

“Remaining Relevant”

Address to the Texas Association of Music Schools

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by

Dr. William V. May

Dean Emeritus, Baylor University

We have a challenge looming large for our music schools...the challenge to remain relevant in this volatile world in which we live, work, design curricula, and shape young peoples' futures. Remaining relevant, despite the word remaining, unfortunately does not suggest staying the same. Rather it suggests that we have to do something in order to remain; doing something requires change and, therein lies the problem.

Many of you don't know me. I have been out of the TAMS loop for a while. But, you quickly will note that tonight I will not be wondering around up here note-less in Ted Talk fashion microphone hanging from my ear; I don't have a PowerPoint; I secretly wish this podium was a little bigger so I could separate from you just a bit more, and I am not interested in you tweeting me with responses during this talk. I simply will lecture and you will listen. All of that sums to one thing...I am old.

I have been teaching or administering longer than most of you have been alive...and most cruelly, I or someone like me, is a member of each of your faculties. I'm the guy, when one of your bright young faculty members has a bright new idea, who says we tried that in 1972 and it didn't work then and it won't work now. I'm the guy who asks the most loaded questions in faculty meetings just to watch you squirm. I'm the guy who calls you "honey" or "youngster." I'm the guy who thinks music began a slow steady decline in quality after Beethoven or after the invention of the saxophone. I'm that guy.

So, what do you do with me? Marginalize me? That will make me even more defensive. Suggest that I retire? Then I will sue you and win. Just wait for me to die? I will outlive both you and your formerly successful department. So, again I ask, what will you do with me? I

suggest that you help me; that you understand me; because strangely we share the very same fears.

When I get back to the quietude of my office and I open my file drawer to find my yellowed classnotes dispersed among dried out overhead projector slides and a few purple ditto sheets, I share the same fear that you have for your school...in this era of rapid change and upheaval, will I become, will my school, will my graduates become...obsolete?

Now some of you immediately are thinking, yeah, yeah, Will...people have been proclaiming the death of classical music and music schools for years and we are still here. The symphony is dead; opera is dead; classical music is on life-support and so is music as an academic major. Well we are still here; we are doing things in pretty much the same fashion as always; despite all the continuing gloom and doom.

But, obsolescence does happen to us. We need only to look to the discipline of church music to find proof. We trained well our students to be organist/choir directors; they were good at it and successful...and they were beloved by congregations until one day a new pastor arrived with projection screens and drum sets. He took perfectly respectable rock and roll tunes, extracted the word Lucille, inserted the word Jesus, and those choir directors who could not adapt were obsolete along with our university curricula. Boom. Gone.

What if our other curricula, methodologies, and our graduates' skills encounter the same tidal wave of change as did church music? I would submit that simply maintaining the status quo puts us at greater risk of irrelevance, so therefore, we must make appropriate changes. The problems with that strategy are two-fold, (1) change in higher education is very difficult...even our accrediting agencies (arguably) force us not to change; and (2) to change, we must foresee our projection screens and drumsets of the future before they arrive.

My wife, a longtime elementary math consultant, opened her teacher training workshops with a slide that read, "the only ones comfortable with change are wet babies." Everyone else is uncomfortable. That's where us old guys reenter the picture with our fears that any change will expose us as obsolete, so we will oppose such at every turn.

So, how do we bring about positive change in higher education, specifically music schools with uncertain futures and old guys standing in the way?

John Kotter, guru of organizational change in business, suggests an 8-step model that starts with the **creation of a sense of urgency** as step one, a step many of you likely have taken already. Some of us simply recognize a drastically changing work world for our musician graduates and, therefore, we recognize also the need to adapt curricula. For many of us, the urgency has come from less positive, external sources, such as the excruciatingly painful mandates to reduce undergraduate degrees from 140+ hours to 120. Those heart-rending changes often have included distasteful shenanigans such as hidden hours and credit-less proficiency requirements.

Others of you are facing declining enrollments? I recently did a NASM visitation in a music school which has suffered an almost 30% decline in student enrollment in the last three years. There's a clarion call for some sort of change.

Or, in a time in which, I firmly believe, we are recruiting from a pool of young musicians better prepared, better skilled than ever before, some institutions have experienced significant declines in student quality. The pool is better, but the pool also is smaller...and some institutions are falling behind in recruiting from this smaller pool, a state from which there is unlikely recovery. Urgency to be sure.

Let's assume then that we all feel some degree of urgency to change.

Kotter's next two steps are, one, to **build a guiding coalition of leaders who feel the urgency** and, two, who can **shape a vision**. Our schools have recognized leaders already, don't we, those who keep the machine oiled and in operation. For change, however, we must carefully differentiate between those whose leadership is based on political power alone, power that might be threatened by change, and those faculty suitable for new coalitions more representative of all and less interested in personal power. That will require you to think in new ways about the leaders who you gather around you.

