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PROMOTING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO A PROFESSIONAL CAREER FOR  
VOCAL STUDIES GRADUATES

by

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Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of  
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

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**ABSTRACT**

A successful opera singer must complement their artistic talent with entrepreneurial and business skills (Daniel & Daniel, 2015; Storen, 2014). Therefore, educational institutions must teach their graduate vocal studies students to expand their talent and learn how to market themselves as a product. Little research has been conducted from the perspective of opera singers' academic experiences in higher educational institutions and how well their institutions prepared them for the transition to the professional world. The purpose of the study was to determine if current core curricula are sufficient or should curriculum development focus on the entrepreneurial and business aspects in the vocal arts, particularly careers in opera. Entrepreneurial bricolage theory was used to examine the educational experiences of 27 survey participants (nine of these participants were randomly chosen to be interviewed) who graduated from a higher educational institution within the past 10 years, to determine if their institutions prepared them to transition from a student into a professional opera singer. Interpretation of the data determined that networking, marketing, and budgeting knowledge and skills were lacking in development based on curricula from higher education institutions. However, high education value with voice faculty, vocal technique, and institution name recognition were experienced among the participants.

*Keywords:* entrepreneurial, business, vocal studies, curricula, performing artists

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During a student's formative years in higher education institutions, vocal studies students need educational programming that will provide a strong foundation for growth, success, and sustainable singing careers. As with other careers, success is achievable if implementation of the appropriate learned qualities, knowledge, and experiences is in place in higher education. "It is clear the interest in arts entrepreneurship education is strong, widespread, and rapidly growing," said Beckman (2007, p. 87) when discussing performing arts students. The essential question was to determine if appropriate curricula had been established at higher education institutions to enable master's of music in vocal studies students to successfully transition into a professional career as an opera singer. As educators, there may be a responsibility for administrators and faculty to introduce academics that go beyond the required vocal technique and music theory and history classes. As Beckman (2007) stated, "Many administrators interviewed emphasized the importance of experiential education in an effective arts entrepreneurship program" (p. 90).

The research study sought to determine if the current core curricula at various music schools and performing arts conservatories were sufficient, or if there was a need for further curriculum development that focused on the entrepreneurial, business, and promotional aspects of the performing arts world, particularly for opera singers. There was an identified gap in research that pertained to the perception of vocal studies graduates and their experience with curriculum in master's programs at higher education institutions. Daniel and Daniel (2015) studied visual arts students only, while Støren (2014) focused on performing artists in general and not specifically vocal studies students who were hoping to become professional opera singers. Obtaining alumni feedback from opera singers about their graduate school experience

and how it prepared them for their opera singing careers, is an important factor for future curriculum development.

The United States Department of Labor (2019) has identified key knowledge, skills, and work activities for performing artists that go beyond the core curriculum of vocal technique studies and music theory. For the purpose of this study, the skills that were the most relatable were in the areas of sales and marketing, customer and personal service, communicating with persons outside an organization, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and making decisions and solving problems (Department of Labor, 2019). Adaptability to change, leadership skills, situational awareness, and institutional culture play major roles in developing and maintaining a curriculum that will allow performing artists to excel in their chosen careers (Department of Labor, 2019).

Expanding on the support to identify important entrepreneurial and business skills for performing artists, the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) has articulated a program on its website titled “The Business of Music – Entrepreneurial Training for Musicians” that outlines key skills that promote “unique needs and challenges of working musicians” (CCI, 2014). Those key business skills include “business basics, including taxes, organizational structures; spending money, including project budgets, creating cost projections, and record keeping” (CCI, 2014). These key factors aligned with the Department of Labor in terms of identifiable skills that should be included in a performing artist’s knowledge base.

An institution’s ideology of what an appropriate vocal studies curriculum looks like may change because of the increasing pressure to adapt more quickly to societal changes in norms and values. Introducing an alternative approach to an institution’s ideology, such as Beckman (2007) who had identified the importance of “training that prepares students to behave in an

entrepreneurial manner” (p. 89), or the changing norms in the use of technology in all disciplines may improve the institutional culture.

One example in the area of technology, is the use of video in productions, and how it can be utilized in a performing arts conservatory. There may be a need to rapidly adjust the institution’s vision of preparing students to interact with this additional production element. Higher education institutions, such as the University of Michigan, have acknowledged that “performing arts technologies have evolved in unprecedented ways” (Michigan Muse, 2013). Through personal communication with educators and administrators from performing arts conservatories around the United States, the researcher had identified that there was a discrepancy between performing arts conservatories as to what they considered an important part of graduate curriculum for vocal studies students. Some identified the importance for their students to build skills that pertain to business and entrepreneurial practices, while others focused solely on vocal technique and performance skills.

Over the past five years, the researcher observed students developing their performing arts careers with support from peers, faculty, and administration. The experience has indicated that music and vocal technique skills and knowledge are by no means the only influence on career success or satisfaction. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on alum of graduate master level programs in vocal studies who were pursuing or already engaged in careers as professional opera singers. Career success and satisfaction were determined by the individual and self-defined in a survey instrument and follow-up semi-structured interviews.

There is no easy solution to maintaining a high-quality education as observed by Senge (2006). “Building learning-oriented cultures is demanding because learning stretches us personally, and it is always easier to stay in our comfort zone” (Senge, 2006, p. 272). This

tendency to remain in the comfort zone has the potential to allow an educational institution to become stagnant and suggests that conservatories should perhaps be seeking to adapt their curriculum to incorporate additional coursework beyond the core vocal studies.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Department of Labor (2019), Daniel and Daniel (2015), and the Center for Cultural Innovation (2014) stated that generally, performing artists need to complement their artistic talent with entrepreneurial and business skills. Currently, there are some performing arts conservatories training vocal artists that offer the opportunity to learn those skills, but there are some that do not. There is little research from the vocal studies graduates' perspective that describes their academic experiences in these programs and how well the institutions prepared them for the transition to the professional world.

Some vocal studies graduate programs give students access to business and entrepreneurial courses to supplement their curriculum to help them develop these additional skills. Graduate students who attend other specialized institutions or performing arts conservatories do not have similar access to business and entrepreneurial courses. Exploring the disconnect between a schools' curriculum and the possible need for useful non-vocal studies coursework addressed the gap in research that pertains to the question of having or not having non-vocal studies coursework incorporated into the curricula of graduate level vocal studies programs.

While the literature does not define *success*, it was imperative to explore how the transition from student to professional singer can be supported by skills and knowledge that go beyond a granular focus on vocal studies performance content in the training process. As Beckman (2007) stated in his article "Adventuring Arts Entrepreneurship Curricula in Higher

Education” in *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, individuals must acknowledge best practices in order to “gain some understanding about the curricular structure, interest in, and growth of these efforts” (p. 87). When it comes to developing the appropriate curricula that address skills beyond the normative vocal technique training, identifying key factors is important. This phenomenological study sought to identify the specific business and/or entrepreneurial skills and knowledge needed for vocal studies graduates to make a successful transition to the professional world. Although several sources indicated a need to include entrepreneurial training in performing arts and creative arts programs (Baker, 2014; Beckman, 2007; Daniel and Daniel, 2015; Department of Labor, 2019), few studies have been done to understand this need from the viewpoint of practitioners. The study was designed to fill the current gap in literature by learning from vocal studies graduates what key entrepreneurial skills and appropriate academic programming best equip them to develop and succeed in their careers as professional opera singers.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine if current core curricula are sufficient, or if there is a need for further curriculum development that focuses on the entrepreneurial aspect of the performing arts world, particularly in the vocal arts as it pertains to careers in opera. The researcher explored vocal studies graduates’ perceptions about their vocal studies training programs, the appropriateness of core curriculum, and what they as opera professionals perceived was missing from their education that would have been useful in transitioning to their professional careers. As reflected by the Department of Labor (2019), to the focus of the study was on establishing the importance of establishing specific entrepreneurial, marketing, business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that performing artists might require.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher developed research questions that focused on identifying critical information to address the problem and potential solutions for this study.

1. What are the key entrepreneurial, marketing, and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that vocal studies graduate students require to successfully transition from academia to the professional world?
2. What is the appropriate higher educational programming in vocal studies that will prepare students to successfully transition to their professional careers?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework that supports this study is entrepreneurial bricolage theory as it pertains to arts entrepreneurship. Bricolage is a “theory of production based on an economic state of resource constraint” (Essig, 2015, p. 234). Motivation is the intermediate variable which is most important for students to have in order to access the knowledge and business skill development that enables to them produce projects on their own. This is particularly appropriate because recent graduates do not typically have the available resources, such as financial and industry knowledge, to produce a promotional performance that might gain them exposure to managers, agents, and patrons. Incorporating the entrepreneurial bricolage theory and focusing on its occurrence “in a resource-poor environment” (Essig, 2015, p. 234), this study could potentially help institutions understand and develop means to incorporate additional relevant coursework into the curricula of their vocal studies programs.

