

Why NAST Institutional Membership is Important

An Overview for Collegiate Theatre Faculty

NAST membership involves far more than a periodic accreditation review that includes self-study, site visit, Commission action, and public notice as an accredited institution. It provides more than the immediate benefits and improvements that usually occur during and after this process. Participation in NAST also means shouldering important institutional responsibilities for theatre, and particularly for its place and role in higher education. This brief paper outlines the principal ways NAST supports institutions and faculties, and how NAST combines the strengths of all members to serve the whole field.

What Membership Signifies

Institutional membership in NAST represents a strategic choice. It signifies a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the work of individual institutions and the work of the entire community of institutions that prepare theatre professionals at the collegiate level. It signifies a willingness to connect with others, both in order to give and to receive. It signifies that individuals with high levels of capability, expertise, and experience in the theatre must take leadership responsibility in accreditation and related areas lest a vacuum be created for non-theatre professionals to fill. It signifies a pledge to continue what NAST has always done: seek optimum learning conditions for theatre students and develop the strength and quality of theatre in higher education by assisting institutional members and their faculties to do their best work.

No one of us ever sees all the work or knows all the people that are helping us accomplish our purposes. Although NAST works quietly, preferring that attention go to the work of its member institutions, each faculty member can be assured that his or her work is supported by NAST day after day and year after year. The following points explain why.

Membership and Standards

- NAST member institutions develop national accreditation standards and guidelines in consultation with other individuals and organizations. Only the member institutions have a vote when standards are being set, however. Professional consensus among the faculties and administrators of over 180 institutions produces authority. It enables the standards to protect as well as to inform. The standards are referenced many times each day at all levels of education. They promote good decisions because they focus attention on artistic and educational essentials.
- The standards are effective because they create a framework of basic competencies and operational conditions rather than a blueprint for standardizing programs. The approach to process is based on support for each institution's fulfillment of its mission, goals, and objectives. Through NAST, its member institutions have a common means for centering critical responsibility for standards and assessment in theatre while respecting the prerogatives of individual institutions and faculty members to create, develop, and evaluate local programs.
- For these and many other reasons, NAST institutional membership means investing in the stature and health of our own profession, in the maintenance of conditions and resources necessary for student learning, and in a system of national review and accountability that we ourselves own

and operate. No organization or group outside the field could fulfill these comprehensive and interlocking responsibilities for us.

Standards and Local Action

- Each NAST member affirms two things. First, mutual support and the development of a common standards framework are continuing necessities. Second, relationships between support and the framework are magnified and rendered increasingly influential when institutions use the standards as the basis for self-study and peer review of their own programs.
- The power of this influence is used to serve institutions and all the people working in them. Because faculty usually serve for many years, they are often the greatest long-term beneficiaries of NAST's direct support. NAST membership thus establishes an optimum relationship between giving and receiving, and between each theatre department or school and all of the others.
- The productive power of the membership commitment of each institution serves the institution's own aspirations by connecting them to the aspirations of the field as a whole. The accreditation process emphasizes improvement and advancement. On-site evaluators and members of the Commission on Accreditation are committed to understanding the unique situation of each institution and to helping it grow and flourish in its own place and time.
- Therefore, NAST institutional membership places the combined expertise, dedication, and goodwill of all members in the service of the artistic and educational work of each member.

Local Action and NAST Support

- Because the focus is on local purposes, achievements, and aspirations, the Self-Study is the most important part of the review procedure. To avoid duplication of effort and to help develop consistent planning processes, the NAST Self-Study can be combined with other reviews, or analyses prepared for other reviews can be part of the Self-Study document for NAST. Whatever the specifics of the procedure, each institution takes an in-depth look at the relationships among purposes, aspirations, curricula, resources, and achievements, and then formulates next steps for correcting deficiencies and making improvements. This analysis also provides the basis for a document that enables visiting colleagues to be effective based on a comprehensive set of data and analysis that the theatre school or department has produced. For most NAST member institutions, the NAST review every five or ten years is the primary occasion for comprehensive, in-depth strategic evaluation and planning centered in theatre. Normally, it produces ideas, plans, documents, and actions that serve long after the NAST review is complete.
- The NAST accreditation review is not primarily a search for problems, but rather a common effort to nurture wise courses of action based on relationships between accountability to national standards and institutional aspirations. Both the courses and the searches for them are primarily each institution's responsibility.
- NAST reviews are conducted by colleagues, not regulators. These colleagues serve in NAST member institutions. Those reviewing will also be reviewed. NAST visitors and Commission members recognize that everyone—from students to faculty, to arts administrators, to provosts, to presidents—is to be learned from, assisted, and served.

