

# Supports and Barriers to Experiential Learning Participation in Arts Higher Education

Christina M. Manceor   
Johns Hopkins University  
cmanceor@jhu.edu

## ABSTRACT

Higher education arts programs are implementing experiential learning (EL) programs to address skills gaps and better prepare students for careers in an evolving arts industry. However, there is a dearth of research relating to EL in the arts. As a starting point, this research explores the supports and barriers that contribute to student participation in extracurricular EL programs. This mixed methods study employed interviews and a focus group with nine students at a Mid-Atlantic performing arts conservatory, accompanied by a brief demographic survey. The findings revealed a complex web of supports and barriers impacting students' awareness of, participation in, and applications to EL programs, including individual, social, programmatic, and systemic factors. The framework of this small-scale study may serve as a model and starting place for other institutions to understand their own unique audiences and settings moving forward.

## KEYWORDS

*higher education, arts, experiential learning, participation, supports and barriers*

The evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century arts industry is marked by significant shifts in career pathways, with fewer available full-time jobs and increasing numbers of artists pursuing portfolio careers and self-employment (Munnely, 2020). Although arts alumni generally report that they leave their higher education degrees with appropriate artistic skills, they report substantial skills gaps in areas such as entrepreneurship, finance, and business management (Frenette, 2020). Consequently, some emerging artists graduate from their degree programs without the skills needed to succeed in the modern arts industry (Bartleet et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2017).

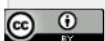
Experiential learning (EL) programming represents a potentially beneficial method for higher education arts institutions to provide opportunities for students to build crucial skills and experiences for their future arts careers (Kindelan, 2010; Slaughter & Springer, 2015). EL theory states that knowledge is built through experiences and application of learning in new settings (Kolb, 2014). EL opportunities are critical for learning transfer in higher education (Eyler, 2009) and may offer a competitive advantage in the job market, such as personal growth, developing new skills, strengthening collaborative and organizational competencies, and building positive professional relationships (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015). Although some institutions offer a variety of paid and volunteer extracurricular EL programs, including internships, community engagement programs, and other off-campus performance and teaching opportunities (Slaughter & Springer, 2015), there are little data on these programs and a dearth of empirical research specifically relating to EL in the arts.

As a first step to grow knowledge in this area, this mixed methods study investigated supports and barriers that contribute to

student participation in extracurricular EL programs. The following sections include a reflection on my positionality as a practitioner-scholar, an overview of the role of EL programs to address skills gaps in the arts, a literature review of supports and barriers influencing student participation, a description of the research methods, data collection, and analysis, and a summary of findings, limitations, and implications of the study.

## POSITIONALITY AS A PRACTITIONER-SCHOLAR

As career services staff and professional studies faculty at a Mid-Atlantic performing arts conservatory, I have an educational background in music performance and experience as a freelance musician and arts administrator. The ambition and potential of my students drives me to connect them with pivotal opportunities that may shape their creative futures. Yet, my experience as a career educator has taught me that it can often be challenging to reach students, provoking questions in my work. What prevents students from engaging? What motivates them to take advantage of institutional programming? Ultimately, the desire to approach this and other complex educational problems of practice in an evidence-based and systemic way led me to begin a Doctor of Education (EdD) degree. Drawing on my professional perspective, as well as new expertise gained as a practitioner-scholar, I hope to integrate scholarship into the work in my field to make a positive difference for more students. This initial research endeavors to engage with evidence that illuminates the landscape of my field from a wide range of lenses and perspectives, beginning with an examination of existing literature related to EL in the arts.



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## IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ARTS HIGHER EDUCATION

In the context of arts higher education, EL has strong potential to facilitate students' development of the skills they need to forge successful careers in an evolving arts industry (Martin & Frenette, 2018; Slaughter & Springer, 2015). Kolb's (2014) widely referenced EL theory (Tippett & Lee, 2019) encompasses a transformative learning model which holistically approaches EL through four modes: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, illuminating best practices behind the design of EL programs. For the purposes of this research, I define EL as an educational technique that incorporates direct interaction with a scenario as opposed to more theoretical or hypothetical approaches (Keeton & Tate, 1978), ultimately adding "a direct experience component to [students'] traditional academic studies" (Kolb, 2014, p. xviii). Student participation in this type of direct experience is critical to situating and contextualizing their artistic studies within an evolving arts industry.

Preparing artists for a rapidly evolving modern workforce requires higher education to equip graduates with real-world experiences that enable them to identify and pursue opportunities while navigating dynamic industry trends (Martin & Frenette, 2018). The arts industry is transforming, as evidenced by decreasing numbers of full-time jobs and higher percentages of artists pursuing portfolio careers (Munnely, 2020). Changes to the field have only accelerated due to recent world events, such as COVID-19 and the subsequent economic upheaval (Jeannotte, 2021; Khan et al., 2021). These shifts in the arts industry substantiate the importance of student participation in EL programming, especially as a means to prepare them for the pivotal transition out of school and into working life.