Integrating entrepreneurship courses in the vocal studies curricula might help to develop creative thinking and exploration “because artists and arts entrepreneurs often work in environments of severely constrained resources and are acculturated to improvisational activity

(sometimes through formal training)” (Essig, 2015, p. 234). This ideology incorporates the Department of Labor (2019) findings and definitions for the career of a *Singer*, which articulate the need for sales and marketing, customer and personal service, fine arts, English language, music or sound editing software, social perceptiveness, critical thinking, judgment and decision making, vocal technique, performing abilities, practice, and interpretation of music as key factors for building a strong foundation in that profession. The question becomes what specific skills and knowledge are most appropriate to include in graduate vocal studies curricula.

### **Assumptions**

A major assumption that was made, due to the researcher’s review of the literature, was the entrepreneurial nature of being an opera singer. There was an assumption that the results from the data obtained would be self-reported and taken as subjective. All research in this area was believed to be up to date and relevant to the study that was proposed by the researcher. It was assumed that the participants in the study would hold the best interest of the study to help improve the curricula that they themselves experienced at their respective educational institutions. One last assumption was that regardless of the gender and vocal range of the performing artist, the entrepreneurial and business skills needed are the same.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations that had the potential to compromise the effectiveness of the study. The most important was the response rate from potential participants once the official invitation to participate in the study had been sent. There was no control over who responded, from which schools, or how many of those participants would be willing to participate in the follow-up, semi-structured interviews.



An additional limitation was the researcher's own experience in the industry. While there was potential for bias, the researcher ensured the likelihood of this happening would be minimized by using bracketing. Another limitation that had been identified was the focus of the study was only on vocal studies students who transitioned into professional opera singers within the last 10 years. The researcher only studied this demographic because it aligned with the entrepreneurial bricolage theory that pertains to making do with a lack of resources. Recent graduates potentially have limited access to funds to help with promotional material and, depending on the program they graduated from, may lack essential entrepreneurial skills needed to make the transition.

Although the initial electronic survey was open to all graduates of a master's in music degree from vocal studies programs in the United States, the semi-structured interviews were chosen from alumni who consented to participate from the initial survey. One final limitation that had been identified was that the experiences of the alumni may be different from that of students who are currently attending a vocal studies program in the United States.

### **Scope**

The scope of this study included graduates from vocal studies programs in the United States who had a career trajectory of becoming professional opera singers. The researcher identified four master's of music in vocal studies programs coded as Conservatory A, Conservatory B, Music School A, and Music School B, which were used for a base curricula comparison. Although a larger pool of participants were surveyed, a smaller pool of respondents from the initial survey volunteered to participate in a more in-depth, semi-structured interview. The participants had graduated within the past ten years from a master's of music in vocal studies program a United States university music school or performing arts conservatory and

were asked about their perception of the coursework and curriculum they received and the non-vocal skills and knowledge they needed in their careers.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to establish what is essential and appropriate for inclusion in curriculum for a master's of music in vocal studies program. Ensuring that the administrators and faculty have the correct tools to implement this curriculum allows the students to more successfully transition into professional careers in their chosen fields.

This study was important because it surveyed and questioned recent alumni who have gone through these programs and gathered information about their experiences at their respective institutions. It also identified what aspects of the curricula did not prove useful and what missing elements would have been useful to graduate vocal students embarking on their professional opera careers. What is significant for the institutions is that they must realize the need to continually realign themselves with ever-changing career expectations while maintaining their own ideology, vision, and mission of the school.

Through the literature review and a comparison study between the curricula of four higher education institutions with vocal studies programs, this researcher identified that their respective approaches to entrepreneurial study was different. In addition to vocal technical skills, these curricula included coursework ranging from business-type skills to production elements such as video technology in order to provide an educational experience that propels the students to success in their prospective careers. What was unknown was how graduates of vocal studies programs perceive the importance of entrepreneurial skills to their careers.

This phenomenological study focused on the alumni who had completed their graduate degree in vocal studies education with the intent to become professional opera singers. It was “a

direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced by people living those experiences” (Center for Innovative Research and Teaching, 2019) that incorporated the perceptions of opera singers who were vocal studies graduates. The researcher incorporated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to define codes and themes that arose during the study.

### **Conclusion**

The need for developing business and entrepreneurial skills for vocal artists has been identified by the Department of Labor, organizations such as the Center for Cultural Innovation, and some higher education music schools. A more in-depth focus on the perceptions of U.S. based higher education vocal studies graduates about their own experiences provides insight into the approaches that the institutions offered in their vocal studies degree programs. While higher education institutions look to have graduating students successfully transition to professional careers, the literature identified courses that encompass business and entrepreneurial themes and ideologies as key factors to include in curricula to help prepare students transition into professional careers.

The data from this study can lead educators and administrators to better understand what courses should be developed, implemented, and interwoven to produce the best possible educational foundation for the students. This study focused on how certain courses may benefit students in preparation for their careers. The researcher explored the different approaches currently in place through a survey with subsequent personal interviews of recent graduates from any university music school or performing arts conservatory vocal studies master’s programs in the United States to discover how their experiences and coursework prepared them for the world after school. This ultimately could affect the approach that the administrators and faculty take in

teaching the students and may encompass certain pedagogy that is outside of the normal vocal studies and music theory curriculum.

In Chapter 2, the researcher extrapolates and analyzes information from literature pertaining to curriculum in performing arts conservatories, identifying key factors that have been studied to achieve a better understanding of the appropriate curriculum for graduating students as they transition to their professional careers. The ensuing chapters include Chapter 3: Methodology, which explains the phenomenological approach to this study to better understand the personal experiences of the participants. Following this, Chapter 4: Results, focuses on the extrapolation of the survey and semi-structured interview data, and Chapter 5: Conclusion with recommendations for further study.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The main objective of this literature review was to explore the ideologies that the literature deemed appropriate programming for graduate vocal studies students in university music schools and performing arts conservatories to obtain successful careers as opera singers. Throughout this literature review, three main areas of preparation were identified and explored: (a) becoming a professional opera singer, including the psychological effects of performing, self-efficacy in the performing arts, and self-promotion; (b) higher education vocal studies curriculum; (c) entrepreneurial programming that would aid the graduates in networking, promoting their product (voice), and promoting their product as a business. The chapter also expands on the entrepreneurial bricolage theory that served as the conceptual framework for the study.

Multiple studies in this literature review occur with an international point of view. This global perspective benefits opera singers because the profession is a global performing art form that can take a professional singer around the world. Information from multiple countries will help singers successfully navigate the world of performing arts.

While the literature does not define the term *success* for opera singers, this literature review explores the research into the transition from a higher education institution to the beginning of a professional singing career with a more granular focus on performing arts conservatories. This study attempted to discover the skills and knowledge that have or would have helped the graduating students enter and advance their careers.

### **Becoming a Professional Opera Singer**

To become a professional opera singer, it takes vocal training, learning arias, exploring a character, and absorbing and emoting the work in multiple languages (Department of Labor,

2019). Bergen Baker, a vocal arts performer with the Minnesota Opera and current director of opera with the University of Minnesota, explained the importance of language education. “Opera singers must have a working knowledge of the most popular languages for operatic performance: Italian, German, and French” (Baker, 2014, para.13). This takes a tremendous amount of dedication, time, and financial obligation. “Schooling is important to singers because it’s a safe environment to develop your instrument” (Baker, 2014, para.14). This study will help contribute information towards understanding possible skills that could complement the already established curriculum as Mezzo-soprano Bergen Baker wrote, “It’s totally an entrepreneurial business. You are your own product” (2014, para. 3).

In addition to mastering vocal technique and several foreign languages there is a need to go beyond the core curriculum. As Baker (2014) outlined in her article, there is a need to have networking at the top of the list. This is an important skill because it is networking that can create opportunities for jobs and performances.

### **Psychological Effects of Performing**

When it comes to positive and negative feedback for a performing arts student and professional, the effects of performing on the psychological readiness of the performer can be apparent, as “singing can be intimidating: performance anxiety is well documented” (Roland, 1997, as cited by Hughes, 2014, p. 260). Swart (2015) conducted a study on ego boundaries that developed a theory about how these boundaries affect the development of artists.

The cornerstone of the arguments in this article on ego boundary development in artists is the presupposition that, in their socio-emotional and even socio-political roles as communicators in society, artists challenge and stretch established boundaries and norms, and address social issues and questions. (Swart, 2015, p. 693)

Establishing coping mechanisms and understanding in the higher education institution is paramount to overcoming the negative feedback and rejection.

