




SINGING SUCCESS REPRESENTING PRIMARILY UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS

Wendy K. Moy and Bryan E. Nichols

Wendy K. Moy
Syracuse University
wmoy01@syr.edu

Bryan E. Nichols
The Pennsylvania State University
bnichols@psu.edu



The culture of singing at Primarily Undergraduate Institutions (PUIs) is an integral part of the American choral ecosystem. Thousands of singers are engaged in robust music making in successful choral programs at PUIs and go on to lead choral programs in schools, churches, and the community. A great deal of scholarship on successful choral programs comes from Research 1 (R1) Universities and, in the case of dissertations, from recent graduates of those schools. However, ACDA conductors at PUIs represent vigorously productive choral singing in a range of small colleges and universities representing both public and private institutions. To that end, we aimed to sample from early, mid, and late-career collegiate conductors. This was challenging, as any two authors would choose conductors differently based on professional networks and exposure to conductors at regional and national conference programs. Thus, representation at conference programs—and elite performance generally—was not the main criterion for selection. Further, we wished to compile a range of demographic variables including geographic representation but also gender and conductors from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

This interview article explores the factors for success in PUIs that have a rich history of choral singing and provides advice for conductors leading similar programs. Five conductors, from early career to late career, speak about the spectrum of successes and challenges in their collegiate choral organizations. They come from a range of PUIs that offer two to five ensembles and a range of music majors from a few to hundreds. Some schools provide community-based participation, with adults aged twenty to seventy-three participating in campus music making. While the lessons learned from these interviews will not apply to every context, the theme of administrative support being crucial to success will resonate with all choral directors.





Jeffrey Benson is the director of choral activities at San José State University (SJSU) in San José, California. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in conducting and choral literature and oversees five choral ensembles.



Peggy Dettwiler has been director of choral activities at Mansfield University, a small state university in north-central rural Pennsylvania, for thirty-three years. She teaches choral conducting and vocal/choral methods and directs five choral ensembles.



Jason Max Ferdinand is the director of choral activities at the University of Maryland School of Music. He was the director of choral activities at a PUI and HBCU, Oakwood University, until 2022.



Lynda Hasseler is professor of music and director of choral activities in Capital University's Conservatory of Music in Columbus, Ohio, where she directs the Chapel Choir and Choral Union; and teaches undergraduate and graduate choral conducting.



A. Jan Taylor is the director of choirs and assistant professor of music education at Prairie View A&M University, an HBCU.



Amy Voorhees is the director of choral activities at Susquehanna University and holds the Cyril M. Stretansky Professorship in Choral Music. Voorhees conducts the University Choir and Chamber Singers and teaches courses in choral conducting, choral methods, and supervises student teachers.

How might teaching at a PUI differ from working at an R1 institution?

Jeffrey Benson: Having never worked at an R1, I'm not fully certain. However, I am aware that my teaching load is often heavier than that of my colleagues. I suspect I am teaching more and reading fewer dissertations and theses. Because of this, my contact hours with students (especially undergraduate students) are higher and I'm mentoring in a different way than some of my R1 colleagues.

Peggy Dettwiler: Since I have worked for more than thirty-three years in a Primarily Undergraduate Institution, it is difficult for me to directly answer this question. I did receive my doctorate in a research institution school and can admit I benefited from that system during those two years. As a teaching assistant, graduate students gain valuable college teaching experience as they work toward their degrees. In a PUI, the teacher has complete contact with the undergraduate students and can offer them all the opportunities for solos, leads in shows, and student conducting leadership that would normally be taken by graduate students.

Jason Max Ferdinand: Time and experience may cause my answer to develop. At this juncture, I think the goals and the pursuit of excellence would be the same. The time spent in the choral rehearsal room is where we seek the highest ideals of music making, in both settings. The differences may occur in campus life and what happens outside of the rehearsal room.

Lynda Hasseler: The absence of graduate students performing in the ensemble(s), assisting with rehearsals and sectionals, teaching classes, and/or assisting with production and performance management often results in the DCA at PUI schools having to "do it all." The silver lining is that undergraduate students will have multiple opportunities to develop their leadership and organizational skills, performing tasks that are usually assigned to TAs. Additionally, PUIs tend to have more limitations related to infrastructure, support staff, discretionary funds, recruitment, tour management, marketing, and development due to budgeting constraints. Again, the silver lining is that often there is more freedom to creatively develop a distinctive choral program and cultivate a "flagship ensemble" for the university.