### Skills Gaps in Arts Higher Education

Portfolio careers, in which artists combine "aspects of performance, recording, creation, music direction, teaching, community activities, health, retail, and increasingly, a presence in online environments," as defined by Bartleet et al. (2019, p. 282), have become increasingly prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bennett, 2007; Frenette, 2020). To sustain successful portfolio careers, undergraduate music majors in the United States anticipated needing non-artistic skills for their careers in addition to creative skills, such as interpersonal, finance, marketing, recording, and teaching skills. Other studies corroborated this; an Australian study demonstrated that skills required for successful arts portfolio careers include communication, networking, entrepreneurship, and industry knowledge, among others (Bartleet et al., 2019), and recent arts alumni in the United States who gained financial and business skills during school felt better equipped for various employment opportunities than those who did not (Skaggs et al., 2017). It supports these expectations that most musicians across the United States, Europe, and Australia were in fact self-employed in some way, pursuing careers that required diverse skillsets (Bennett, 2007; Skaggs et al., 2017).

Despite these trends, many music degree programs continue to focus primarily on artistic and technical skills, often failing to teach skills that support portfolio careers and self-employment (Bartleet et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2017; Munnely, 2020; Slaughter & Springer, 2015). In addition to established skills gaps in entrepreneurship, finance, and business management for American arts alumni

(Frenette, 2020), evidence suggests that music conservatories would benefit from addressing skills related to pedagogy, technology, networking, community engagement, and grant writing (Bartleet et al., 2019; Creech, 2008). Evidence of skills gaps and related recommendations for appropriate curricular change suggest that many arts graduates complete their degrees lacking sufficient skills and preparation to effectively transition out of school and into sustainable careers in the modern arts industry (Forshee et al., 2022).

### Potential Impact of Experiential Learning to Address Skills Gaps

Numerous sources support both curricular and extracurricular EL as one potential avenue for higher education arts students to develop key skills and gain tangible experiences that may prepare them for their future careers (Kindelan, 2010; Slaughter & Springer, 2015). As described by Slaughter and Springer (2015), EL opportunities for artists could include activities ranging from community involvement, performances, and independent projects, to internships, fellowships, and entrepreneurial activities. In the context of arts entrepreneurship education, faculty, staff, and students in various music programs across the United States emphasized the importance of accessible and controlled opportunities for students to take their talents outside of the classroom to build skills related to entrepreneurship, community interaction, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Beckman, 2007; Friedrichs, 2018). Myers (2006) further advocated for community engagement, mentored internships, and other experiential training opportunities as a means to facilitate long-term professional impacts for students. The ability to work within the community and larger arts industry is imperative, and the opportunity to do so through EL programs can enhance students' learning while simultaneously providing important career experiences and connections (Miller et al., 2017; Slaughter & Springer, 2015).

EL opportunities are particularly critical for students in the final years of their degree programs and can ease students' transitions to the professional world (Creech et al., 2008; Silver & Roksa, 2017). Research in the arts and other fields demonstrated the ways that various types of EL programming facilitate skill development, expansion of networks, and other career benefits. Table 1 summarizes the benefits of various types of EL programming. Overall, by preparing students with crucial career skills that go beyond technical expertise, EL activities can be one approach to help arts students establish more sustainable and successful careers and equip them to better navigate professional choices over time (Kindelan, 2010).

**Table 1. Potential Benefits of Experiential Learning by Type**

Experiential Learning Types	Potential Benefits
Community engagement	Enhanced and more relevant learning experiences (Slaughter & Springer, 2015)
Performance opportunities	Building professional relationships (Slaughter & Springer, 2015)
Service learning	Support for senior year transition (Creech et al., 2008)
Internships	Building professional connections (Creech et al., 2008; Slaughter & Springer, 2015)
Term-time employment	Communication and organizational skills, problem-solving skills, and community connections (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015)
Career development networking opportunities	Finding jobs more quickly (Martin & Frenette, 2018)

Understanding the impacts of EL may help institutions maximize resources and reduce skill gaps that leave students unprepared for employment in the arts industry. Before researchers and practitioners can adequately evaluate the long-term outcomes of the programs, the first focus must be to understand factors impacting students' access and participation. This research aims to fill a literature gap by exploring the supports and barriers contributing to extracurricular EL participation in the context of higher education arts institutions.

### LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY: FACTORS IMPACTING EXTRACURRICULAR EL PARTICIPATION

There is a considerable amount of literature focused on the benefits of EL and student experience in various EL contexts and fields. However, existing studies focus primarily on the students already enrolled in EL programs and research discussing what factors contribute to students' desires or abilities to participate in EL is much more sparse. Due to the dearth of research relating to EL participation in higher education arts settings, the literature review spans a variety of fields, with references to music- and arts-specific studies where they are available. It also draws more broadly from research on participation and engagement in different kinds of activities, particularly extracurricular activities in higher education.

