

To: NAST Members and Constituents

From: Karen P. Moynahan, Executive Director

Re: A Challenging Time – COVID-19 and Related Issues

NAST is monitoring national and international conditions, especially the extent of efforts and related decisions intended to prevent COVID-19 from spreading. NAST holds concern for the health and well-being of the representatives of the institutions it serves and their communities. Comprehensive efforts are underway to provide information and assistance to institutions. As part of these efforts, the National Office staff is working to address individually and personally every inquiry received in a swift, direct, and clear fashion. NAST is focused on targeting the pressing needs of and issues facing institutions reaching out to the Association for assistance and those with current membership/accreditation responsibilities.

At this time and in addition to these efforts, NAST wishes to offer 1) a context, 2) a selection of facts, principles, and considerations that may be useful as administrators and faculty members consider local issues and make decisions, and 3) information as it pertains to ongoing institutional responsibilities. Please note that the information offered in the “Facts, Principles, and Considerations” section below is advisory in nature.

Context

Theatre administrators face difficulties every day. Over the past several weeks, typical challenges have been blended with tremendous problems arising from external situations and ensuing responses. Together these challenges and problems have produced complexities that are unprecedented in recent times. What happens from here is all but impossible to predict. We have come to learn that the facts do not always speak for themselves and information presented may or may not be complete, accurate, or current. How long present realities will last and with what intensity remains unknown. Whether today’s realities will be replaced by tomorrow’s uncertainties remains unknown. And therefore, we find ourselves in uncharted waters. However, we do hold hope that current realities will not last indefinitely, and that our individual and collective efforts and work can and will lead us through these challenging times.

Current and associated realities produce for us at least one instructive conclusion – for the most part, challenges and problems being faced at this time by local institutions, schools, and programs cannot be addressed by a single national answer. Local situations may share commonalities and mutual concerns with others, but without question, detailed decision making at the local level is an individual undertaking and must be aligned with and customized to local conditions. More than ever, the way forward for each institution and program involves careful information gathering, thoughtful consideration, prudent planning, and calculated action, all built on thorough knowledge of one’s own situation, a foundation of patience, a readiness to be flexible, and faith in the eventual arrival of greater contextual stability than we are experiencing today. It may be helpful and comforting to recall historical challenges faced and surmounted by predecessors at your institution. They too managed and weathered unpredictable storms.

Facts, Principles, and Considerations

National Problem. The appearance and initial spread of COVID-19 has produced high levels of concern. Reactions have produced precautionary decisions that are disruptive. Such disruptions may continue for some time. Across the nation, institutions of higher education have closed temporarily. In-person education of students has been curtailed in many cases. Important education-related rehearsals and events have been cancelled. Mandates to deliver coursework via distance learning means have become commonplace. And, the financial markets are on a roller coaster. Economic worries are mixing with health-related concerns and fears given the unknown and unpredictable, heightening the collective unease of the nation.

Dealing with Realities at Multiple Levels. In every local situation, it is advisable to consider security and future action in terms of what can change or has changed, and what does not or cannot change, and also what can or cannot change back. As theatre administrators, we understand that (a) educating and preparing students for the profession is an abiding principle – something that must not change, and (b) all curricular and other efforts of the institution and its personnel must work in concert to support the realization of

achievement in individual students in terms of content mastery and technical skill. Each institution develops specifics of curriculum, schedule, graduation requirements, and so forth to accomplish this purpose. However, even in normal times, specific means vary from institution to institution. The permanent presence of such differences demonstrates that there are many ways to accomplish commonly held purposes, many successful methods, many ways of teaching, many ways of selecting and organizing subject matter. These facts and realities taken together are a useful springboard for developing temporary solutions in disruptive times: for example, focusing on function first, and method or delivery systems second, which sustains attention to core or first order issues. It also sets the stage for developing creative solutions and responses – for recalibrating and adjusting the ways in which curriculum and other student development elements are structured, ordered, scheduled, delivered, and evaluated in order to remain as productive as possible for the duration of problematic conditions.

Working Within Your Institution. If your theatre unit is part of a larger institution, you will probably be working with specific policies and mandates established by higher authorities and working to cooperate as best as possible under current circumstances. It is likely, however, that you and your colleagues will be responsible for specific decisions within the frameworks of those policies and mandates. In carrying out such responsibilities, it may be useful to consider the extent to which the decisions you are developing are consistent and align with the fundamentals of existing institutional policies which address emergencies and other problematic situations – not simply the letter, but also the spirit of these policies, particularly if you have to justify your decisions to institutional officers. Many will elect to rely on existing and established distance learning means and programs. As well, you might also consider the extent to which delivery systems used to teach in other subject areas might be adapted temporarily for your use. But not every course in every curriculum is online. When time is of the essence, it is worth recalling that distance learning can be accomplished without the full complement of hardware and software found in the most sophisticated e-delivery systems. E-mail and other simple communication systems may seem old-school, but they can work, especially with small groups of students. Be willing to transfer delivery concepts from other sources, starting first by looking at resources and practices in your own and neighboring institutions.