A. Jan Taylor: We are a small department, so that means that we teach not only our specialty, but we teach other things as well. I am primarily a choral conductor so I may teach choral techniques, elementary education, choral conducting, and voice for music majors who are not voice majors. I also teach fundamentals of music and class piano. We support the department by teaching other courses. Our university is heavily focused now on research and providing time off, as well as funding and ways for faculty members to find funding for research projects and for writing.

There are many cultural differences at an HBCU. There are some things that we understand about each other, the students, the faculty because we serve predominantly Black students. And then there are also things that Black students who attend HBCUs do not have to deal with that they might encounter in a PWI [Predominantly White Institution]. Those kinds of things are eliminated, which in turn give students more of a sense of freedom to be who they are. At Prairie View, social justice and anti-racism is at the center of the University. There's a lot of focus on building, on breaking down barriers of race caused by racism, and teaching our students to be more socially active. There may be more of a focus on African American art and culture than students would experience at a PWI.

“ In my absence, there is no graduate assistant to step in, so student leadership through collaboration is encouraged.

Amy Voorhees: Being a professor at a PUI means working exclusively with undergraduate students. I tend to wear lots of hats including teacher, mentor, and sometimes even a counselor. In my absence, there is no graduate assistant to step in, so student leadership through collaboration is encouraged. I am excited to include both majors and non-majors, though it requires me to be a strong teacher of musical skills and choral/vocal pedagogy on a more frequent basis. Skill levels vary greatly, and I enjoy this aspect of a PUI at this juncture in my career.

How does your pattern of performance opportunities support sustained student interest?

Benson: We try to provide varying levels of commitment and performance opportunities depending on student needs. Our auditioned choirs perform two major concerts each semester, with evening dress rehearsals. These groups also sing for smaller events or full School of Music events. Our Treble Choir and Glee Club (non-auditioned) only have one concert each semester with no separate dress rehearsal outside of class time. This lower commitment allows non-majors with busy academic schedules to still participate without as many conflicts to their schedules.

Our students are incredibly passionate and devoted to the work we are doing centering diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and belonging (DEIAB). Because of this commitment, our programming is often focused on music that celebrates DEIAB work. Students seem to be fully engaged with this programming and excited to share our diversity commitment with audiences. It's difficult to know how this programming impacts recruitment, but it certainly has had a positive impact on retention!

Dettwiler: We strive to create a welcoming environment and set high standards for participation in every ensemble to build a sense of pride in performance through careful repertoire selection. I believe in teaching voice in every rehearsal. We directors may be the only voice teacher the students ever have. Our choral curriculum presents an understanding of cultural history with repertoire from the choral standards but also inclusive of social justice issues through the selection of repertoire that speaks to issues the students face and care about. Each year, we produce at least one CD of the year's repertoire and one DVD of the holiday concerts.

Ferdinand: The choirs here do perform at a steady cadence and the students enjoy it. Programming is an art that reaps so many rewards on varying fronts. I have learned that students love to be stretched, and with intentional programming, that can be achieved. Potential students, seeing the passion on the faces of those singing, are drawn to that and want to share in the experience.

Hasseler: We have intentionally created a range of ensemble experiences that vary in the time commitments and rigor of the ensemble with the intention of providing an ensemble experience for every student who would like to sing. Our annual Christmas Festival concerts are a focal point of fall semester and draw the largest audience for any single event on our campus. Students consider it a point of honor to be involved in this festive concert. Spring semester features a variety of opportunities to capture student interest. Within the context of our commitment to study, perform and program music of merit, we have challenged ourselves to expand our repertoire selection beyond our traditionally exclusive programming practices, so that our concerts better reflect the rich cultural diversity of our world. All Conservatory performances now include music written by composers of historically underrepresented populations. All performers engage with the context, lives, and works of these diverse musicians through performance preparation and program presentation.

Taylor: We do the gamut: all the historical periods of choral art music. We focus on African American spirituals. We also do a little bit of Gospel and Broadway, so we have a varied repertoire, that's one [thing]. And the second always has to do with where we travel. Of course, if we've got an international tour, or if we're going to places outside of the state, those types of trips definitely attract and help us retain students. So, an active performance schedule.

Voorhees: All ensembles sing three to four major concerts a year. Additionally, it is an expectation that each of the larger ensembles share music during a Sunday morning chapel service. The University Choir and Chamber Singers carry the highest load for total number of performances and expectations. Our students rise to the challenge because of their desire to be a part of something meaningful and for which they can be proud.