Exploration of related fields and factors through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested ecological systems theory suggests several potential supports and barriers that contribute to this issue, including a variety of individual, social, programmatic, and systemic factors. First, malleable programmatic factors such as student awareness (Roksa & Silver, 2019), access (Coker & Porter, 2015), and perceptions of the programs (Dickinson et al., 2021) may influence participation. For example, relating to access, students must have sufficient time and availability to participate (Frenette, 2019) as well as the prerequisites and self-efficacy to apply to programs (Griffiths et al., 2021). Information about key factors such as these can be used to evaluate existing EL programs. Additionally, by understanding student motivations more deeply, institutions can better align programmatic content with students' personal and professional ambitions, which were described as relevant factors to motivation by Gonzalez-Moreno (2012). Further, faculty and peer influence appear to play a substantial role in student perceptions, opportunities, and choices (Creech et al., 2008; Gaunt, 2011), demonstrating an additional avenue which could positively or

negatively impact students' desire or ability to participate in EL programs. In the context of an evolving arts industry and conflicting cultural beliefs about arts careers (Avis, 2020; Bartleet et al., 2019), the impact of demographic factors such as social class, parental resources, and international student status are broader issues across higher education and beyond (Choi, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2018; Roksa & Silver, 2019). This study explored how different groups of students engage with the existing programming in light of these overarching factors. Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework displaying potential relationships and connections between malleable and relevant factors.

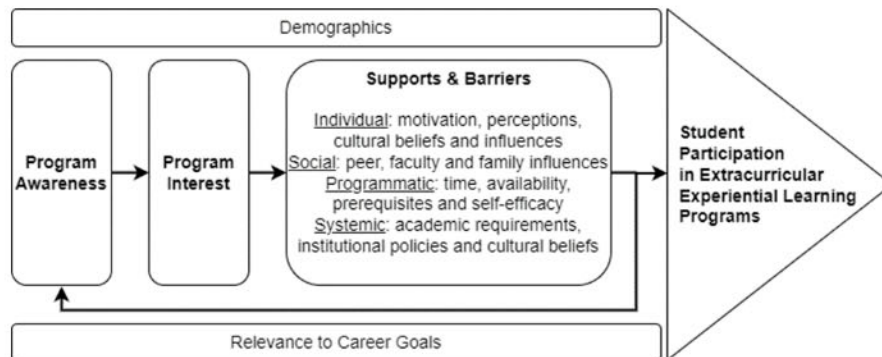
### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONSTRUCTS

I conducted a study to better understand what factors contribute to extracurricular EL program participation to facilitate student access and engagement in higher education arts settings. The research was guided by three research questions relating to students' interactions with existing programs at the institution, supports and barriers contributing to participation, and relevance of the programs to students' career goals. Through these research questions, the study explored five constructs: program awareness, program interest, supports and barriers, relevance to professional goals, and demographics.

The first construct of program awareness investigated whether students know what programs and resources are available to them (Roksa & Silver, 2019). A second, related construct, program interest, explored how students value and prioritize their involvement (Dickinson et al., 2021). Together, these constructs provided a baseline from which to contextualize the next construct, supports and barriers, which Dickinson et al. (2021) described as factors which either motivate students to participate, or "prevent them from becoming involved" (p. 745). Additionally, the construct of relevance to career goals was explored to better understand how students' motivations and career aspirations do or do not align with the content of the EL programs (Gonzalez-Moreno, 2012). Lastly, the demographics construct explored if and how the first four constructs vary based on personal characteristics of participants.

This article focuses on the following research question: What supports and barriers contribute to student participation in extracurricular EL programs, particularly for different demographic groups? Although this question primarily explored the supports and barriers and demographics constructs, the other three constructs also intersected as relevant factors in the thematic analysis.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



## METHODS

Utilizing a mixed methods design, the constructs were explored through qualitative and quantitative data, with an emphasis on the exploratory nature of qualitative methods. Part I of the study involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews with six students to narrow down supports and barriers that contribute to their participation in EL programs. Part II utilized a student focus group to confirm themes from the interviews and follow-up on additional factors of interest. Both parts were accompanied by a brief quantitative demographic survey.

The study took place at a Mid-Atlantic performing arts conservatory in the United States with a total student population of 750 enrolled students. All students were invited to participate in the study through email, social media, and posted fliers. Convenience sampling resulted in six interview participants (three undergraduate and three graduate students) and one focus group with three participants (one undergraduate and two graduate students), making a total of nine participants. To ensure inclusion of both undergraduate and graduate students, criterion sampling (Sandelowski, 2000) was used to select participants from the pool of interested volunteers. Data collection and analysis procedures are detailed in the following subsections.

