

CTE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

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By Pat Huston

ENVISION NO MELODIES, DANCE, COSTUMES, CHOREOGRAPHY,

colorful lights, or creative backdrops. No live theatre or movies. No Super Bowl half-time show. No Grammys. No Oscars.

Performing arts professionals Tatiana Owens, Sean Gannon, Jackson Gallagher and their career and technical education (CTE) teachers, administrators and state leaders can't. They, in fact, want more. In an economic environment emphasizing in-demand jobs, they are waging a battle not only to keep, but to elevate, those areas that most Americans enjoy but take for granted.

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), categorizes performing arts within the Arts, Audiovisual Technology & Communications Career Cluster. Around the country, performing arts is known by such names as Arts and Communication and Visual and Performing Arts, among others. Among the 16

nationally recognized Career Clusters,[®] performance programs are often thought of as the “stepchild,” the one that multitudes want to see and hear and many secretly wish to be—except for the lack of a structured schedule, regular income and a house in the suburbs.

This story is about the value of CTE performing arts education in the United States. It is about local and state CTE leaders and performers who are working not only to keep dance, music, acting and stagecraft alive, but also to make it thrive. The focus is on what is happening in Ohio and New Jersey, but it is applicable to other states as well.

What CTE Performer Alumni Say

Tatiana Owens, 22, describes herself as “a female version of Bruno Mars.” Taking a break from applying makeup and twisting strands of her hair into waves for a 1920s off-Broadway role, she explains that she is most at home being “very funk and R&B,” but she can be pop if she needs

the money. Mars, widely recognized for his mainstream songs “Just the Way You Are” and “Uptown Funk,” is narrowly known for his more extensive reggae, hip-hop and rap. Owens hails from a Toledo, Ohio, CTE program and lives in a loft in upstate New York. She is a singer who acts, dances and writes music.

Sean Gannon, 25, a graduate of a New Jersey CTE program, lives in a small apartment across the Hudson River with a clear view of the New York City skyline. Five days a week he takes a 15-minute bus ride from Hoboken to Times Square, arriving before 8 a.m. and walking past more than 100 performing artist hopefuls to his job with a casting company. When he is not in his steady position that pays the rent and provides health insurance, he's a dancer and a dance teacher.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, 23-year-old Jackson Gallagher answers a knock on the door. Tonight, his dinner is Indian fare. He eats and relaxes in a London hotel room just before setting up visual

effects for alt-J, a British indie rock band. Tomorrow, it will be less appetizing food with 16 people riding and sleeping in a tour bus. After four years as an actor, singer and dancer, he studied stagecraft in an Ohio CTE program and is a video technician/designer.

These three 20-something entertainment industry professionals, who have never met, are working in a risky, highly competitive, fast-paced career full of rewards and disappointments. They say achievement and success are surer bets for those who hone their talents and skills in a CTE program than for the teens balancing private lessons and single fine arts classes in traditional high schools.

CTE Performing Arts Status and Jobs

In a national climate that emphasizes more plentiful, higher-wage jobs in industries like information technology, health and engineering, CTE performing arts programs struggle for air, clamoring for local, state and national attention. An informal survey conducted by Ohio in the summer of 2014 revealed that most of the nation's CTE programs had moved away from performing arts to fine arts, where the emphasis is more on appreciation and less on making a living.

Many states that did not give up the CTE performing arts model shifted the emphasis to technical theatre, where graduates are more likely to obtain steadier jobs. The CTE programs still clinging to the “triple threat” emphasis on dance, music and acting are generally geographically close or have strong faculty connections to such notable performing arts industry states as New York and California.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, jobs for technicians, such as sound engineers for concerts, are projected to grow 9 percent from 2012 to 2022. In comparison, positions for dancers and set designers have a 6 percent growth projection. For musicians and singers, the projected growth is 5 percent. For actors, it is 4 percent. For those who want to teach art, drama and music to students wanting to be the performers the teachers once

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were or wanted to be, the occupational opportunities are greater.

What CTE Performing Arts Educators Say

Local CTE faculty and state agency leadership talk about work ethic, occupational safety and health, higher-education alignment, rigorous academic and technical skills, professional networking and the business operations side of performing arts. In a climate where performing arts programs are often the victim of cuts, there are strategies to keep these programs off the chopping block.

Spokespersons from Ohio and New Jersey, which have CTE performing arts programs in 11 and 24 locations, respectively, offer these three pieces of advice:

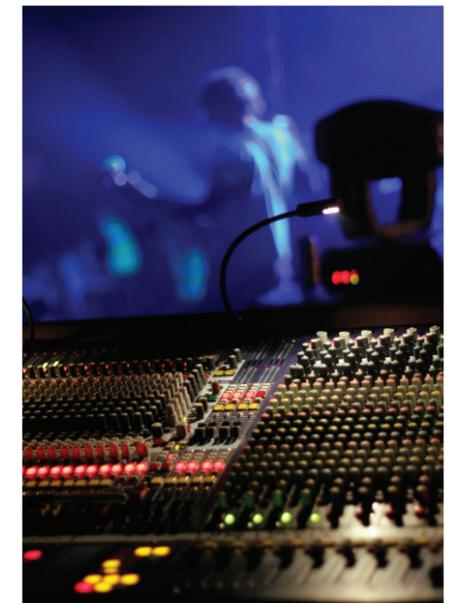
- Make sure your academic programs are strong. Programs with high-level academics seldom, if ever, get cut.
- Reinforce the business and entrepreneurial side of performing arts. Students going into dance, theatre and music are more likely to support themselves in these careers if they understand and even implement business knowledge and skills.
- Federal Carl D. Perkins money for CTE performing arts can be the savior of arts overall in school districts that cut back fine arts classes.