The scenario every performing artist faces to a greater or lesser degree is having to reconcile their experience of their own self and their own art with the opinions, criticisms, interpretations, and even fantasies which are reflected back at them through various forms of feedback. (Swart, 2015, p. 695)

A study conducted by Thomson, Jaque, and Baltz (2016) looked at professional opera singers who were “taught in an integrative and psychologically supportive environment where singers worked musically, dramatically, and physically without fear of criticism” (p. 479). The authors were exploring the psychological impact of performing and career success. As Thomson et al. (2016) stated, “the overarching mission of the program, one that all members of the faculty reinforced within their specific classes, was to empower the singer as an expressive artist and to provide practical tools to augment self-esteem and self-efficacy” (p. 480). The curriculum was developed to see if there was a correlation between success and lack of anxiety when the criticism was taken out of the equation.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is an important theme that appears throughout the literature (Baker, 2014; Cacciotti & Hayton, 2015; Thomson et al., 2016). At some point, there is a responsibility of the vocal studies professional to rely on their own talent, dedication, education, and professional knowledge to help them succeed. As Baker (2014) noted, “Know your music and your language...Your talent got you hired in the first place. Being a colleague will get you back” (para. 28). “Self-esteem is the capacity to view the self as worthy; it is a strong marker for well-being and self-efficacy” (Cook, 2001, as cited in Thomson et al., 2016, p. 480). As Gangi (2014)

mentioned, “processes like consideration of task strategies, self-instruction, time management, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation are essential” (p. 57).

The literature presented by Cacciotti and Hayton (2015) of the Warwick Business School explored the relationship between fear and success as it relates to entrepreneurship. Cacciotti and Hayton (2015) presented the ideology that “further limitations of these studies rest in the conceptual and empirical inconsistencies in the relationship between fear of failure and risk-taking behavior” (p. 170). Exploring this relationship between a performer’s fear of a negative reaction by the audience and their level of risk-taking behavior could prove pivotal in providing the necessary psychological tools to overcome such fear. “An ability to engage in goal-directed behavior to improve the distressing situation is balanced with an ability to recognize and control negative impulses” (Thomson et al., 2016, p. 481).

This ideology goes beyond the entrepreneurial theme and to the vocalist’s fear of rejection. “Each negative emotion involves a specific person–environment relationship that comes together with personal meaning and the appraisal process in the concept of a core relational theme” (Lazarus, 1991, in Cacciotti & Hayton, 2015, p. 167).

### **Self-Promotion**

As social media increases its outreach into business networking, the Department of Labor (2019) identified the importance of utilizing networking skills. Schnipper (2017), owner and executive director of Washington D.C.’s famed Blues Alley who has worked with innumerable jazz performers, agents, and promoters, emphasized this fact. “Never forget that every musician is fundamentally in the communications business and that every successful business is responsible for developing its own clientele” (p. 17).



Further emphasizing this point, Schnipper (2017) stated, “You can be the greatest musician in the world, but if you do not take the time to market, network, and cultivate your audience then you are essentially an artist without a voice” (pp. 17-18). In today’s society, there is a need for additional emphasis on networking and self-promotion required for graduates (Department of Labor, 2019).

### **Technology-based Promotion**

As technology changes, the material that opera singers use to promote their product should also adapt. Schnipper (2017) stated, “Your website should be just another tool in your entrepreneurial toolbox; it should reflect who you are and it also is your link to the outside world—wherever that world may be” (p. 16). Schnipper (2017) did not include a survey to indicate the potential for increased exposure for the artists.

### **Understanding How to Promote One’s Product—Vocal Performance**

Knowledge goes beyond the classroom and the educational institutions and into the professional world (Baker, 2018). For artists, part of learning to promote themselves is “knowing your targeted demographic audience will enable you to further your product to the consumer” (Schnipper, 2017, p. 17). In the literature, “Business of Music 101”, Schnipper (2107) looked at a small sample of what is needed to educate a performer about their patrons. In the United States, the changing economics of government support towards the arts has warranted an adjustment in the way performing institutions are funded. “We no longer possess the infrastructure to transform abject creativity into financial success” (Schnipper, 2017, p. 18). The author inferred that the appropriate topics that professionals need to learn to understand the changing tastes of internal and external stakeholders should be acknowledged and explored. In turn, this would allow the professionals to navigate society’s ever-changing tastes.

### **Need for Entrepreneurial Programming**

Some literature focused solely on artists (Daniel & Daniel, 2015) while others focused solely on business (CCI, 2014). There is a relationship between the two entities (arts and business) that was discovered during the literature review. Both artists and businesses need an entrepreneurial ideology so that their product can be marketed and sold.

Daniel and Daniel (2015), both of James Cook University, conducted a study that focused on a small sample size of participants in a geographically limited area of north-western Australia. The methodology for their study was limited to surveys and was geared towards the kinds of job opportunities that were available or not available for recent arts graduates. What came to the forefront in the literature was the high level of freelance work that arts graduates needed to sustain a living. As time went on, the reliance on freelance work became less as the artists garnered more work experience and navigated the professional world. Daniel and Daniel (2015) concluded, “apart from particular creative skills or knowledge, an understanding of the commercial side of creativity is frequently mentioned, as is a desire to have learnt more about the intricacies of how industry works and operates” (p. 422).

Daniel and Daniel (2015) identified the length of time it took graduates to find employment in the performing arts by noting that the artists transitioning to a full-time career in their chosen field often took well over a year to accomplish. Having the graduates develop an understanding of the inner workings of the professional world was crucial to advancing their careers. Daniel and Daniel (2015) were successful in addressing some gaps from previous studies, noting,

The findings also proposed that in relation to the curriculum where the researchers are based, there is currently an insufficient balance between artistic and non-artistic skills, the

latter involving the capacity to understand, navigate, create and capitalist on industry opportunities and realities. (p. 423)

The literature from Daniel and Daniel (2015) suggested that institutions should look at their curriculum and go beyond just training in the art forms. This was found to possibly help the transition for the students into the professional world. However, there was no suggestion about what types of courses were necessary to aid in the student's development. Developing a well-rounded curriculum would aid the students in acknowledging the societal forces that affect the arts and what is successfully produced. The authors concluded,

The findings here reinforce the notion that higher education institutions offering programs in the creative and performing arts—in both metropolitan and regional—areas should arguably require that students develop capacities to apply various non-arts behaviours and mindsets to their career goals and employment pathways. (Daniel & Daniel, 2015, pp. 423-424)

Støren (2014), a research professor at the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research, and Education, studied entrepreneurship education and whether the skills are innate or learned. The literature determined there needs to be more exploration among graduates in the performing arts to define the need and success of entrepreneurial programming in their institutions. Støren (2014) concluded, “The extent to which entrepreneurship education has effects in terms of providing entrepreneurial skills depends on whether entrepreneurship can be taught and learnt. According to many studies, entrepreneurial skills associated with entrepreneurial behaviour are learnable” (p. 797).

Støren (2014) and Baker (2018) demonstrated the need for understanding the skills that should be acquired for an artist to be innovative and different from others. Learning how to

network is a priority as Baker (2018) stated, “Networking is at the top of the list” (para. 22). There is also the ideology to expand beyond vocal technique only as Støren (2014) mentioned, “one learning outcome of entrepreneurship education is that it promotes entrepreneurial and innovative orientations that go beyond the question of starting one’s own business” (p. 788). Therefore, the entrepreneurial skills can be helpful even if there is no plan to open up a business.

The literature delved into such parameters with reference to the United States, again bringing in the global perspective which is important in today’s economy. Støren (2014) noted, “When controlling such properties, their findings indicate that innovative intentions among USA students are largely affected by taking an entrepreneurial course as well as by specific pedagogical practices concerning assessment, for example, assessments encouraging innovative approaches to problem solving” (p. 799).

With this evidence, the impetus for developing curriculum for higher education performing arts conservatories and music schools would also be present. The study of European graduates conducted by Bjørnali and Støren (2012) demonstrated,

the more a graduate’s study programme emphasized the development of entrepreneurial skills, and the more the HE [higher education] study was characterized by project- and problem-based learning as modes of teaching and learning, the higher the likelihood of the graduates being innovative at work. (p. 4)

Ultimately as Bjørnali and Støren (2012) stated, the performing artists would have a greater chance of innovation.

One aspect of Støren’s (2014) study that relates closely to the performing arts is the results from the students of the master’s in humanities and arts. The data suggested that only 15% of the students took a form of entrepreneurial course (Støren, 2014). The takeaway is that

these higher education programs do not see being innovative and entrepreneurial as an asset to a student's chosen career. In the realm of vocal artists, opera singers conducting a business with their product—their voice—and having to sell this product supports the need to improve entrepreneurial and business skills.

Further exploration of the Bjørnali and Støren (2012) study showed the correlation between the length and depth of a course could fundamentally change the approach to developing the necessary entrepreneurial skills. If the subject matter of entrepreneurial education is folded within another course, it will not have the same effect as if it were a course on its own. An opera singer, unlike a full-time employee, does not have the advantage of being hired by a company for an extended period of time. “The business of music is all about uncovering quantifiable solutions to pragmatic problems. It is also about making more money, at the very least, and about earning a living at the same time” (Schnipper, 2017, p. 16). This means the performer must constantly network with colleagues, maintain and improve their singing technique, learn new roles, and adapt to possible changes in the artistic tastes of society (Baker 2018).

This ideology transcends boundaries among different genres of performing artists. “As an entrepreneur, an artist must develop a constructive business plan that contains elemental forms of one's own personal investment—whether that investment is thought, ideas, or currency” (Schnipper, 2017, p. 16). Educational programming can be developed that would delve into the importance of audience development and how a performer can strategize to bring about success.