Programming for both semesters places a high priority on tour audiences and current student abilities, diversity of style, era, and composer, and availability of student collaborative pianists. High school students are


naturally drawn to excellence, but I believe balancing a program to showcase a broad spectrum of what is fun about choral music piques the interest of both the serious choral student and the regular "I just love to sing" kind of student. We want and need them all, so ensuring a varied program really speaks to them in a single concert or snapshot situation.

What cultural norms and activities promote recruitment and retention?

Benson: A retreat for two of the choirs and a concert tour really create a sense of ownership. We try to let the undergraduate students take on leadership roles, organizing retreat activities and even helping with tour planning. In addition, we try to have undergraduate section leaders in most of the choirs. While we do have a master's program and those MM students serve as assistant conductors, the undergraduate music education majors are the student section leaders in each choir. It's been invaluable for cultivating student leadership and retention is a strong result of that leadership. We also have an active student chapter of ACDA and National Association for Music Education (NAfME), where student leadership thrives, especially with our undergraduates. The students are highly involved in programming and cultivating speaker series and social events that help build a tremendous community for the choral program.

Dettwiler: We organize a one-day retreat in the beginning of each year to welcome new singers into the ensembles and build a sense of community. We have an active student ACDA chapter that meets with the NAfME chapter to bring in guest clinicians and host Zoom meetings with leaders in the field. We create service projects that build community with visits to homeless shelters, nursing homes, and half-way houses. Our ACDA chapter hosts an annual Young Men's Choral Festival for students in grades seven, eight, and nine from schools in the region to sing with the university TTBB ensembles.

Ferdinand: Pre-COVID, we always held our Labor Day Retreat, which was a time for the ensembles to



learn more about each other. The social committee members would plan gatherings (movie night, dinners, game night) once a month or so during the school year, to continually try to foster that family atmosphere. The pandemic made the aforementioned activities challenging to curate.

Hasseler: All of the ensembles, and most especially the Chapel Choir, build a culture of belonging and community that is essential to the growth and well-being of the ensemble through rehearsal rituals, retreats, service projects, travel, singing at conferences, and team building activities. This culture of excellence and belonging creates an infrastructure that promotes recruitment and retention. Both are essential elements in cultivating a choral sound and community that our current and prospective students seek out.

Taylor: We have an annual choir camp that lasts one week, and it is the week prior to the start of school. That is the main retreat type thing that we do. Traveling together creates bonds and helps to retain and recruit.

Voorhees: Once enrolled, we try to cultivate a sense of welcome and belonging early on in the process by utilizing resources that build community. One choir is required to learn music prior to their arrival to campus and then starts the year with a two- or three-day retreat. During this time, we rehearse but most importantly, get to know the people in the room. We will often do a mini retreat at the start of semester two when our student teachers, who are absent from the fall [term], return to the ensemble to finish the year. The tour is the highlight for the ensemble. We utilize choir managers and section leaders to promote a team-driven environment where we celebrate the achievement of the ensemble through shared responsibility. I select the section leaders, but they are encouraged to allow all voices within the sections to contribute to the process and feel heard in their observations and suggestions.

How do you recruit from music and non-music majors at your school?

Benson: We do a variety of recruitment events including annual tours to high school and community college programs around the state. Also, we host a High School and Community College Choral Invitational on our campus where each choir sings and San José State University sings for them, plus a Tenor-Bass festival (y'all come) on campus. We post flyers all around campus and the school has an app where we post info about auditions. Lastly, we give free concert tickets to students, and we sing for lots of events on campus.

Dettwiler: We actively recruit voice majors through auditions, welcoming not only the brightest and the best, but also the “diamonds in the rough!” We advertise auditions through our website, Constant Contact announcements, phone calls, promotional materials, and email correspondence. I welcome guest conducting opportunities for festivals or school choir clinics and regularly apply for appearances at conferences. I lead the Concert Choir on tours regionally and internationally to Europe every three years and we have performed in Carnegie [Hall] five times and in eighteen countries to date. I believe that college students who are enjoying their experience in the choral program are the best advocates to influence their high school directors and friends to consider Mansfield as their career choice.

Ferdinand: Oakwood University is a place where everyone sings. We jokingly say that you can pull any four voices and you would have a great sounding quartet. The choirs here are comparable to the football team at the bigger universities and as a result, many desire to audition. Yes, we do visit schools while on tour and that is always a joy, and we see the results of it.

Hasseler: Recruitment is an ongoing effort now more than ever. Email invitations are sent to every incoming student and all voice majors are required to sing in an ensemble. We currently are not touring annually; however, we have traveled for conference performances, and we create as many opportunities for prospective students to come to campus and sing on our beautiful

Mees Hall stage as often as possible, either within their own high school ensemble, or with singers from other high school programs and/or with the Chapel Choir. These invitations include singing in high school festival choirs made up of singers from multiple schools, and the Young Choral Artists Festival featuring opportunities to work with guest composers.