As to shaping visions, we all have done that. Our shelves are filled with volumes of cleverly crafted words left from endless exercises in strategic planning.

Ok, leave those on the shelves and consider today a different sort of vision for us all: That is, to marshal resources, shape curricula, and direct energy toward **educating our students for their futures, not our pasts.**

How do we do that? Kotter suggests that we first must **remove obstacles to change.** There are many in addition to old guys. We have heard all the change metaphors...change in higher education is like moving a cemetery; nobody pays attention until you try to do it. Or, curricular change is like rebuilding an airplane...while flying it (Tony Wagner). What are our common obstacles? Our greatest fears, of course:

If something of great value is to be added, then something of less value must be left out.

What is fearful about that, you ask? We already reduced to 120 hours so the next reductions extend all the way to individual classes...our professorial **turf.** We old professors are like ancient craftsmen, the creators of beautiful furniture or the builders of ornate cathedrals. We enjoyed developing our expertise. We often had lengthy apprenticeships...and we then perfected our “handcrafted products,” our classes, our special classes. Leaving any portion out now would be like leaving a leg off of a fine dining table or building a cathedral with no stained glass windows.

We have our carefully prepared lecture notes and likely our biggest recent pedagogical change was the switch to PowerPoint...as long as we have someone else there to help us turn the dang thing on.

Declaring any topic less important evokes resistance...need a few examples?

1. Do we really need to discuss the contents of the Montpellier Codices and whether the motets therein are isorhythmic or not? Why learn that stuff? Because, those used to be items on the GRE exam, don't you know.
2. Or, how much time do you spend clearly delineating the subtleties of German versus French versus Italian augmented sixth chord resolutions? A long time? Yet on YouTube, there's a clip of a then high school student who has already entered Baylor performing one of those multi-screen videos. He wrote and performs all the vocal parts, and the piano interludes, of his arrangement of “Misty” using harmonies infinitely more complex than any encountered in the entirety of Baylor's theory curricula. Well, you

say...he's different...he can place out of basic theory and take instead some advanced coursework...advanced course work...like 16th century counterpoint.

3. Or, do we really need to teach things like trip planning, resume writing, or selecting choir dresses in Music Education Methods classes?
4. Or, do we really need to demand of our doctoral students reading knowledge of two foreign languages simply because we had to do it?

Have I hit your sacred cow yet? Are these unimportant topics? No. But, should they make the next inclusion lists? I don't know. Maybe not. But, us old guys who fear obsolescence view this talk as large, threatening asteroids that might wipe us out.

And, how about perhaps our worst fear of all, the **fear of making the wrong decision**? What if our vision of our students' futures is incorrect? Change is a risk...a risk to tradition, to our autonomy, to time-tested centuries-old methods, to our very way of life...what if we get in wrong?

How do we get past all these fears and other obstacles? How do we move forward? Kotter's sixth principle is to first **focus on short-term wins**...small incremental positive steps. To do so,

- We must keep our prime objective...our vision...clearly in sight. To alter existing mind-sets and assuage the fears of us old guys, we must continually remind everyone of the why of change.
- And, at the same time we must move slowly and be patient as we demonstrate that we are not repeating another church music scenario or jumping on a temporary bandwagon.

Then Kotter suggests gradually **accelerating the change process by...**

1. Making sure that surrounding structures, such as faculty reward systems, are in tune with the change and are promoting it,
2. By making sure that human energy and financial resources are in support of the change;
3. By making sure that faculty have the skills to do what is required. That was the downfall of the comprehensive musicianship movement of the 70's, the teaching of transfer between isolated music disciplines, history, theory, conducting, etc. Great ideas, some of

which linger today. But great ideas that were put in place before we had faculty with the expertise to realize its goals. And...

4. Ultimately, those still questioning, and there will be those, need to see someone they respect already embracing and practicing the change. At the University of North Texas, decades ago, I observed that arguably the best music theorists in the school were the jazz majors. They lived and breathed theoretical principals every day in order to perform. Famous jazz vibes player, Gary Burton, once remarked that he went to Berkley in Boston to learn what to call what he already did. And, sure enough, after a hard fought political battle at UNT, turf wars if you will, the jazz folks created an undergraduate music theory curriculum completely apart from the traditional one. Today, at the University of Miami, under the leadership of another jazz guy dean of the school who could point toward UNT, their theory curriculum has been transformed into what I would describe as a “learn by doing” approach that does not begin at all with thinking about Baroque harmonies. Sometimes us old faculty members need to see innovations in action before embracing them.

Kotter’s 8-steps finish with **bringing the changes into full membership in the institutional culture**. The institutional culture is the glue that holds the institution together. Lose it and you’re done. It is over and can’t be reclaimed.

And, if your institutional culture embraces the notion of educating students for their futures and recognizing the fear of your faculty, it will be a culture that can be sustained. And, all of your young folks, like these present tonight, can begin their long journey to become old guys like me. Thank you and best wishes to you all.