### **Higher Education Curriculum**

Looking more in depth into the curriculum of selected higher education institutions that focus on vocal studies for future professional opera singers reveals there is a discrepancy among

programs in the courses that are offered for the graduate degree programs. While educational institutions seek to have graduating students successfully transition to a professional career, the literature identifies the key factors in determining the appropriate curriculum for the students to help prepare them for this transition.

### **Current Curriculum for Vocal Studies**

Four graduate vocal studies programs in various parts of the United States were selected to demonstrate the typical course content in vocal studies master's in music programs.

Institutions identified as Conservatory A, Conservatory B, Music School A, and Music School B were selected for inclusion in this study. The researcher examined the four institutions' curricula through their publicly accessed websites. Each school had developed core vocal studies courses that focus on vocal technique, musicianship, ear training, music theory, movement, acting, vocal performance, and vocal studies. The four institutions had each developed a Master of Music program that is to be completed over a two-year period. A complete list of each school's curriculum is located in Table 1.

Table 1

#### Complete list of each school's curriculum

	Conservatory A		Music School A		Conservatory B		Music School B	
	1 <sup>st</sup> yr	2 <sup>nd</sup> yr	1 <sup>st</sup> yr	2 <sup>nd</sup> yr	1 <sup>st</sup> yr	2 <sup>nd</sup> yr	1 <sup>st</sup> yr	2 <sup>nd</sup> yr
Major Lessons	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Graduate Italian Diction	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X
Graduate English Diction	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	X
Graduate German Diction	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Graduate French Diction	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Advanced Acting	X	X	-	-	X	-	X	X
Movement	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	-
Vocal Studies Seminar	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-
Analysis for Graduate Students	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X

Piano I	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Recitative	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-
Music History & Voice Electives	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-
Ear Training for Graduate Students	X	X	-	-	-	-	X	X
Vocal Physiology and Function	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
Vocal Repertoire	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-
Vocal Performance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
The Entrepreneurial Musician	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	X
Concert Attendance	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-
Jury	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-
Graduation Recital	-	X	-	X	-	X	-	X

At Music School A and B the Master of Music for Voice programs look beyond the standard curriculum that is commonly shared with other vocal studies programs. Faculty collaborate with their business school to incorporate additional skillsets in entrepreneurship. As detailed on one school’s website (2019), “we have created a new instructional area entitled Music Career and Skills Enhancement” (para. 1). The curriculum includes Technology for Musicians, Creative Entrepreneurship, and Business Plan Development to name a few.

Music School B has an Arts Management and Entrepreneurship degree program that “enables musicians, composers, actors, directors, and playwrights to further develop their skills as performers while acquiring the competencies they need to excel as independent artists, reinvent existing cultural organizations and launch their own arts-related enterprises” (School Catalog, 2019, p. 20). This recognition of exploring additional skillsets beyond just the voice is something that is not shared by all the selected institutions.

Neither Conservatory has any mention of additional curriculum such as entrepreneurship or business development beyond the core vocal technique and music theory classes. This is also

true for Conservatory B's voice program (School Website, 2019), where students focus on study to "refine their technique and develop their artistry" (School Catalog, 2019, p. 40).

The common career prospects for graduating vocal studies students are (a) freelance performer, where performers are not employed by one particular company but do multiple auditions to perform a variety of concerts or engagements throughout the year, (b) develop their own projects, collaborating with other artists such as composers, musicians, visual artists, etc., to produce a show, and (c) join as an ensemble member of an opera house where they perform many smaller, introductory roles in reparatory environment.

Previous literature defined *curriculum* as "a process of facilitating better engagement for learning" (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2015). These authors discovered that "the focus of curricula has often shifted from a focus on elements such as knowledge acquisition to, for example, practical application of knowledge and the development of work-related skills" (Brooman et al., 2015, p. 664). This definition of curriculum allows for expansion beyond the core vocal courses to those that can include the development of entrepreneurial and business skills. This study seeks to understand from practitioners what training would be most relevant to their careers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework that supports this study is entrepreneurial bricolage theory as it pertains to arts entrepreneurship. Bricolage is a "theory of production based on an economic state of resource constraint" (Essig, 2015, p. 234). Levi-Strauss (1967) developed this theory to introduce a *making do* ideology when it comes to "tools, skills, and materials at hand" (Levi-Strauss, 1967, as cited by Davidsson, Baker, Senyar, 2017, p. 23) for entrepreneurs. How this relates to performing artists such as opera singers was the case for this study and aimed to fill the



identified gap in research. The literature clearly demonstrated that the career of opera singer is entrepreneurial in nature, yet only half of the programs examined for this study included any entrepreneurial training. This “make do” element to the entrepreneurial bricolage theory in particular referenced those students and graduates who did not have the entrepreneurial skills and knowledge to adapt to the professional world, so they “make do”. Since there was limited empirical research examining the theory in this particular context with professional opera singers, this study provided additional data about entrepreneurial bricolage in the performing arts.

Utilizing the behavioral theory of entrepreneurial bricolage, there was a focus on developing the necessary entrepreneurial skills and business acumen for vocal studies students to guide them through the process of developing key items that allow them to become creative with opportunities that are presented. Baker and Nelson (2005) “developed an integrative definition of bricolage as making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (p. 333). The motivation was the intermediate variable which was most important for students to have access to the knowledge and business skill development to produce projects on their own. There needed to be an understanding that the students may not have the available funds to produce a promotional performance that would gain them exposure to managers, agents, and patrons. Incorporating the entrepreneurial bricolage theory and focusing on its occurrence “in a resource-poor environment” (Essig, 2015, p. 234) might potentially help institutions with understanding how to bring appropriate curriculum into their vocal studies programs.

The researcher identified a gap in literature that pertained to the perceived experiences of vocal studies students who had recently graduated from their respective vocal studies graduate programs. Studies conducted by Daniel and Daniel (2015) and Støren (2014) focused on visual

artists and performing artists of multiple genres respectively. This study focuses solely on vocal studies graduates who desired to become professional opera singers. As cited by Davidsson et al., (2017),

Levi-Strauss also described a more material form of bricolage, portraying the bricoleur as a jack-of-all-trades making do with the tools, skills, and materials at hand. The bricoleur is contrasted with the idealized action of the ‘engineer,’ who obtains and deploys the right inputs for every task (p. 23).

It is important to understand and acknowledge how fear of scarcity, which is fundamentally what bricolage is about in terms of access to resources, applies to vocal studies graduates. As Hayton and Cacciotti (2018) stated, “when entrepreneurs worried about the potential of their idea or their personal ability to develop a successful venture, they tended to be affected more negatively and become less proactive” (p. 4). Incorporating the appropriate curriculum to guide vocal studies students could alleviate or re-channel this fear of scarcity, acknowledging that fear can be used as a motivator. “For entrepreneurs, courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to persist in spite of it” (Hayton and Cacciotti, 2018, p. 2).

### **Conclusion**

The literature demonstrates some of the challenges to becoming a professional opera singer but does not include the voice of those who have lived that transition experience in regard to the educational training that they feel would have best prepared them for their careers. Current curricula in some institutions include both vocal technical and non-technical skills, but that is not common among the four schools reviewed in this literature review. The result of not including both skillsets can be seen as a scarcity of resources (specifically entrepreneurial knowledge and skills) which leaves graduates to make do with the technical resources that were provided. This

may not be enough based on the need for entrepreneurial programming identified in the literature. Furthermore, the theory of entrepreneurial bricolage (or scarcity of resources) supports the purpose of this study, which was to determine if the current core curriculum is sufficient or if there is a need for further curriculum that focuses on the entrepreneurial aspect of the performing arts world, particularly in the vocal arts.

There needs to be a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of vocal studies students and the curricula of master's level vocal studies programs. There would then be an opportunity to address how the administration and faculty might incorporate courses that would extend beyond the standard vocal technique and theory work.

There is extensive information about the psychological aspects of performing, but a literature gap exists about what skillsets are needed to transition to a professional opera career. With the entrepreneurial bricolage as a theoretical framework, the researcher explored which additional courses would be appropriate to supplement the current curriculum at higher education institutions that focus on vocal studies. With Daniel and Daniel (2015) and Støren (2014) having studies in other countries, incorporating their ideologies into the American curriculum will be explored in this study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology for this study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The problem this study addressed was that there was little research available from the vocal studies graduates' perspective that described what skills are needed to establish and sustain their opera singing careers. Research indicated that business and entrepreneurial skills and knowledge may be essential to succeed in their career. Feedback from graduates working as opera singers can be used to redesign curriculum for vocal studies students to help meet their needs for a successful transition to the professional world. The purpose of the study was to determine if the appropriate curriculum has been established for higher education institutions' vocal studies students to transition from a student into a professional and sustain a successful singing career. This study had two research questions that focused on identifying critical information to address the problem and provide potential solutions:

1. What are the key entrepreneurial, marketing, and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that vocal studies graduate students require to successfully transition from academia to the professional world?
2. What is the appropriate higher educational programming in vocal studies that will prepare students to successfully transition to their professional careers?