“CTE performing arts prepare students for life after high school and beyond—not just for the next level in a series of classes,” said Mike Cordonnier, a teacher at Centerville High School in Ohio who taught Gallagher. “In addition to understand-

ing the need for project-based learning with creative, free-spirited teenagers, [CTE] prepares students for such industry demands as work ethic, extremely tight deadlines and long, uncommon work hours.”

Another aspect that sets CTE performing arts apart from other career fields is early exposure to working with professionals, according to David Saygers, artistic director for the Toledo School for the Arts, where Owens completed 12th grade. At this northwestern Ohio school, students are introduced to professional work through internships and other work with local theatres, organizations and clubs.

“Students who come here have to be passionate about performing to the point where almost nothing else matters,” said



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Karen Homiek, principal of the Ocean County Vocational Technical School Performing Arts Academy, which has alumni like Gannon. “If they come to dance, they dance a lot.”

Kirstin Lynch-Walsh, speech arts and dramatics teacher at the Gloucester County Institute of Technology in Sewell, New Jersey, speaks of a curriculum that addresses how all components of performing arts fit together and that individuals must have the ability to market themselves in whatever position is needed.

“Theatre is not only a creative art form but also a business,” she remarked.

“When our students do a show, they sign a contract and are graded with a rubric that is their ‘paycheck.’”

The key difference between CTE and fine arts, according to Dale Schmid, visual and performing arts coordinator at the New Jersey Department of Education, is summed up in two words: industry standards.

“Given the extraordinarily competitive nature of the performing arts field and the high demand for refined literacy and fluency within an artistic domain, CTE programs are best positioned to prepare students to enter the industry or continue

their postsecondary education,” said Schmid. Like leaders in most states who have kept CTE performing arts, he, too, is a performing artist.

Nancy Pistone, consultant for the fine arts at the Ohio Department of Education, described the academic arts as “aesthetic, reflective, interpretative and creative.” In short, she says, academic arts curriculum has a goal of arts appreciation lasting a lifetime for students as consumers. The CTE programs emphasize the more practical and technical skills.

Pistone and Schmid agree that arts knowledge and skills strengthen creative, intellectual and problem-solving aspects of learning, and that making it in the business isn’t necessarily dependent on a college degree.

How and Why to Make It

“I got accepted into Berklee College of Music in Boston at the same time I

received an offer for a show in New York; I was torn but turned down college,” Owens said. “A couple years later, I met one of Berklee’s professors at my show. She said I made the right choice. She said college would have rearranged and destroyed my natural and unique sound.”

For Gallagher, the added skill in video and lighting design at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon University propelled him to places he might never have been. He has worked shows with Shania Twain and lesser-known but equally talented artists. He has traveled to Las Vegas, London and Paris, as well as to the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium and Germany.

All three U.S. secondary CTE alumni had their talents encouraged by friends and relatives as they danced around kitchen tables as young children, were captivated by local theatre productions as adolescents and went on to New York instead of Yale or medical school after high school.

They are flexible and open to different opportunities, willing to travel and work irregular hours. A good salary is \$50,000 a year, plus reimbursement for travel, lodging and food while on the road. A bad salary is applause and sleeping on a friend’s couch at the end of the night.

“Performing is a full body experience. You feel eyes drawn upon you,” Gannon said. “You get knocked down. It takes a lot of work, but it’s worth it. Nothing makes me as happy as this.”

“Half the time, you live out of a suitcase,” said Gallagher. “To my friends who work nine-to-five jobs, what I do horrifies them. But after several non-stop weeks, I can take a month off and go to Iceland.”

“Sure, you would like to be world renowned,” said Owens. “But to me it’s more important that people can relate to my music. Doing this makes me feel alive.”

Owens, Gallagher and Gannon, along

with their mentors and performing arts proponents, hope for the same for others. **Tech**

Pat Huston has been working in CTE for 25 years. One of her current responsibilities within the Office of CTE at the Ohio Department of Education is oversight of CTE performing arts programs. E-mail her at pat.huston@education.ohio.gov.

EXPLORE MORE

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), categorizes performing arts within the Arts, Audiovisual Technology & Communications Career Cluster. At ACTE’s CareerTech VISION 2015, which will take place in New Orleans, November 19–22, there will be a career cluster-focused strand of 10 concurrent sessions that will help attendees develop and organize high-quality CTE programs of study. For more info on VISION, go to www.careertechvision.com.



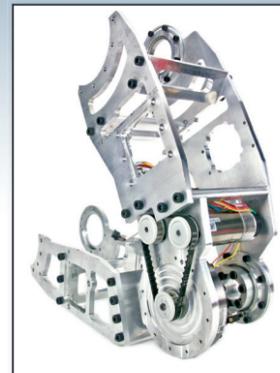
Ohio CTE student Kayla Hampton in Toledo School for the Arts’ “Kaleidoscope 2013.”



Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Croak

Real CNC for the Classroom

Tormach’s affordable CNC machines not only bring real CNC capabilities into the classroom, but they are also easily integrated with any design software. Shown below is an articulated humanoid robot leg, built by researchers at the Drexel Autonomous System Lab (DASL) with a Tormach PCNC 1100 milling machine. To read more about this project or to learn about Tormach’s affordable CNC mills and accessories, visit www.tormach.com/education.



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