Coursework and Basic Functions. Each course in a curriculum has a set of core purposes that can be thought of and expressed as basic functions. Basic functions may be labeled as goals and objectives or carry some other designation. At the course level, it may be useful to concentrate on these several basic functions, especially when the customary delivery system is disrupted or no longer available. Courses and experiences that function to teach the performance and presentation aspects of theatre through actual performing and presentation provide a case in point. When performances and shows are cancelled, when performance, presentation, and creation lessons and classes are no longer taught, especially in groups, it may be useful to look at which basic functions addressed by these courses can and cannot be taught by other means. The principle just articulated suggests the utility of reprioritizing temporarily – finding means for fulfilling or concentrating on certain functions of specific courses during the period when all the usual basic functions of that course cannot be addressed.

Creativity and Solutions. As artists, we are centered in creativity, in finding new ways to express and do. Difficult times call for creativity and for timely and carefully considered experimentation, especially with method, but also with function as necessary. Consider building temporary solutions around appropriately selected features of artistic work such as theme and variation, idea development over time or in space, controlled balance and imbalance, proportion, metamorphosis, controlled scattering and gathering, juxtapositions of opposites, random or apparently random presentations of material that aggregate in time, recognition and use of natural orders, sequences, and reactions, and so forth. Remember that while fulfilling specific curricular content-based functions, it is acceptable to break from traditional conventions. Often such breaks become the bases for discoveries that become or influence new conventions.

Resources and Allocations. Given the nature of the present situation, it may be necessary to make stopgap plans as though there will be no new resources, while also facing the possibility of fewer resources immediately or in the future. Allocations within the theatre unit may need adjusting, and the unit may experience reallocations from upper administration. To be ready for any external resource or allocation proposal or decision, it may be useful to develop a short and well-reasoned list of absolute make-or-break variables or issues for the unit that include but go beyond specific curricular considerations. Such a list with

reasoned annotations may prevent decisions that inadvertently produce long-term damage. At any level, it is extremely important to avoid setting resource allocation precedents that cannot be sustained. Expectations management is essential. A few minutes of thought devoted to possible ramifications may assist to prevent years of misunderstanding and trouble.

Health and Safety. It is critical to review all proposals and operational plans against applicable external (i.e., federal and state) and internal (i.e., institutional) policies and requirements regarding health and safety. Personally, it is critical to take precautions seriously, and especially to stay rested and well.

Trust. Difficult times naturally produce information and emotions that can erode trust. Often, active measures are employed to manipulate trust for various purposes. In dealing with what is natural and in trying to discern what is manipulated, administrators and faculties have a special responsibility to maintain and build trust among each other within their own contexts. First, because it is the right thing to do, and second, because it is the productive thing to do. Trust enables efficiency, careful and comprehensive consideration, economy, and speed. All studies, proposals, and decision making should be considered in light of their impact on trust. It helps to remember that trust is needed in this crisis, but also in the next one, and the next one after that.

Knowledge, Experience, and Sharing. As you and your colleagues work through the situations you face, you will gain knowledge and experience that can be shared. Be willing to help other institutions seeking advice, but also with other kinds of assistance. NAST members have supported each other through various crises such as Hurricane Katrina and the September 11, 2001 attacks. Most institutions have a group of institutions or theatre programs regarded as their peers. Seeking consultation and advice from peer institutions or programs first may produce ideas more likely to fit purposes, and be desirable, appropriate, and affordable. Of course, good ideas come from an infinite number of sources, and there should be no hesitation to contact those you think may be able to provide assistance.

Positive Attitudes. Courage, patience, and perseverance are hallmarks of work in theatre and in all the arts disciplines. They are major elements in sustaining positive attitudes. Leaders exhibit and cultivate positive attitudes, even as they help others work realistically with extant conditions. Positive attitudes are important elements in building the strength and cohesion necessary for success in any time, and especially in difficult times. Positive attitudes are also powered by gratitude, by reminding ourselves of the great progress we and our predecessors have made in a relatively short period of time. Setbacks and frustrations should not daunt us, but rather teach us, and inspire ever greater success.