This phenomenological study explored and examined the experience of vocal studies alumni who had graduated with a master's degree from a higher education institution in the previous ten years and were currently working as professional opera singers. The study sought to establish an understanding of the experiences of each graduate based on their higher education programming and its ability to prepare them for the transition to their careers. It aimed to gain further insight into what entrepreneurial and business skills they discovered were learned or would have been helpful to learn in their vocal studies curriculum.

The researcher used a phenomenological approach to this study that essentially helped “depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) of its participants. In other words, the object was to “describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 44). The researcher addressed the overarching research questions about what the appropriate higher education programming in vocal studies would be that would prepare the students to successfully transition to their professional careers, as well as where there were key entrepreneurial and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that performing artists require to successfully make that transition. It was an important part to identify those factors that opera singers perceived to be the most valuable skills, knowledge, and experience to support a successful career.

The researcher solicited from a large pool of participants to protect the identities of the interview participants. This large pool of potential participants provided a broad set of experiences around the skills needed to transition into the role of opera singer. It was the study’s purpose to discover what courses proved to be most beneficial for the graduates as they embarked on their professional careers and what areas of study they would have like to have completed.

### **Setting of Study**

The setting for this study involved all respondents to the researcher’s survey who graduated from a master’s level vocal studies degree program within the last ten years. The respondents’ perception of their experience in the graduate level program was recorded and analyzed. As the study moved to the semi-structured interviews, participants were selected from a smaller sampling of respondents who consented to the next phase. This determination of stratified sampling was based on whether the higher education institution is either solely a

performing arts conservatory (Conservatory) or is a performing arts program within a university music school (Music School). The key factor in differentiating the institutions from being a Conservatory and a Music School was the access to business and entrepreneurial academic courses within their respective institution.

In the researcher's examination of sample programs, there was a disparity among Conservatories and Music Schools regarding whether entrepreneurial and business skills were introduced to curricula. With those schools associated with regular academic institutions (Music Schools), there were additional opportunities to take courses focusing on areas such as entrepreneurship and business. Those institutions that were solely performing arts conservatories (Conservatory) did not have the opportunity through their curricula to introduce entrepreneurial and/or business courses. All participants in the study earned a Master of Music (MM) in Vocal Performance. The primary focus of Conservatory B according to their online catalog was for their MM program "to develop skilled performers in all areas of vocal techniques and to offer opportunities to perform" (Conservatory B, 2019, para. 1).

The mission at Music School B takes on a different approach that embodies a more entrepreneurial view. It states that Music School B "students imbibe an entrepreneurial outlook and prepare to chart their own course in today's ever-evolving music landscape" (Music School B, 2019, para. 1). This institution has identified that the singer needs more than vocal training, and this was indicated by the implementation of an entrepreneurial curriculum. Music School A also incorporated an entrepreneurial education for their vocal studies students.

### **Participants**

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling which means that this research was "intentionally selecting individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon"

(Creswell 2012, p. 206). The importance of this sampling method was that it identified certain parameters that allowed the researcher to determine appropriate demographics. The demographic for the larger survey questionnaire were graduates from any performing arts school or music school program who are currently working in the field as professional opera singers. With this demographic having been identified, the study focused on what potentially appropriate courses beyond the vocal technique and music theory, such entrepreneurial and/or business courses, might help guide the graduates transition to a successful opera singing career.

Each participant was asked to identify their school to give the researcher a sense of the spectrum of higher education institutions represented in the study. The researcher solicited initial participants through social media (Facebook) and email. There was also contact made with the National Association of Teachers of Singing, which posted the study on their website to help the researcher gather survey participants. Through this approach, there was a hope that snowball recruitment would take effect with the initial participants forwarding the recruitment email or social media post or providing the researcher with potential participant contact information to receive a personal invitation to participate in the study.

The initial survey invitation was sent to vocal studies graduates with no limitation of education institution. Once the surveys had been received electronically, the researcher parsed through the responses and randomly selected in equal number, participants who had attended either a Conservatory or a Music School. This stratified sampling gave the researcher the desired population without divulging the selected schools. From that sample, the researcher again selected a representative sample for follow-up semi-structured interviews.

Survey respondents were invited to participate in the second component, the individual interviews that included a smaller purposeful sampling taken from the survey respondents who

volunteer to also be interviewed. The questions delved deeper into the experience of each graduate with a focus on their perceptions of the entrepreneurial or business skills that they deemed were or would have been important in order to succeed in their field and whether those skills were or were not delivered in the curriculum. Each participant who volunteered and was selected for the interview portion of the study was entered into the drawing for a \$250 Amazon gift card.

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study was gathered through a customized survey instrument and follow-up, individual, semi-structured interviews. The survey was distributed to all identified participants via a link with an invitation to participate. Survey questions (Appendix A) were developed in line with the entrepreneurial bricolage theoretical framework and the skills identified in the literature as necessary for entrepreneurs in the arts in general as well as technical skills. There was a focus on identifying the participants' perception of the skills needed to transition into the workplace. The collected data included descriptive demographic information such as vocal type, the education institution from which the participant graduated, and their current employment. Additionally, they were asked to identify key entrepreneurial and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that performing artists require to successfully transition from academia to the professional world and whether the curriculum they experienced at their respective institution included training in those areas. Each participant completed the survey with responses collected via REDCap that were then sorted and manually coded.

Following the data collection from the survey, the proposed semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B) were further developed from themes that emerged from the answers given by the larger sample of survey respondents. These questions were utilized in the individual



semi-structured interviews with the smaller sample size of participants to help gather more in-depth information. Each interview was recorded with voice recorders and was professionally transcribed. Through the review of transcripts, emerging themes and ideologies were manually coded for future analysis.

The responses to the survey were retrieved from REDCap by the researcher, saved, analyzed, and coded to identify emerging themes. The researcher conducted the survey and follow-up interviews, data collection, coding, and analysis of data. Data was gathered through surveys and, based on those responses, semi-structured interview questions were expanded for more in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of participants. All surveys and interviews were done with full disclosure of the intent of the study and reassurance of confidentiality.

As Creswell (2013) mentioned in his writing regarding data collection procedures, the researcher systematically identified research participants through purposive and stratified sampling methods; gained access and obtained permissions; enhanced the interview questions to further align with the survey results; recorded data on self-designed protocols; and lastly maintained sensitivity to the challenges and ethical issues of gathering information face-to-face (p. 205). These were five key points that the researcher strived to achieve.

### **Analysis**

The collected data was analyzed and coded to gather the necessary information to inform the researcher about possible recommendations. There was further analysis accomplished through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with careful attention to “a skillful demonstration of both patterns of similarity among participants as well as the uniqueness of the individual experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 24).

The collected data was recorded and sorted into emerging themes resulting from the answers to the survey and interview questions. There were no predetermined themes as they were entirely based on the participants' responses. Throughout analysis of data collection, codes were used to sort major themes and ideologies that emerged. The individual interview questions were shaped from this first round of data collection analysis. The researcher utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis as a method to identify themes and codes that surfaced during the survey and semi-structured interviews. IPA "requires an intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts derived from participants" (Smith, 2011, p. 10), which aligned with the data collection that had been identified for this study. IPA had also been chosen as a method of analysis because it included "the most common method of data collection...in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before being subjected to analysis" (Smith, 2011, p. 10), and this study had identified both survey and semi-structured interviews as sources of data collection.

The second round of data analysis took place once the individual interviews had been completed. The researcher had not identified a need for a member check initiated for this study.

### **Participant Rights**

The participants in this study were protected through the implementation of ethical standards that are expected for any study. All responses and participant identities remained confidential to ensure they were able to answer the questions with no repercussions. This was done by removing any individually identifiable data and assigning pseudonyms to interviewees and their alma maters. All data was kept in secure files which were password protected. Each participant was given the right to decline answering any question. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason with no repercussions.

The intent of this study was to provide useful information and recommendations to the institutions regarding appropriate curriculum for vocal studies students studying to be opera singers. Therefore, the information that was gleaned from the participants was presented in this way. The researcher sought to protect the participants from unintended outcomes from their participation in this study. Confidentiality remained in effect for all participants to ensure they feel protected from any potential unforeseen consequences for participating.

### **Potential Limitations of the Study**

Limitations for this study included those from the researcher as well as the participants. The participants were involved on a voluntary basis, so they were permitted to relinquish their participation at any time affecting the overall sample number. While there was every effort to maintain strong ethics while conducting the study, the voluntary nature of the study may have influenced their effectiveness in answering the questions, as well as possibly not answering all questions posed by the survey due to a lack of incentive.

Another limitation was that this researcher is employed by a Conservatory. The researcher was also a performer for over 20 years who successfully transitioned into the administrative side of performing arts organizations. The researcher had transitioned into the academic world with a focus on higher education in the performing arts.

It was important to maintain a code of ethics to ensure no professional or personal bias was incorporated in the data collection. There was a need for bracketing to ensure that personal bias did not creep into the study. It was imperative for the researcher to maintain a self-reflective attitude that allowed for the identification of personal bias. There was an understanding and acknowledgement that the views of the participants could not be manipulated to help formulate an opinion in the study that would be skewed towards the personal bias of the researcher. There

was an acknowledgment and understanding that the researcher maintained a professional protocol while continuously working to prevent personal bias.

