Recruitment for the College Studio

By Daniel R. Smithiger

The music department relies heavily on a successful percussion studio to outfit its performing ensembles with outstanding musicians. Therefore, building and maintaining a quality percussion studio is necessary for success. Performing groups may range from the wind ensemble, symphonic band, and concert band, to the university orchestra and highly visible marching band. Additional groups may include the traditional percussion ensemble, world music ensembles (African, steel band, Brazilian, gamelan, etc.), and the electronic percussion ensemble. The studio makes its presence known through quality representation at periodic department performance showcases, ensemble performances, individual student recitals, and extra-curricular activities that may highlight various peripheral ensembles. The studio should also be a resource to local educators through which teachers can rely on current and former students for assistance in their programs.

Colleges and universities strive to maintain and set standards of performance and teaching on regional and national levels. Percussion studios are frequently represented on departmental audio and/or video recordings, appearances at conventions or tours, and they may possibly acquire sponsorship and/or endorsements through widely recognized companies. Success is manifested through strong enrollment, quality performers, and a positive culture within the studio.

But how do we get there? Percussion instructors must wear the “recruitment hat” and be proactive and passionate about their mission. Beginning with my appointment as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where I served as Director of UA Steel Bands, I had the responsibility of networking, maintaining, and cultivating relationships within the region. Selected events, such as the Arizona Mass Steel Band concerts of 2002 and 2003, which functioned as the opening concert for the spring State Day of Percussion in each of those years, was an activity organized and coordinated by me and UA Steel Bands. It raised the level of awareness and exposure of UA ensembles around the state.

From my time in Tucson to my appointment as instructor of percussion at Angelo State University (San Angelo, Texas), to my current appointment at McKendree University (Lebanon, Illinois), I have focused on recruitment, retention, and visibility—three significant items in building a percussion program. This article is directed to that mission and to those of you who are actively working towards cultivating a positive identity for your studio.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Determine
Identify
Be Visible: Network
Articulate
Cultivate: Maintain a Rapport
Be Versatile

This article is divided into two portions: off-campus and on-campus responsibilities.

OFF-CAMPUS ITEMS
Determine
First, determine your purpose for off-campus appearances. Then decide which focus is most important: local, regional, or national. You may choose to cover the local area first: private and public secondary institutions, local music contests, or conventions. You may also decide a regional approach is important, covering areas outside of the city, county, and state. Furthermore, the active recruiter may decide that a combination of all the plans is best for the institution. Whatever you decide, imagine that your presence anywhere off-campus is basically a commercial: the higher amount of repetition, the better-known the “target area” is with you and your program. Just keep in mind that you are still a representative of the university and institution.

Identify
What type of students do you want? A former colleague at Angelo State University helped clarify this process: Identify the types of players that you want and go get them! There are some outstanding band, orchestra, and percussion programs throughout your state. You will see these players by attending a multitude of events, such as regional/all-state music festivals, area concerts held in both the fall and spring semesters, music camps, and maybe even a high school football game when the band performs at half time. Additional options include:

• Seeing potential students perform with their high school drumline at an area marching percussion contest.
• Seeing students (and their directors) at conventions.
• Seeing/hearing students perform in their school’s annual percussion ensemble concert.

The key word is seeing. You must make the effort!

While working in Texas, I traveled many miles from San Angelo to outlying areas. I journeyed as far east as College Station (200 miles) to present percussion master classes at Texas A&M Consolidated High School, and I traveled west into Monohans (170 miles) to work with an Angelo State graduate and his marching percussion section. I traveled north of the city, landing in smaller regions throughout West Central Texas, and even ended up in Midland-Odessa (approx. 130 miles) to work with the percussion ensemble at Midland High School. Additionally, I worked as a technician and instructor for the marching percussion section at the local 5A high school in San Angelo (Central High School). I had identified some talented and hard-working students in these regions and made the effort to see them, which demonstrated interest in their programs as well as their individual success.

Be Visible: Network
Maintain an active schedule of visibility:

1. Perform with local/regional/national groups (orchestras, jazz ensembles, concert bands, etc.).
2. Attend state and national conventions (PAS state chapter Days of Percussion, TMEA, MENC, PAS/IC, MidWest Clinic, TBA, etc.).
3. Be attentive to phone calls, e-mails, or paper correspondence.
4. Present recitals (on and off campus).
5. Take studio groups on tour.
6. Produce and distribute audio and video that represents the studio.
7. Keep a journal of contact information and frequency (using a database on your computer is recommended).

Articulate

1. Adjudication (solo and ensemble contests, regional music festivals, all-state music festivals, percussion festivals, marching competitions, etc.).
2. Present clinics and master classes (concert, marching, world, jazz).
3. Teach lessons.