NAST Support and Faculty

- NAST works constantly to strengthen the relationship between individual capability and the work of the field as a whole. All of these efforts by NAST and its member institutions are dedicated to helping each theatre student. The goal of helping students cannot be reached without a constant effort to support faculty.
- NAST standards for undergraduate programs, for example, expect a comprehensiveness that requires a range of faculty specializations. The standards also provide a variety of degree formats that support distributions of curricular time that enable faculty attention to student learning and to their own professional development.
- Through both accreditation and advocacy, NAST has been in the forefront of efforts to explain and defend the work of theatre faculty—content, scope, depth, connections between art making and intellect, and so forth—to those outside the field. It advocates fair promotion and tenure policies for theatre faculty, seeking parity with faculty in other disciplines.
- NAST standards address resources and policies such as library, studio space, equipment, facilities, technology, teaching loads, faculty development, and so forth. Reasoned efforts by NAST on a broad range of fronts have enabled improvements in every member institution, sometimes to spectacular effect.
- NAST also supports its member institutions and their faculties by organizing projects that can only be accomplished through national cooperation among institutions. Among these is one of the largest institutional research projects in American higher education: the Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) project. The result is annual composite statistics that support decision-making at all levels, particularly with regard to budgets and faculty salaries.
- The Association is deeply engaged in policy analysis, watching the context for challenges and opportunities. It regularly produces reasoned positions on such issues as assessment and evaluation, minority recruitment, distance learning, interdisciplinarity, and so forth. It monitors many other areas—copyright, theatre education for children and youth, tax policies as they affect non-profit organizations, federal legislation and regulation on higher education in the arts, for example—and takes action when necessary. All of these efforts promote the best possible environment for the work of faculty.

A Fundamental Strategic Decision

- Every theatre program in higher education is a citizen of several communities. Most are within institutions where theatre is one of many majors offered. Each is also part of the theatre community in higher education with all its specializations and interests, the higher education community as a whole, the professional theatre community, and a local community.
- Each of these communities makes decisions that affect theatre schools and departments. Many of these decisions are made by those with little or no in-depth understanding of theatre. This fact creates the need for professional presence and action.
- As a unique discipline, theatre has special needs and interests. Primarily, these are the responsibility of those educated and trained in the field. These responsibilities cover a broad range, everything from artistic matters and agendas for scholarship to management structures and

accountability, from student recruitment and graduation standards to repertory and production policies, from facilities to student health and safety. In these and many other areas, theatre professionals have a choice. They can fulfill each responsibility themselves, or they can leave it primarily to others.

- The decision of the theatre community in higher education to establish NAST in 1965 and develop it to parity with organizations in other professions constituted a strategic decision: institutions devoted to developing theatre expertise will establish standards, conduct reviews, and create a forum for professional exchange and learning rather than leaving these responsibilities to others.
- This decision is important in and of itself, but it also reflects and thus strengthens other critical principles. In the United States, accreditation is a private sector responsibility. It is responsible for affirming quality based on standards and for protecting institutional autonomy, programmatic innovation, artistic and academic freedom, and the mobility of credits and credentials.
- NAST thus represents higher education institutions that teach theatre in the most broadly accepted evaluation procedure in higher education as a whole. Its work in accreditation and beyond is a reference point for others in the field, and is especially valuable for decision makers without a theatre background.
- Institutional membership in NAST is a strategic choice to join work in fulfilling these important responsibilities for the field of theatre and to gain local support from a community of peers dedicated to service.

To pose questions or obtain more information about NAST, please contact:

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