Taylor: I take the choir out on many tours to schools throughout Texas. I sometimes also go with the voice faculty, and we take some voice majors to do a performance. It's just very informal. Then there are times when I will go alone to do master classes, particularly around UIL [University Interscholastic League] or contest time. Occasionally, if there are college nights at high schools in the area, we go out and visit.

Voorhees: Over the summer we send communication inviting students (regardless of major) who participated in music during high school to consider being a part of the ensembles at Susquehanna. We offer two sessions during orientation where we give students an opportunity to ask questions and audition. This yields a significant number of non-majors who are typically undeclared at the time. I visit a fair number of high schools throughout the year. We place a high priority on the recruiting efforts of ensemble directors. Our tour structure has pivoted slightly from past directors. We do a regional tour every year and the primary goal now is to be in the schools. The students and me, together, offer a clinic to the high schools and then will typically share a concert in the school's auditorium, including a mass choir piece.

How does your school promote or support choral singing institutionally?

Benson: The University and the School of Music & Dance provide funding from student activities fees to help with costs for concert tours as well as costs to purchase music annually. Because of university support, the students do not have to pay for in-state tours each year. In addition, the university helps the program fundraise for international tours in order to make the costs more affordable for choir members to travel abroad ev-

ery two to three years.


Dettwiler: The Student Government Association commits some of the student activity fees to the music program. This has helped Music Department ensembles to tour regularly, produce recordings, and bring in guest artists. The campus public relations office helps to spread the word about the program and the activities of the various groups on the university website, area newspapers, and radio and television stations.

Ferdinand: The administration has been consistent with allocating a budget that allows for touring and other activities. We always wish it could be more, right?

Hasseler: Capital University has a rich history of supporting choral singing, in part due to its Lutheran identity, and recognizes and supports musical performance as a form of scholarship. The Chapel Choir is regularly asked to sing at important University events including Orientation and Welcome Sessions for first-year students, Presidential Inaugurations, Convocations, and all major and minor campus celebrations. At the community level, the University turns to the Chapel Choir for comfort in times of sadness and celebration in times of joy. Singing in the choirs is much more than fulfilling an ensemble requirement.

Taylor: Our choir pretty much serves as an ambassador for the university. We go outside of campus to perform on behalf of the university at the invitation, perhaps of administrators. They provide all types of opportunities for us to perform on campus. We get financial support when we have big trips. For instance, if we traveled internationally, or if we are invited to sing at a conference, we usually will get some financial support.

Voorhees: Susquehanna University has a strong record of support for choral music. They support ACDA conference invitations, and our administration recognizes the public nature of what we do. We are always promoting the "ambassador" role to the singers. As one of the most visible entities on campus, we promote citizenship as the underpinning of education. The annual Christmas Candlelight Service continues as a constant



for alumni and the greater Susquehanna community. As a collaboration between music and religious studies, it draws a couple thousand people to the campus to reflect on the spirit of the season. When the administration supports and sustains these traditions, the community recognizes the high value of music at the institution, and we are fortunate to participate in these events.

What successes and challenges are unique to PUIs or helpful for directors at PUIs to consider?

Benson: Because ours was primarily a commuter school for years, many students across campus would leave immediately following their classes to go home or to go to work. That is beginning to change as more and more students are living in the dorms and becoming part of campus. With a campus of over 30,000 students, it is still difficult to get the word out about choir to our non-music majors, especially when they are pulled in so many directions with their studies and other extra-curricular activities. Many of our SJSU students have part-time or even full-time jobs in addition to their studies. So, this makes it more difficult for them to be in a choir when you add in the extra rehearsals and concerts outside of class time.

Dettwiler: Our Music Department produces a well-known musical and a fully staged opera every year, providing undergraduate students opportunities to sing the lead roles. This is a major recruiting tool for students who think a large school with a graduate program would offer more opportunities. Nurture your choral alumni. Every five years we hold a reunion for Concert Choir alumni! More than 140 alumni returned for a weekend and performed a fabulous concert that they prepared individually in advance! My husband, a music historian, edits a newsletter entitled “Hear the Voices” that we publish two to three times a year and includes articles about the upcoming concerts, history of the ensembles, student successes, faculty news, alumni activities, and even fan mail!

Ferdinand: As the University seeks to expand academ-

ic offerings, we have seen more clashes in schedules, which affects the non-music majors. The energy at the undergraduate level is combustible, and I absolutely enjoy it. They are yet malleable, and that allows for so many possibilities.