### Part I: Interviews

Modeled after Roksa and Silver's (2019) study, the interviews utilized an emergent design and standardized open-ended interview approach, with five to seven foundational questions prepared based on the constructs of interest, while also allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions or dig deeper into areas not previously considered. Interviews took place on Zoom, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data was coded and analyzed using the platform ATLAS.ti. Initially, I identified a priori codes based on the factors which emerged in the literature review. The first round of coding focused on identifying patterns and notable segments relating to the a priori codes, and additional inductive codes that emerged were grouped under an Other category. During a second round of coding, additional emphasis was placed on identifying additional instances of the Other codes. Lastly, subcodes were organized for the most

prominent and multi-faceted a priori constructs. A priori codes and interview questions can be found in Table 2.

### Part II: Focus Group

A single, one-hour focus group followed Part I of the study. The focus group offered confirmation or disconfirmation themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews across a different group of students. It also provided an opportunity to explore additional factors of interest. Drawing from focus group procedures in a study by Dickinson et al. (2021), I incorporated several activity-based techniques to encourage participant engagement, including facilitation of free-thinking in student responses and the use of visual and text prompts to invite focused feedback on key elements. The focus group took place in-person in a campus meeting room and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

For comparison purposes, the focus group protocol utilized core questions similar to those from the interview protocol, with a few adjustments based on the interview data analysis. These questions are outlined in Table 2. In addition to following a semi-structured focus group protocol consisting of four open-ended foundational questions and a few follow-up questions, I also provided participants with printouts of a visual representation of factors of interest gleaned from the interviews to solicit their feedback. Before concluding the focus group, each participant had the opportunity to share any additional comments. I reviewed the transcripts multiple times to code and analyze the data using ATLAS.ti. To make connections to the interview data, the codebook from the semi-structured interviews provided a priori codes for the focus groups, with new codes added as needed.

### Demographic Survey

A brief demographic survey was administered to interview and focus group participants immediately following each session. The questions in this survey were developed using language from Hughes et al.'s (2016) re-evaluation of demographic questions alongside language from an institutional alumni surveys and information referenced in the academic catalogue. The survey data was aligned with the qualitative data from each interviewee or focus group attendee for analysis using a unique five-figure identifier.

**Table 2. Summary of A Priori Codes, Interview Questions, and Focus Group Questions**

A Priori Codes	Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
Awareness of programs	What extracurricular EL programs are you aware of at [the institution]?	What extracurricular EL programs are you aware of (or have you participated in) at [the institution]?
Perceptions of programs	Which programs, if any, interest you and why?	How did you become aware of or learn about these programs?
Faculty influence	Have you participated in any extracurricular EL programs offered by [the institution]? If, so what was your experience participating in these programs?	Where/how would it be most helpful for you to see and find information about these kinds of programs?
Peer influence	What factors, if any, would motivate you to participate in an extracurricular EL program?	What factors serve as supports or motivators for you to participate in extracurricular EL programs?
Cultural values and beliefs	What factors, if any, have prevented you from participating in an extracurricular EL program?	What factors prevent you from participating in extracurricular EL programs?
Time	How have others in your community (parents, faculty, peers) impacted your participation in extracurricular EL programs, if at all?	[Show visual display of interview findings related to supports and barriers]. Do you agree or disagree with these findings? Why do you agree or disagree?
Availability	How do you perceive these programs are relevant (or not) to your current studies, career goals or future aspirations?	How do you perceive these programs are relevant (or not) to your current studies, career goals or future aspirations?
Socioeconomic status and parental support		What skills or experiences would you hope to gain from participating in these programs?
Prerequisites and self-efficacy		
Motivation		
Applicability to student		

The survey was conducted online via Qualtrics, and participants were sent a link immediately following an interview or focus group session. It included four multiple choice questions and three short text response questions inquiring about participants' degree level and major, international student status, and self-identified gender, racial/ethnic, and social class identities. All nine interview and focus group participants completed the demographic survey.

I analyzed the demographic survey results in Excel and associated them with findings from their respective qualitative sessions in ATLAS.ti to explore potential demographic impacts on student participation in EL programs. Although the quantity of data was not sufficient for statistical analysis, it contributed context in conjunction with the interview and focus group data. Tables 3 and 4 display participants' demographic characteristics that were most relevant to the findings, including self-reported degree level, major, and social class identity.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics: Degree Level and Majors of Participants**

	Bachelor's	Master's	Major/Departments Represented
Interview Participants	3	3	Computer Music/Performance; Composition; Voice Performance; Music Education; Dance; Cello Performance
Focus Group Participants	1	2	Oboe Performance; Viola Performance; Musicology

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics: Gender and Social Class Identity**

Participants	Social Class Identity		
	Poor	Working class	Middle class
Interview Participants	2	1	3
Focus Group Participants	0	1	2

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through concurrent mixed methods analysis, themes related to constructs of supports and barriers and demographics emerged in three prominent areas: learning about programs, prioritization and incentive to pursue programs, and applying to programs. Table 5 displays the supports and barriers discussed by participants that are most relevant to each of the three areas.