An additional limitation was the number of responses that were ultimately received from participants in the initial survey and the number of respondents who volunteered for interviews. There was not a disproportionately high number of responses from one institution compared to others whose graduates had been contacted. Participants who voluntarily selected to be interviewed by the researcher were entered into a drawing for a chance to receive a \$250 Amazon gift card. Even with this incentive, there could have been a low number of responses from the initial survey that were conducted. As participants were alumni of the schools and conservatories and the study focused on asking about their perceptions of their educational experience, there was the potential for personal bias towards their alma mater that might have influenced their responses. It was hoped that because the participants' identities would remain confidential they felt free to answer the questions honestly and without fear of any repercussions.

### **Conclusion**

The methodology and conceptual framework of this study were outlined, align well with the literature, and allowed for an exploration in the identified gap in current research. Utilizing the entrepreneurial bricolage theoretical framework permitted this researcher to gather and analyze the experiences of the participants of this study to deem if the curriculum they studied included the resources needed for their transition to become professional opera singers.

In Chapter 4, the researcher analyzes the participants' responses from the survey and semi-structured interviews. This was done using IPA to examine the responses to the interview questions regarding the perceptions of vocal studies graduates working as professional opera singers. The focus was key entrepreneurial and business skills and knowledge required to

successfully transition from academia to the professional world, and what role these play in their careers. Their perceptions help to identify the appropriate higher education programming in vocal studies programs that would prepare future students for professional opera careers.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study explored the perception of vocal studies alumni about how successfully their respective graduate institution prepared them for their transition from academia to the professional world. There was an absence in previous research pertaining to the perceptions of the alumni about their preparation and evaluating their assessment on how best to improve the current curricula. The theoretical framework for this study used entrepreneurial bricolage theory (Essig, 2015) that focuses on the limited resources of the graduates. This could pertain to financial resources as well as lack of knowledge about the business practices and career development in the professional opera world, overall business and entrepreneurial skills, networking skills, and self-efficacy in terms of maintaining vocal health and vocal technique.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology provided the opportunity to explore and analyze the lived experiences of vocal studies alumni as they commenced and continued their transitions from students to professionals in the professional opera world. This study was designed to give equal voice to a purposeful sample of vocal studies alumni. This study was guided by the research questions:

1. What are the key entrepreneurial, marketing, and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that vocal studies graduate students require to successfully transition from academia to the professional world?
2. What is the appropriate higher educational programming in vocal studies that will prepare students to successfully transition to their professional careers?

Chapter 4 presents the findings from two methods of data collection that were developed with key factors that were identified from the researcher's literature review. The electronic survey (Appendix A) and interview protocols (Appendix B) provided avenues for an in-depth

understanding of how graduate vocal studies alumni perceived their higher educational experience after transitioning to the professional opera world and how that preparation served their careers. Through careful data analysis of the electronic survey and semi-structured interview transcriptions, the researcher was able to identify patterns of responses from participants regarding specific aspects of their learned skills in both the higher education institution and the professional world. The researcher conducted phenomenological reduction by breaking down themes for a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in current curricula. This was accomplished by noting patterns in the way student participants described their perceptions of their higher education experience in graduate level vocal studies.

To gain the appropriate perspective, an electronic survey was sent to vocal studies alumni who graduated within the past 10 years from master's degree programs in either a performing arts conservatory or a university-based music school. The following parameters were included to aide in defining a more limited scope of participants:

- The participant must have graduated with a master's degree from a vocal studies program within the past 10 years.
- The participant must be a professional opera singer.

Participants were asked to identify in what ways their curriculum of study was helpful to their transition from a vocal studies student to a professional opera singer. In addition, participants were asked to identify key entrepreneurial and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that performing artists require to successfully transition into the professional world and whether the curriculum of study they experienced at their respective institution included training in those areas.

The survey garnered 29 responses with 27 falling within the defined criteria. The follow-up semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted by the researcher who contacted 10 of the 15 survey respondents who expressed willingness to participate in the next phase of the study. The researcher chose the potential interviewees based on a cross-section of university music schools and performing arts conservatories. Nine agreed to be interviewed. Each interview took place via telephone at an agreed upon time and was conducted and recorded by the researcher. To maintain the confidentiality of interview participants they were given pseudonyms. It should be noted that no higher education institute or opera house were named in this study. This was done to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Questions for the survey portion of the study were developed based on the researcher's findings from the literature review. Selected questions were then expanded for the interviews to further examine the results of the electronic survey and achieve a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions. While the interviews had a base set of questions, the researcher was able to adjust and ask pertinent follow-up questions in real time during the interviews in response to statements made by the individual interviewees. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) mentioned "the advantage of use of a survey is that it is relatively unobtrusive and is easily administered and managed; however, it can also be limiting in determining complex social relationships or intricate patterns of interaction" (pp. 120-121). Engaging in the one-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to delve into the intricate patterns of interaction associated with the vocal studies alumni and their experiences with faculty and administrators at their respective higher education institution.



## Participants

A cross-section of participants from performing arts conservatories and university affiliated music schools completed the survey. All voice types were represented in this first phase of study. In Table 1, the demographics of the electronic survey population are detailed. The ratio of those participants from performing arts conservatories compared to music schools is 3:1. There were 16 university affiliated music schools and 11 performing arts conservatories represented.

Table 1.

### *Surveyed Vocal Studies Alumni Demographic Information*

<b>Voice Type</b>	<b>Type of Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Current Position as Singer</b>
Soprano	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Performing Arts Conservatory	Teacher/Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Performing Arts Conservatory	Young Artist in U.S. opera company
Soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Music School	Teacher/Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano*	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Music School	Young Artist in U.S. opera company
Soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Mezzo-soprano	Performing Arts Conservatory	Resident singer in European opera company / Freelance singer
Mezzo-soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Mezzo-soprano*	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Mezzo-soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Mezzo-soprano*	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.

Tenor*	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S. / Continuing higher education (DMA)
Tenor*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in Europe and U.S.
Tenor	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Baritone	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S.
Baritone*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Resident singer in European opera company / Freelance singer
Baritone*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S. and Europe
Baritone	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Baritone	Music School	Resident singer in a European opera house / Freelance singer
Bass-baritone*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S. / Teacher
Bass*	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in Europe

\* *Denotes survey participants who participated in interviews*

In Table 2, the demographics of the smaller number of participants from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews are outlined. The ratio of those participants from performing arts conservatories compared to university affiliated music schools is also 3:1.

Table 2.

*Interviewed Vocal Studies Alumni Demographic Information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Voice Type</b>	<b>Type of Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Current Position as Singer</b>
Mary	Soprano	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S.
Christopher	Tenor	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S. / continuing higher education (DMA)
Frank	Bass-baritone	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in U.S. / teacher
David	Baritone	Performing Arts Conservatory	Resident singer in a European opera house / freelance singer in U.S.
Jeffrey	Baritone	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in Europe and U.S.
Susan	Mezzo-soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.
Matthew	Tenor	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in Europe and U.S.
Joshua	Bass	Performing Arts Conservatory	Freelance singer in Europe
Emily	Mezzo-soprano	Music School	Freelance singer in U.S.

As confidentiality was at the forefront of this study, each interviewee was given a pseudonym. Furthermore, each institution was designated either as a performing arts conservatory or university music school so as not to identify the individual institution. The participants were asked: *What higher education institution did you attend?* and *Why did you choose the higher education institution that you graduated from?* Their responses allowed the researcher to determine the classification of their higher education institutions into one of the two aforementioned categories.

What follows below is brief description of each interviewee which includes additional demographic information and highlights their most relevant perceptions from the interview:

### **Mary**

Mary described herself as a soprano who attended a [performing arts conservatory] in New York City. She expressed that her experience at the institution provided opportunities for developing vocal technique through character development, while being exposed to an excellent array of performance opportunities. Mary stated:

These days, it's not enough to sit around and go to auditions and hope that your voice is enough. Knowing how to put together a business plan, how to ask for funding for a show you want to do, how to make an idea come to fruition; these are the things we really need to know. You go into a conservatory or music school with the talent already and yes, cultivating and growing that talent is a must, but we also need to learn how best to modify and sell that talent.

Mary delved further into the institutional culture that was present at her performing arts conservatory. She mentioned that she wanted to switch to a different voice teacher, but it became apparent how difficult it would be. According to Mary:

No one tells you that you might not have work once you've graduated, that you might have vocal issues, that you might lose your joy of singing for a little while, and what to do after these things happen. There are such high demands from [the institution] and from ourselves, and what do you do when you can't lean on that anymore. How do you fill your time with positive and useful ways of spending your time while trying to build an opera career?

The researcher asked Mary about her relationship with her teacher after leaving the performing arts conservatory, “I had some pretty major vocal realizations and have taken the past year and a half to get my voice back on track. I am slowly starting to audition and have a few singing jobs here and there. Living the 'gig' life.”