Hasseler: The University’s class meeting schedule is one of the most challenging pieces of the puzzle for recruiting and retaining singers. It is very difficult to keep rehearsal time sacred, and thus it is common for students, particularly non-majors, to have class conflicts that prevent them from continuing to sing. Another big challenge in a PUI is sheer numbers. With a smaller student population, it is often the case that the same students are doing everything—singing in choir, playing in the band or orchestra, performing in the opera/musical, serving in leadership roles—all while meeting the demands of their degree programs. Students are more likely to be spread thin in the context of a smaller undergraduate program.

Taylor: If there is a barrier, it would be the lack of funds to provide scholarships. There is one scholarship fund that I was able to secure, along with the help of our institutional advancement office. We were able to identify one particular donor who gave a substantial amount of money toward a scholarship in the name of one of her family members. Other than that, I have to go out. It is customary for HBCUs like mine, like Prairie View, to go out on Sunday mornings and sing at church services for an honorarium. When we get invited to perform at various places, perhaps to do a Sunday afternoon concert, we typically will get an honorarium and so that’s one of the ways that we get funds for scholarships. We sometimes can get a little bit of scholarship money from the student government association. That is one of the biggest barriers of recruitment and getting kids to stay in choir is whether or not there are funds available for scholarships.

Voorhees: One of the privileges we are afforded here at Susquehanna is funding. When resources remain available to take advantage of opportunity, success often follows. Our tours are valued and funded each year. However, often these take place over spring break and

for some non-majors the thought of giving up a “vacation” to go on a class trip sometimes prevents them from wanting to be a part of this particular ensemble. They will then opt into the ensemble that lacks this requirement. Another large asset to the department we have in place is a full-time music admissions coordinator. This person assists with auditions, campus visits, and is the primary contact for parents who have inquiries about the program. Regarding barriers, the schedule for ensembles is the same as athletics and this creates conflicts for some who wish to participate in both. Coaches have been flexible, but sharing that timeframe has been problematic for a good athlete who is also a strong musician.

What advice would you offer a new conductor at a primarily undergraduate institution?

Benson: I believe working with undergraduates is quite exciting. These students are eager to learn and grow, and they have an intellectual curiosity that often rivals graduate students. Don't limit yourself or them just because they are undergraduates. Push them and challenge them. You may be surprised by how much they can handle!

Dettwiler: I would offer them the same advice I give to students graduating from a PUI and starting their first teaching position: always have a mentor; honor the person you follow whenever possible; study previous concert programs to assess the level and types of music the ensembles are accustomed to singing; don't change everything in the first year; go to professional conferences; and never stop learning.

Ferdinand: Expose yourself to the bastion of repertoire that exists. Familiarize yourself with the canon and don't be afraid to search for the lesser-known composers/works. In terms of the physicality of conducting, codify regular physical activities (opening a door, shaking a hand) that can correlate to conducting gestures. In this way, an organic language can be developed.

Hasseler: Go in with a growth mindset, be prepared for the workload and to wear many hats (they are lovely

hats!). Build teams of support by developing a network of colleagues within your department, as well as with high school and middle school colleagues in your city. Know that you will need to educate and engage not only your students, but your administrators, colleagues, university, and extended community members about the choral art and how essential it is. Be creative—make the work meaningful—use the freedom you have to take risks, get outside of your comfort zone, and build a culture of excellence!

Taylor: Be prepared to not only focus on being a choral conductor, but be prepared to teach more than just courses that relate to your area of choral conducting. Typically, at an undergrad program like mine, you would probably have a lot of interaction with faculty members who are not within your discipline or what's in your specialty. Not only are you teaching your courses, but you have to stay on top of your research. Those of us who are on the tenure track or are tenured must be involved in all of the areas required to be tenured: research, service, and teaching. I'm in a smaller program, so there is a lot of involvement with our students, not only with coursework but meeting them where they are and being involved with them in terms of what's going on in their lives. There is a lot more personal interaction with students.

Voorhees: Depending on your goals and interest in being a teacher/conductor, the rehearsal process requires strong leadership on many levels. Traditions tend to be important, so keeping those intact is preferred for a smooth transition. Smaller institutions will be looking for someone who has abilities and interests in other areas of the department such as music education, musicology, and/or theory. You may even be asked to teach outside your department. Finally, it will be important to enjoy the recruiting process including working with high school directors, hosting festivals, and sending notes to high school students. If you love doing it all, a PUI is the perfect place to be! 🎵