**Table 5. Supports and Barriers to Extracurricular Experiential Learning Participation**

Theme/Area	Supports	Barriers	Both
Learning About Programs	Awareness Curricular integration	Discomfort asking questions	Promotion Faculty influence Peer influence
Prioritization and Incentive to Pursue Programs	Compensation Motivation Applicable to student	Time and availability Not applicable to student	Cultural values and beliefs Proximity to the institution Socioeconomic status and parental support
Applying to Programs	Curricular integration	Short turnaround to apply	Prerequisites and self-efficacy Prior experience

## Learning About Programs

Students must first understand what programs are available to consider participation. Most participants reflected mixed or limited awareness of existing programs at the institution. As articulated by a graduate interview participant,

I know what [the career services office] does and I'm glad that [it] exists and all that. But I'm certain I know that there are people that don't, so I think knowledge of programming, for any program forever in any domain, is fertile.

Additionally, promotional strategies are a key avenue through which to share information about EL opportunities with students. In addition to broader promotional tactics such as email, newsletters, social media, and posted flyers, students emphasized the importance of interpersonal connections as a means to spread knowledge of programs.

Students further highlighted the importance of including critical information in all promotional materials, as some participants expressed discomfort asking questions or reaching out to solicit more information. One student noted the difficulty of "[a]sking questions about why stuff is there, if they're interested in it. Which is, yeah, not always the easiest." Although students of varied social classes agreed with this barrier, most participants who indicated discomfort asking questions identified as poor or working class, corroborating existing research which demonstrates that working-class students had more limited institutional knowledge and were less likely to reach out to student support services (Roksa & Silver, 2019).

Furthermore, several themes emerged relating to factors that play a role in promoting awareness of EL programs. The most prominent of these were faculty influence, peer influence, and curricular integration.

## Faculty Influence

For many students, faculty were a positive influence to learn about opportunities. For example, a graduate student stated,

The top of my awareness is whatever professors send out as opportunities for us to look into . . . if it's from a professor, I'll definitely read it at least, bare minimum, and as well as perceive as it being important.

Another participant indicated that if she had not heard about a certain career development resource from faculty, she would not have known it was there. "I have not seen information about the orchestra list thing anywhere else. So, if my teacher hadn't mentioned it in a lesson one time, I would not have known." However, faculty influence can lean either way. As stated by a focus group participant, "if they encourage you, then you do it. But if they discourage you, that would definitely be a big discouragement." One undergraduate interview participant, who was in a different instrumental studio, had not received any encouragement to pursue institutional EL programs from faculty. This student had extremely limited awareness of programs and had not participated in any programs.

Considering the close mentoring relationships faculty often have with their students in conservatory settings, their strong influence on students' connection to opportunities makes sense (Creech et al., 2008; Gaunt, 2011). Austin and Rust (2015) similarly found that faculty buy-in was the most effective promotional strategy for a new experiential learning program at their higher education institution.

This leads to the related question, how aware are faculty of existing extracurricular EL programs at the institution? A graduate student reflected on this, concluding that, as one example, their faculty were supportive of career services programming but unaware of the details of available resources and opportunities.

I hear, basically, a lot along the lines of like, '[the career office] is doing good things. What are they doing? I couldn't tell you, but I know that it's good and you should take advantage of it.' And not just from my studio, [but also] across, you know, people that teach rep classes, [and] people that teach theory and musicology.

Given these findings, it could be informative to further explore faculty awareness and perceptions of programs as a pathway to more effectively reach students.

### Peer Influence

Similar to faculty, peer influence also played an important and multi-faceted role in students' knowledge of programs. From a support perspective, several students discussed how they learned about programs from peers. One graduate student referred to this as "positive peer pressure," explaining, "I learned more through peers, through people taking advantage of programming and me hearing about it from them." Another graduate student participant agreed, reflecting on "how close to my social circle does the information come from for me to really pay attention to it." Similarly, an undergraduate student described peer participation and accountability as a "gateway" to accessing new opportunities. Another undergraduate student further shared that peer testimonials could provide helpful insight into the experience and outcomes of joining programs as well. Conversely, multiple participants discussed how peers could limit or discourage students' exposure to opportunities. An undergraduate interview participant asserted that it's "dependent on who you surround yourself with. There are definitely people who are like, 'you're going to a concert?' [skeptical tone]." Considered in context of research by Juvonen et al. (2012), the interview and focus group findings support the connection between peer interaction and engagement with institutional extracurricular activities.