This may include clinics and master classes that you can present to the community. You should be willing to provide services to the community and surrounding region (this is sometimes categorized into the outreach component for faculty service). As your time at the institution continues, you will be hired to do more—judge, give lessons, clinics, critique, present master classes, etc. Clinics may include a bit of travel, possibly 30–45 minutes or more in length. The trips may include driving a few miles to teach one or two short lessons or a 60-minute marching percussion sectional. Vehicle fuel and personal time are both sacrificed; however, these small ventures pay huge dividends. Again, be sure to document all activity for your department and for your own personal records.

Cultivate

Plant the seeds. Cultivating a relationship with the community, region, and state is no simple task. It is not just one appearance at the local music festival or area high school, nor is it just one appearance at the state or national convention that will draw immediate results. It is repetition, breadth, and quality of the visits that you make onto campuses. Additionally, it is the consistency, availability, and “need” that will factor into successful cultivation. You are continually planting seeds with every visit, phone call, e-mail, or appearance. These efforts are recognized and highly appreciated by directors and students.

Maintain A Rapport

Develop and nurture a rapport with the community. The rapport established between you and other music teachers, potential students, administrators, and parents, can often be the most significant factor. A good rapport with a local music teacher will yield obvious benefits. Important points include:

• Treat people as you want to be treated.
• Express direct interest in their program, goals, school, and son/daughter.
• Follow-up calls and/or e-mails for every visit.
• Positive “word-of-mouth” about their programs.

Interaction with students, directors, and parents makes all the difference.

Be Versatile

Remain versatile. Along with off-campus teaching and clinics, participate in the local/regional orchestra, band, or chamber group (classical or jazz). Make efforts to see local professional and semi-professional groups of which you are not a part. Seek out area music festivals and happenings that deal with all areas: marching percussion, concert, symphonic and jazz percussion, chamber groups, local performers who may present recitals or lectures, drumset of various styles such as jazz, Latin, funk, soca, rock, etc., world percussion groups (African ensemble or steel band ensemble), and possibly individuals who are regionally/nationally recognized for their composition or academic success. Repeatedly, many of the potential students have multiple strengths and are seeded in various performance idioms.

Another key to success is to remain “open” to events and happenings that may not lie in your particular strength. Sometimes the most rewarding accomplishment is to make connections beyond a comfort zone.

ON-CAMPUS ITEMS

Maintain a Healthy Studio Environment

The instructor must maintain a healthy percussion studio! Senior members and graduate students (when applicable) may set the tone for performance, professionalism, creativity, and responsibility for the studio. (See my article “Teaching Percussion: The Social Learning Theory and its Effects on the Percussion Studio ‘Culture’” at www.blackswamp.com/images/bspftp/pdf/Smithiger.pdf)

In addition to the weekly master class sessions, trips to regional percussion festivals, and the natural bond that students form through
Identify the types of players that you want and go get them!

ensemble enrollment, students will respond to the overall dynamic and culture of the studio. This can be fostered by positive communication and periodic gatherings.

Produce Graduates Who Exemplify Your Standards in Playing, Teaching, and Overall Musicianship

Percussionists who matriculate through your program and department curriculum will have passed barrier exams, recitals, coursework, etc., in order to graduate. Typically steered by the studio instructor and his or her set of expected competencies, the student will have earned the “stamp of approval” by the department and studio. These graduates become great models and representatives to the community.

Present Exceptional Concerts and Recitals

Your juniors and seniors, both education and performance oriented, must present quality recitals. Performance majors should present recitals that are comparable, at minimum, to those in peer institutions. Education majors must exhibit excellent qualities of performance as well, as they will be affecting hundreds of other students every year. Accepting minimal levels from education majors only harms the students and their eventual disciples.

Scholarships and Funding

Be sure to identify all sources of funding for incoming students (freshman and transfer). Educators who have a grasp of the overall packages, and the corresponding language, can only benefit from this knowledge.

Collaboration

Collaborate within the department or college of music. Percussion instructors may program pieces for percussion ensemble and chamber opportunities, which utilize musicians from other areas—voice, flute, trumpet, clarinet, etc.

Alumni

The institution’s alumni base is one of the most highly regarded entities on campus. It is typically one of the larger contributors to the institution (scholarships, grants, endowments, other types of funding, etc.). Administrators such as the department chair, the dean, and the president are always cognizant of the support base from the alumni.

• Identify those individuals who hold high positions in the alumni department.
• Be familiar with graduates of the institution, and develop a strong rapport with them.
• When alumni representatives call about your program (and they will!), be courteous and outgoing, promotional and helpful.
• Negative interaction will be detrimental and administrators will be notified. The alumni connection can be one of your best friends in your mission.

Recruitment and retention are two words that rank high in “administration land.” They are also considerable elements to success in any applied studio at the university level. These tips for success are merely starting points. However, developing a focused plan of attack for recruitment, visibility, and articulation will serve any faculty member well.

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