### **Christopher**

Christopher is a tenor who graduated from a music school in the Midwest. His initial goals for his career were “to be an excellent singer and voice teacher and get paying jobs in those two fields.” Overall, he perceived his higher education as good as he felt prepared “vocally and dramatically” as he entered the professional world.

He is currently a freelance opera singer with engagements lined up in the near future. However, his interest in continuing to teach has him “working on a Doctor of Music (DM) degree at a university affiliated music school” which enables him to “study with my voice teacher while I freelance professionally.” He feels he is on track for his goals by noting:

I have an associate instructorship while I work on my DM. This is a paying job that allows me to teach and perform, and even freelance on the side or audition elsewhere.

Without the vocal instruction I received in my master's, I don't think I would be where I am now.

There is one area that he felt the institution did not properly prepare him for in his transition to a professional opera career, and that was in the area of personal finance. There were few, if any, courses that provided information about how to approach this aspect of a singer's career.

### **Frank**

Frank described himself as a singer and also an administrator. Along with his professional career as a freelance singer, he has created a non-for-profit organization that collaborates with other music professionals. During the interview he mentioned, "It would have been good to understand what it takes to start a non-profit organization. I know that it would not have been something all the students would have been interested in, but it was definitely trial and error."

As a bass-baritone who graduated from a performing arts conservatory, he is currently an operatic soloist, chorister, and voice teacher. He chose to attend his higher education institution because "it had a great reputation and I received a scholarship to cover full-tuition costs." He felt he graduated with the necessary resources by stating, "Yes, in that I had a network of people whom I could continuously reach out to for guidance along the way. No two careers are the same and each path can vary greatly."

He also felt the institution prepared him by "offering the necessary technical skills to be an operatic singer: vocal technique, language facility, musical understanding, professionalism, preparedness, time-management." As the interview moved forward, he noted that ways in which he did not feel prepared were from "a lack of acting/stage-craft training and guidance for the business side of a career as a musician."

Frank's career goals included aspirations that went beyond his skills as a musician. He noted, "I did not necessarily have strict goals of being an operatic singer, because I had interests in education and entrepreneurship." In the course of the interview, he listed important skills that he learned after graduating which included "acting, stage-craft, marketing, self-promotion, entrepreneurship, management, fundraising and development, and budgeting." He wished those topics were taught in addition to the vocal technique classes at his performing arts conservatory. He felt he would have "benefited in that it would have saved me a lot of time searching out the appropriate avenues of knowledge and researching entrepreneurial techniques. There would have been less trial and error."

Even though Frank did not have the exposure to entrepreneurial or business courses at his higher education institution, he still feels on track with his career. Frank mentioned "I have built a career that is diverse and requires a variety of skill-sets. I am financially stable and living a life surrounded by the arts."

### **David**

David graduated from a performing arts conservatory where he was able to successfully transition to an operatic career. He stated, "I had multiple jobs and auditions lined up as a direct result of being a student at the [performing arts conservatory]. I also got my manager while a student there." As a baritone, he is currently engaged in an international freelance singing career while maintaining a position as a resident singer at a major European opera house.

During the interview, David expressed that learning skills that applied to "finances, taxes, and maintaining vocal developments on my own", would have been helpful. However, he did say that he was "set up for success from the institution" because of the various networking, auditioning, and performance opportunities that were presented to him while a graduate student.

The institution gave him valuable resources such as “connections with important conductors, directors, opera management officials, managers, donors, and auditions.”

David chose his institution because of “its prestige, connections, and scholarship” which enabled him to attend tuition free. When speaking about the institution he noted it prepared him for the transition to the professional world stating, “The prestige of the school opened a lot of doors for me.” This enabled him to feel comfortable in the auditions. He felt he was on track for his goals of “an international solo career.”

### **Jeffrey**

Jeffrey is a baritone who graduated from a performing arts conservatory and is currently “a freelance singer in major international opera houses in Europe and the United States.” He was extremely happy with his choice of institution as he went there for his undergraduate degree and did not feel the need to switch schools. He rated his school as 100 percent preparing him for a successful transition to a professional career.

He described the ways in which he felt prepared stating, “The head of the program had many people come in to hear us. This led to management and jobs opportunities for many people.” He elaborated on this by stating, “The head of the program made the school a similar environment to a fest contract, so we would be learning a new role while in production of another role. I have found this training to be very valuable as I have left school.”

Jeffrey’s transition to a professional career was in line with his career goals, “I wanted to start singing right away wherever I could. I also wanted to get signed by an agent.” He recounted, “I was very fortunate and lucky to get signed at the end of my last year of school and begin singing at houses that March before I graduated.”

He mentioned that there “could have had more business courses to go over skills and business of opera.” To that end, he identified certain skills or knowledge that he acquired after graduating:

Promoting myself and how to deal with the ins and outs of the business by being around older singers working alongside them. I am still learning this. I think that is a process that never ends, or rather should never end.

He stated that the courses he found helpful from his institution were:

Mainly centered around things that would directly help in the career: opera history, poetry, the science of acoustics, etc. The most valuable part of the graduate training was performing and the chance to have as much coaching as possible. We also did not really have a set voice faculty which was wonderful.

He was especially complimentary about the institution’s support for allowing the students to “study with whomever they wanted if the head of the department approved and that they could be back in time for rehearsals in the evening.” It gave flexibility and a certain level of comfort knowing that if the voice teacher did not work out, then the student could change to another teacher, just as you would have the opportunity to do in the professional world.

### **Susan**

Susan is a mezzo-soprano, having graduated from a music school that she chose because her “voice teacher was a professor there. We began working together one year before I attended.” Another draw to the institution was that she “was awarded a fellowship that offered generous financial compensation for the duration of [her] master’s.”

At the time of her interview, Susan was an opera singer who considered herself a working professional. She recalled, “I have supported myself thus far solely on operatic/symphonic gigs.”



This is in line with her goals which she explained, “were rather short term. I wanted to be a part of a respected, high level Young Artist program and move to full time professional singer from there.”

Susan felt she was on track to achieve those goals and noted, “I was accepted into a young artist’s program at a major United States opera house one year after graduating from my master’s.” Her institution did prepare her in certain ways for the transition to the professional world. She stated, “I did feel vocally capable of beginning a career in opera. I had several large roles and stage experience under my belt as well as a fleshed-out technique and ability to be my own teacher.”

However, there were certain areas that she felt unprepared. She explained, “at my specific university, we were under-coached, and diction training was lacking. Greater emphasis on language skills would have been useful.” She also noted she did not receive the necessary resources in terms of entrepreneurial or business skills that she said would have made her feel more confident in her career:

I think having the ability to budget your time and money, to be organized with your calendar, to understand American and European tax literature would have helped immensely. Freelance musicians are entrepreneurs and typically go out into the world with no actual business skills.

In addition to the vocal technique training and performance opportunities, Susan felt that courses addressing topics such as “tax prep, networking, and marketing strategy, personal fundraising, decorum, and how to budget without a steady income,” would have been very helpful. These skills were just a few that she needed to learn on her own after graduating. Having to learn “entrepreneurial and self-promotion skills and managing taxes after graduation was a

huge undertaking and something I wish was explained just within some sort of 'business for musicians' class.”

### **Matthew**

Matthew is a fulltime freelance singer who graduated from a performing arts conservatory as a tenor. He said he chose his higher education institution because it provided “continuity with my teachers and coaches from undergrad.” His main goals were to “make a living as a professional singer bridging opera, concerts, musical theatre, recitals, and other projects that take me to the highest level of presenters in North America and abroad.”

As a singer, he felt he was on track for attaining his goals because of “the training and professional connections [he] received in school.” He felt that he graduated with great resources such as, “a network of coaches and teachers, top-level management, connections with companies and administrators around the world leading to immediate debuts in smaller, regional companies and planned debuts with larger houses.” Matthew felt that his institution prepared him with the “ability to learn music quickly and at a level that supported projects with the top conductors, orchestras, directors, and opera houses. An understanding how to begin branding, self-promotion and conduct [himself] in professional settings.”

The ways he felt underprepared by his institution included, “an understanding of international taxes, how to budget for reimbursements that come months later, and professional social media, and promotion obligations.” He described how he would have benefited from entrepreneurial courses stating, “We do need to look at ourselves as small businesses, including budgeting, promotion, hiring assistants, and maintaining many logistics outside of our musical studies. More courses to specifically equip us for these demands would be helpful.” Matthew

also mentioned topics that would have proven helpful in his career as “filing for Limited Liability Company, budgeting, and taxes.”

### **Joshua**

Joshua is a bass who graduated from a performing arts conservatory. He chose this institution because he wanted to “continue studying with [his] teacher and take [his] craft to higher level through the professional training.” He described his occupation as:

A freelance singer in Europe with a full calendar consisting of small roles in big opera houses and more substantial roles in small houses and summer festivals. I am working with composers as a librettist for multiple new operas. I am working with my duo partner to present recitals in Europe and the Middle East and to build our body of repertoire.