### Curricular Integration

When asked about pathways where they received information, two graduate student focus group participants discussed learning about programs through required curricular professional studies workshops and course announcements. Additionally, an undergraduate interview participant discussed how her experience in a sophomore year community engagement course was "one of the main things that helped [her] realize that [she] could, you know, go and make connections in the community and actually go to events that [she] felt uncomfortable in." Students' recognition of curricular connections as a key method to learn about opportunities and programs supports further integration of EL program promotion in this context.

### Prioritization and Incentive to Pursue Programs

Students discussed their motivations to pursue extracurricular EL programs and how they consider prioritizing their limited time and energy. Some of the prominent factors that emerged as supports and barriers to prioritizing participation included compensation, cultural

values and beliefs, motivation, time and availability, proximity to the institution, and socioeconomic status and parental support.

### Compensation

In terms of supports, compensation was clearly a positive factor and was mentioned by several students, most often graduate students. As one graduate student asserted "Obviously, the easiest incentive is cash. If you're gonna pay me, that's great."

### Cultural Values and Beliefs

Many of the factors discussed were more complex and demonstrated potential to either positively or negatively influence students' prioritization of EL opportunities. For instance, several students discussed how cultural values and beliefs within their artistic spheres influenced their choices. One composition student discussed how their major encouraged pursuit of external opportunities. "There's generally encouragement to . . . take opportunities outside of coursework or lessons and whatnot. And I feel like that's generally from what I've seen, a very composer mindset of trying to find opportunities outside of school." On the other hand, a vocal performance major discussed pressure to only pursue specific types of opportunities based on their departmental culture.

This is not unique to [this institution], but I think it's that the nature of getting a master's degree in voice prioritizes opera culturally, like at most institutions, right. So being selected to be involved in that is often coveted and seen as a positive thing for you to do, and why would you not take advantage of it even if it's not a thing that you want to do? It is the thing that I want to do, although being in every production for the past few years has been taxing and it has meant that I haven't done other things.

### Motivation

Many participants discussed the motivation to gain skills and experiences relevant to the current arts industry, as well as expand their networks at the institution and beyond to qualify themselves for various career options. However, motivation was dependent on student perceptions of the programs as they relate to their personal interests and goals, since the skills students were interested in developing were often connected to their majors and areas of focus. For example, performance majors expressed interest in gaining a variety of types of performance experience, and all five students pursuing a performance degree discussed this as an incentive to pursue experiential learning.

Conversely, when students perceived programs as inapplicable to them, this proved to be a significant barrier to their motivation to participate. Non-performance majors in particular noted that they perceived many existing institutional programs as less relevant to their specific majors and degree programs. As a graduate composition student summarized, "I'm sure many of them could be applicable, but I think they'd probably take more work or be applicable in an indirect way, where it's like I would have to find the really relevant positive impacts in it, rather than them being inherent in the work." Broadening students' knowledge of the programs and clarifying the ways different majors might benefit from participation may help more students make stronger connections to institutional EL programs.

## Time and Availability

Many students emphasized that time was one of the biggest factors impacting their ability to participate in extracurricular programs, and all students agreed unanimously that their busy school and work schedules made it difficult to incorporate additional activities. A graduate student asserted, “part of it is time and capacity, with curricular responsibilities and with life responsibilities, just being a human being. I think that’s probably the biggest one for me personally.” Furthermore, an undergraduate student emphasized how the conservatory context plays a role.

Being in conservatory is pretty different than being in a normal university setting with a different, more focused degree. There’s a kind of separation of like, doing your classes, doing your studies, but also like crafting your instrument, crafting your work, doing more like higher support skills, and that in and of itself. . . it’s a pretty heavy load.

This aligns with Frenette’s (2019) findings related to time as notable concern and challenge for artists in their education. As a possible solution, the same undergraduate student suggested that accessible, one-off opportunities with a more limited time commitment may be more manageable for students’ busy schedules.

## Proximity to the Institution

The factor of time also relates to the proximity of the programs. Multiple students expressed concern with the time required to travel to off-campus opportunities or logistical limitations such as not having access to a car or limited public transportation options. Two graduate student focus group participants discuss transportation barriers in their conversation, noting that “some people don’t have a car,” “parking at a venue can be annoying,” and “sometimes things are far away.” Intersecting with time, one of the students further expressed that “the time to get somewhere” created an additional barrier, explaining “Even if it’s only 30 minutes, that’s now an hour of being in a car or some sort of public transportation where you can’t necessarily do other work.”

