teacher and do some mental imaging of how they might feel about being in a similar circumstance. Particularly useful are field experiences in elementary and middle schools, because many college students may not have been around younger students in a music classroom setting since they themselves were that age. Careful career counseling, both in high school and in college, along with early field experiences are important ingredients in helping prospective music educators make wise choices.

Beyond self-screening, which should continue throughout a students' college career, there are two mid-point checks which normally occur by the end of the sophomore year. One screening device is new and mandated by

law. Beginning this year, all potential education majors must pass a Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST). The PPST has been instituted to insure minimum levels of competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. Students must achieve a passing score before continuing in the upper division education sequence. Although administered by individual colleges, the PPST is a TEA requirement; thus, control over who remains in an education degree program does not reside with the college at this juncture.

A second mid-point screening device may be established by each institution. This may involve application to the education unit for admission to the upper division sequence or a mid-point check by the music unit. A sophomore review by the music education faculty might include the following: a review of all courses taken, along with grades, to insure satisfactory progress toward the degree; evaluative feedback from all the music professors with whom the student has had contact during the first two years; and an interview/review session with the music education faculty. This last procedure, the interview, allows outstanding students to get positive feedback, average students to receive both positive comments and constructive criticism, and mediocre students to receive fair and early warning that they are not meeting professional expectations and a career re-evaluation may be in order. The interview helps take the onus off an individual advisor for communicating unpleasant news and also makes it less likely that weak advisors will avoid confronting difficult students. When the catalog gives the faculty the authority, the sophomore review may also provide for the actual elimination of extremely weak students, much as the qualifying audition might prohibit unskilled students from pursuing a performance degree.

Near the end of the degree program there are several final screening devices. TEA requires a 2.25 grade point average for admission to the student teaching semester; individual institutions may require even higher grade point averages. The student teaching experience itself is perhaps the ultimate screening device. While it is unfortunate if a student fails to meet minimum professional standards at such a late date, no student should pass student teaching just by virtue of having signed up for it. The spectre of denying a person a degree at the last possible minute makes the earlier checkpoints all the more critical.

Actually, successful completion of an education degree program will soon no longer lead to automatic certification. Anyone who applies for certification after May 1, 1986 will first have to pass an "exit certification test." While the content of this test is still unknown, it will apparently include questions in professional education and in the teaching field. This, again, is a TEA requirement and makes it possible for a student to receive a college degree in education without being certified.

All the screening devices in the world will not insure that only high quality teachers are certified. However, self-screening, institutional screening, and TEA screening can help those youngsters who are less suited to a teaching career make intelligent career choices, while giving support and encouragement to those who are most likely to become outstanding music educators.