Ongoing Compliance with NAST Standards

Continuing Flexibilities. NAST standards and procedures offer the wide latitude necessary for work in a creative field. The standards are frameworks that address functions and their fulfillment, ordinarily leaving methods and means to institutional discretion. Such latitude supports institutional development and use of new or different means during difficult times, or at any time. Given these flexibilities, the Association does not need to change its standards to deal with emergencies.

Comprehensive Reviews and On-site Visits

Rescheduling. On-site reviews may be rescheduled by institutions as necessary and desired. In particular, Spring 2020 visits may be rescheduled to Fall 2020 or postponed to the 2020-2021 academic year or later. It will take time and patience to reschedule or postpone a visit. The first step is to contact the National Office, specifically Kathryn Omune (komune@arts-accredit.org). Staff will provide detailed information, assistance, and support.

Self-Study Materials. If a site visit is rescheduled or postponed, updates to a completed Self-Study may be provided as part of an institution's Optional Response submitted after receipt of the Visitors' Report. There is no need to amend and resubmit the full Self-Study and accompanying materials. Questions regarding submissions may be directed to Adèle-Marie Buis (abuis@arts-accredit.org).

Consultant/Evaluator Schedules. Consultants and evaluators scheduled for visits that are rescheduled or postponed are asked to continue to make their own determinations about their ability to serve during the newly requested time period. Consultants and evaluators may contact Kathryn Omune (komune@arts-accredit.org) should questions or concerns arise.

Expenses. Consultants and evaluators holding airline tickets for travel to visits that are now rescheduled or postponed are asked to work directly with the airline to rebook arrangements or receive reimbursements. Should questions arise regarding expenses, please contact Tracy Maraney (tmaraney@arts-accredit.org).

Commission Meetings and Materials Due. As confirmed in an email dated March 13, 2020, the Commission on Accreditation meetings scheduled to take place March 21-25, 2020 have been cancelled. Holding an intention to reschedule the Commission meetings, NAST will provide further information in the coming days. In the meantime, should questions arise, please contact Adèle-Marie Buis (abuis@arts-accredit.org) for information and assistance.

Commission Reviews after Rescheduled/Postponed Visits and Extensions. Rescheduled and postponed visits, and extended reply deadlines will have no effect on Commission reviews for Membership, renewal of Membership, Plan Approval, and other such substantive considerations associated with standards compliance. All such reviews are based only on NAST standards as published in the NAST *Handbook*, not on review schedules. Requests for postponements do require staff or Commission action as appropriate and are governed by the NAST [Policy on Postponement](#). Please contact Kathryn Omune should questions pertaining to postponements arise (komune@arts-accredit.org). These actions are procedural rather than substantive, and normally are completely separate from a substantive standards-based review.

NAST 2020 Annual Meeting

As confirmed in an email dated March 13, 2020, after careful and thorough consideration of all issues before the Association, the NAST Board of Directors voted to cancel the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Association, including all professional development sessions, pre-meeting workshops, Board of Directors meetings, and Commission on Accreditation meetings scheduled to take place March 21-28 at the Hyatt Regency Baltimore Inner Harbor. Further information regarding the business aspects of the 2020 Annual Meeting will be provided in the coming days. Should questions arise, please contact Kyle Johnson (kjohnson@arts-accredit.org) for information and assistance.

Further Information

There are many sources of information available to individuals and institutions such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), the [United States Department of Education \(ED\)](#), the [Federal Student Aid Office](#), as well as those made available by specific and applicable state and local offices.

Questions

Please contact NAST directly if you have questions. Please do not sit with concerns or speculate about what NAST will or will not do. NAST works to assist member institutions to accomplish their purposes and to this end will address with focused attention the issues brought forward by its members and constituents. A list of staff names and assigned responsibilities may be found [online](#). Staff members stand ready to offer assistance. As well, please do not hesitate to contact me directly if I may offer assistance (kmoyghan@arts-accredit.org; (703) 437-0700, ext. 116).

Conclusion

Thank you for the work you have done and will do during this difficult time. Cognizant of the accomplishments of the NAST membership and that pursued and completed by individual member institutions, it is apparent that the greatest strength of the Association and its members lies in the deep and abiding respect held for the field of theatre and for those who labor tirelessly to advance its cause. At this time of great challenge, member institutions can rely on this great community for support and assistance, a community that you and your predecessors have built and sustained for decades, a community that will not only survive, but prosper in the years ahead.

Please be and remain well as together we work through these challenging times.

Warm regards.