## Socioeconomic Status and Parental Support

Based on the demographic data findings for social class, it is possible financial factors and parental support play a role in students’ time and access to programs as well. For example, a graduate student who identified his social class as poor emphasized how his time was limited by financial and work obligations on top of his academic course load, limiting his time to take on additional activities. In comparison, a middle-class student dismissed parental support as a significant factor when discussing her ability to participate, stating “that’s not the main influence.” This student did not discuss financial limitations at all, but rather how parental support enabled her to attend summer seminars related to her major. Further research may be beneficial to explore if and how social class may increase barriers, such as time, for students with fewer financial resources and more limited parental support.

## Applying to Programs

In terms of applying to programs, students expressed concern relating to prerequisites and self-efficacy to apply to and pursue new opportunities. For example, a graduate student explained her hesitancy to pursue an opportunity “if you don’t feel like you’re having experiences that build you up to the level of competency, or if there’s

prerequisites but you’re like barely scraping by and have no idea what’s happening.” Similarly, another graduate student described,

I don’t want to throw something together and feel afraid up there. That’s not worth it. That’s not going to be a positive experience for me. So, I could take advantage of it, but I’m not going to because I don’t think I’ll be able to put my best foot forward in those settings with everything else that’s going on.

Others discussed how prior experience plays a role in preparing them to pursue new opportunities. In particular, students emphasized the importance of curricular learning to support their self-efficacy to pursue extracurricular opportunities. An undergraduate student explained,

I feel like there [were] kind of these building elements to establish my confidence. I’m pursuing a business of music minor and I think, taking a lot of those classes beforehand, like arts leadership, had really helped me like feel more educated and have a confidence in that kind of aspect of things and feel like, okay, I can actually possibly do this.

The same student described how curricular integration of programs influenced her experience applying to an institutional grant program. “Having things integrated into the curriculum is super helpful . . . you were guided through the steps the whole way.” Another undergraduate student agreed that curricular support “makes it more approachable” to pursue extracurricular opportunities. As summarized by a graduate focus group participant, “extracurricular learning is built on curricular learning.”

Lastly, a few students noted that they sometimes saw opportunities only a short time before the application deadline and were unable to pursue them due to a short turnaround to apply, even if they were interested in the program. One undergraduate interview participant described,

It’ll be like, hey, this opportunity, it’s due by midnight tomorrow night. And that’s great . . . but it’s always usually a time crunch. And it’s like, do I want to drop everything that I’ve already had planned to do in the next 48 hours to focus on this opportunity that could be really good, and could you know, bring me more . . . opportunities outside of my coursework? Or do I just have to say, well, maybe next time?

Another undergraduate student expressed a similar sentiment, stating, “There’s just stuff that I missed that I . . . if I only saw it earlier.” This suggests that institutions should promote programs well in advance to give students enough time to find information and prepare appropriate application materials.

Overall, the findings revealed several themes related to individual, social, programmatic, and systemic factors that impacted students’ EL participation. At the same time, each study participant expressed distinct motivations, values, and priorities which impacted their choices and perspectives. It is critical to address supports and barriers to participation while constructing and communicating programs in a way that allows students to make connections to their unique interests and goals.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several significant limitations to this study. First, due to sample size and the priority given to qualitative methods, the results are not generalizable. Moreover, this research was situated at a specific institution which offers a particular array of programs.

Factors impacting participation may look different at other institutions with other models and types of programs. The methods and sample size were appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and provide strong groundwork for further research at this institution and beyond.

Additionally, the demographic factor of social class was not operationalized in a measurable way. The demographic survey framed social class in terms of student identity, as this research was very exploratory in nature and the survey was designed to be flexible to various student groups and identities, such as undergraduate students who consider themselves part of a greater family unit compared to graduate students who might consider themselves independent of parental support. Future, more expansive studies may benefit from more measurability of this construct, particularly given the potential connections between social class and participation explored in this research.

Further limitations arose relating to recruitment. When recruiting students for the focus group portion of the research, I received limited responses and the students who did respond had very little overlapping availability. As a result, I was unable to include as many students in the focus group research as originally intended. Furthermore, no international students participated in the study. This is a substantial population for the institutional context and the lack of participation limited the ability to gather valuable international student perspectives. Even so, these recruitment challenges support the theme of student time and availability as a factor for participation in extracurricular EL programs (Frenette, 2019) and align with literature which highlights additional barriers to engagement for international students (Choi, 2013).

Selection bias also posed a threat to validity, as the project engaged a limited group of nine students who elected to participate based on their interest and capacity to respond. The individuals who volunteered may have certain attributes potentially unrepresentative of the remaining student body, impacting their experiences and responses. Future expansion of this research in quantitative forms can broaden access to participate in this research and reduce the impact of selection bias.

Finally, my staff and faculty roles at the institution and perspective as an alumna of the institution placed me in close proximity to the research as someone closely situated to the programs and to the students. To mitigate this limitation, I kept an ongoing research journal to remain cognizant and reflexive throughout the research process. Constructively, my positionality as a practitioner-scholar provides a unique lens through which to process the findings and ultimately make positive change at my institution.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The mixed methods findings revealed a variety of interwoven programmatic and systemic influences on student participation in extracurricular EL programs at a mid-Atlantic performing arts conservatory. In relation to research aims, students discussed a wide range of supports and barriers to learn about programs, prioritize and incentivize pursuit of programs, and apply to programs. The following list encompasses a brief summary of findings within these primary themes.

- **Learning about programs:** Awareness and curricular integration were supports to learning about programs.

Discomfort asking questions was a barrier for many students. Promotion, faculty influence, and peer influence had potential to serve as both supports and barriers depending on the details and circumstances of each.

- **Prioritization and incentive to pursue programs:** Compensation, motivation, and applicability of the programs to student interests were clear supports to participation. Time and availability and lack of applicability of programs were substantial barriers. Other factors, such as cultural values and beliefs and proximity of the programs to the institution, could positively or negatively influence participation.
- **Applying to programs:** Curricular integration returned as a positive influence, while short turnaround to apply emerged as a barrier. Prior experience and prerequisites and self-efficacy were more complex factors which could be categorized as both supports and barriers.

Furthermore, although demographic data was not generalizable, interesting potential connections appeared in the findings, particularly for differences in perceptions and experience for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as that of students of different social classes. For arts contexts specifically, there also may be potential for trends between different majors and areas of study. Based on these findings, the following sections review implications for the institution as well as for continued research in the field.

## Implications for the Institution

Bearing in mind the limited sample size of the study, the findings suggest several possible avenues to improve program promotion, address supports and barriers to participation, and further explore factors of influence at the institution.

### Promotion

Based on student responses, the institution should promote programs on multiple platforms, such as social media, email, student opportunities newsletters, online job posting platforms, and in particular through curricular integration, which was consistently reported as a support for both learning about and applying to programs. Personal and catered outreach through faculty, staff, and student organizations may also be helpful to facilitate direct connections to the programs for students. Additionally, posting paper flyers with QR code links in high traffic areas may reduce students' need to search for information online by making it available in convenient locations. Within promotional materials themselves, it may be beneficial to include sufficient details to address logistical and motivational influences such as time commitment, location, and professional networking, and to reduce the need for students to reach out and ask questions about the programs to get more information.

### Supports and Barriers to Participation

To increase supports for participation and reduce barriers, the institution should design programs to maximize alignment with student motivations and minimize logistical challenges. This first involves reviewing existing programs to ensure opportunities are offered for all degree types and majors. In addition, programs should clearly offer opportunities to build relationships with professionals in the field as well as peers at the institution. From a logistical



perspective, considering students' limited time and availability, the institution should offer one-off opportunities that occur within a limited time frame and ensure the availability of EL opportunities near campus or even on-campus to negate the need for transportation and minimize travel time. To support students' self-efficacy to apply to programs, the institution can provide scaffolded skill-building opportunities (through required curriculum or through alternative approaches) and define clear pathways for students interested in gaining experience and qualifications that will prepare them for certain programs.

### Further Exploration

While this research addressed a substantial number of potential factors related to student participation in extracurricular EL programs, it also revealed the need for further exploration in several areas. First, since no international students participated, it is critical to gain more information about these students' perspective, particularly given the large international student population at the institution. Additionally, this study identified student perceptions of EL programs, but did not specifically explore how to better frame existing programs and broaden student perspectives to better connect the programs to student interests and reduce misconceptions. Lastly, considering participants' discussion of faculty as a substantial influence on their knowledge of and interest in EL opportunities, it would be beneficial to better understand faculty awareness and perceptions of the programs.

### General Research Implications

Given the limited scope and context of this study, further research is needed to generalize findings for application beyond my institution. The design and methodology of the study have potential to serve as a reference and foundation for future, more generalizable research which can facilitate better understandings of students and programs in other higher education arts contexts. Furthermore, the demographic observations in this study suggest potential for several demographic influences on EL participation that may be relevant to explore in more detail to determine if there are trends related to student characteristics such as social class, degree level, and major. Overall, this study demonstrates the complex network of influences impacting student participation in extracurricular EL programs and sets the stage to broaden availability of much-needed empirical research related to EL in the arts.

### CONCLUSION

Framed by an evolving arts industry which has created substantial educational skills gaps for emerging artists, this study provided a better understanding of the factors that contribute to student participation in the extracurricular EL programs at a mid-Atlantic performing arts conservatory. This data supports evidence-based practice in the field and may help the institution adjust the programs and processes to serve more students by making them more accessible and relevant to different groups of students. The study also provides helpful groundwork for future research in this area, which has the potential to substantially and positively impact higher education arts institutions seeking to build and promote EL programming in a way that makes these pivotal opportunities accessible, relevant, and appealing to more students.

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