Joshua’s described his career goals as, “what I am doing now, but at a higher level. I would like to be singing a few major roles at big houses and carrying on my work in new music and chamber music through better funded channels.” He felt he was on track to reach his ultimate goals “because I feel that I am doing it now on a smaller scale that makes sense for being in my second year out of school.” He has bypassed the young artist program and “recently signed with a major European management company in Europe.” This was a great step for him because “they are looking to my long-term development and understand and are interested in the breadth of my work as a singer, writer, and collaborative artist.”

Joshua perceived that his institution prepared him with the necessary resources. He stated, “I did graduate with the resources and skills I needed. For the most part, I think that was the musical and vocal training from my [performing arts conservatory] for my master’s.” He elaborated on the kinds of resources he received from his institutions, such as “career grants and

the opportunities to connect to high-level performance opportunities [that] are unique facets of the conservatory.”

The performing arts conservatory that he attended “gave great training, the brand name, and the faculty and administration has been supportive and helpful when [I] reached out for guidance or recommendations since graduation.” However, it also lacked resources which Joshua identified:

My master’s [performing arts conservatory’s] Professional Development course for singers was not enough. I did not enroll in other such courses at the [performing arts conservatory], because I felt I had those skills in my toolkit and the idea of working on them, or learning them in a classroom, felt like a misuse of limited time in the institution. My undergraduate [performing arts conservatory’s] Professional Development course was enough, but it was only one semester as a structured course. It was so great that I think it should have been every semester.

### **Emily**

Graduating from a music school, Emily, who is a mezzo-soprano, had no clear reason for choosing her institution. She did not identify if the curriculum, a voice teacher, or reduction in tuition were part of her decision for attending. Her goal was to obtain a position as a young artist in a U.S. based opera company.

Her perception of how her institution prepared her for the professional world appeared more philosophical in nature. She stated:

Learn[ing] how to walk slowly before you run is very important. Even with running, you got to be very careful with the external environment that you simply cannot be in control

of [it]. In conclusion, it's a slow path that you may never feel like you are completely ready for because your expectations get higher.

The knowledge and skills Emily identified that she learned after graduating continued the philosophical theme. “Self-love and the ability to let go. Rejection is a continuous cycle. It means something but not everything”, she said. She expanded upon the non-vocal skills by stating, “It would be very interesting for students who might want to consider doing musically-related business when running low in budgets of going to places for auditions.” This supported her perception in terms of how she felt underprepared by her institution to successfully transition to a professional opera career. She noted a lack in areas such as, “experiences of traveling, going to auditions, rejections, acceptance, and setting positive mindsets.”

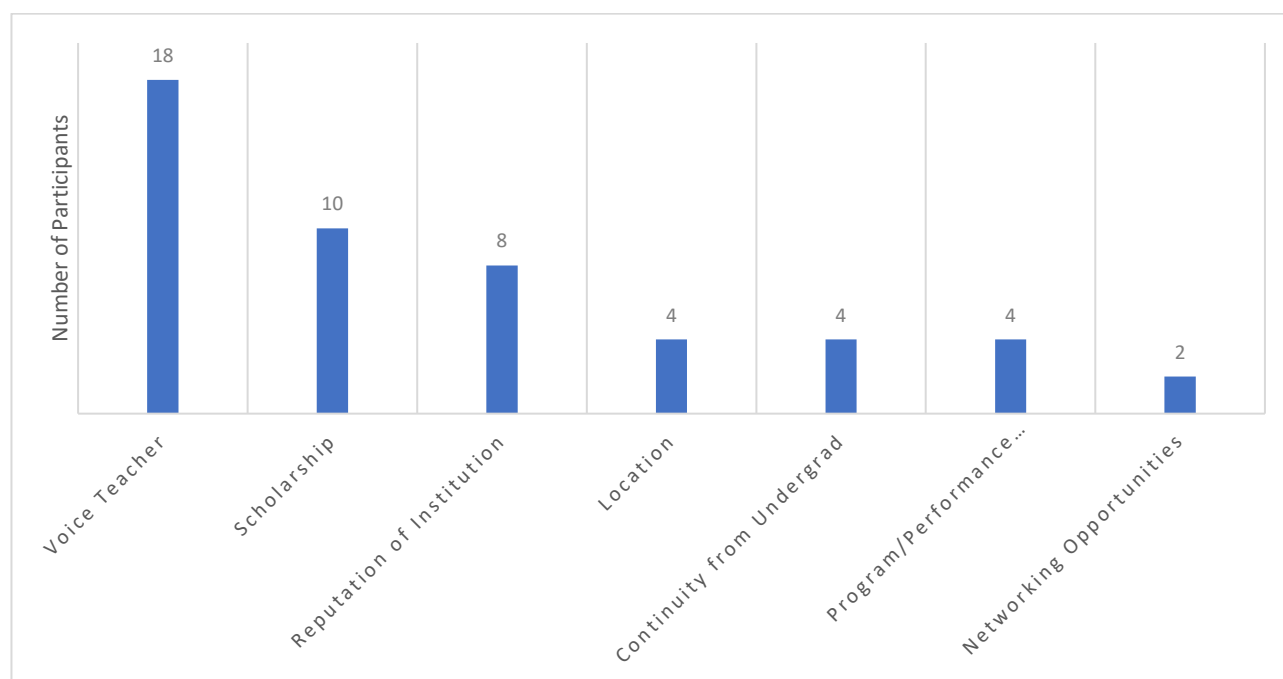
## **Results**

The survey included questions that were meant to identify the higher education institution in order to better understand any differences in student preparation between a university affiliated music school and a performing arts conservatory. This differentiation was predetermined as a key factor in vocal studies education and how the institutions prepared or did not prepare their vocal studies graduate students for a successful transition to professional opera careers.

### **Selection of Higher Education**

The participants were asked to identify the reason or reasons why they chose their respective institution for their master's in music degree. Figure 1 outlines the categories that were defined by survey participants. Eighteen out of the 27 respondents noted that their main reason was because there was a specific voice teacher they wished to train with at the institution they opted to attend. A second reason was a scholarship offered by the institution that would help

to offset the tuition required for the degree. The third distinctive reason was the reputation of the institution, which participants believed would help with their careers upon graduation.

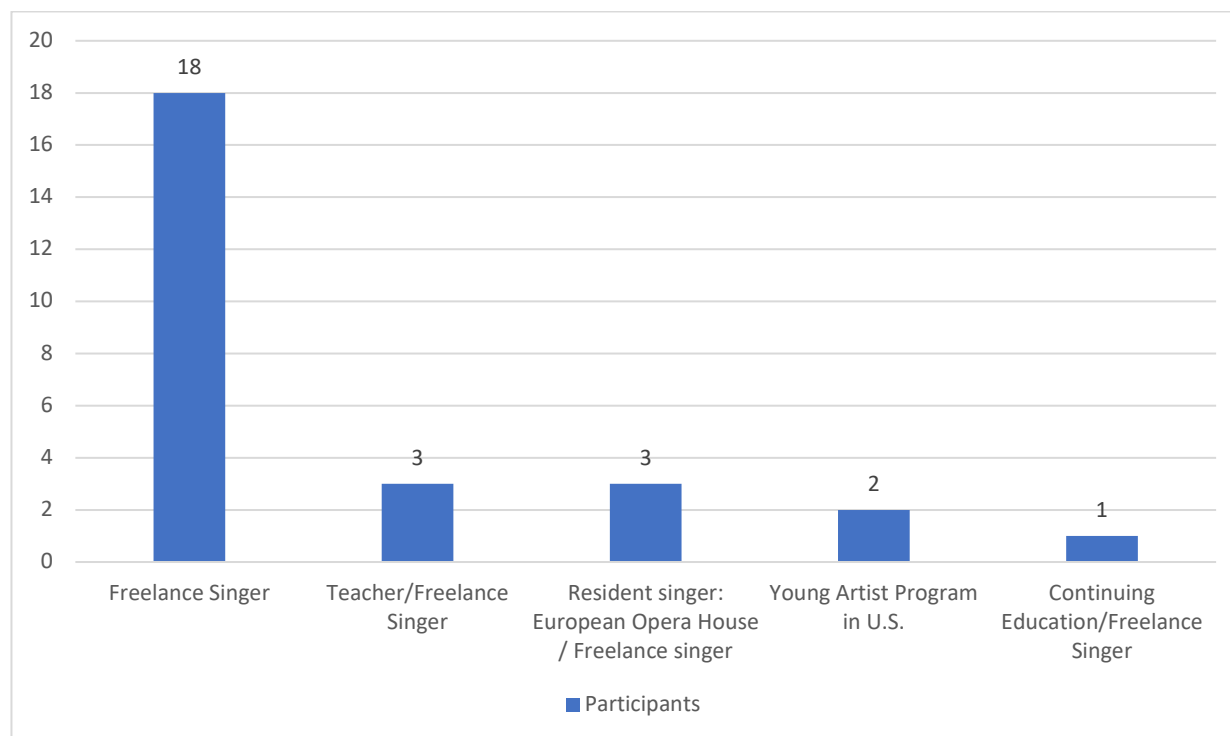


*Figure 1.* Why participants chose their respective institution. Many of the categories defined above by the participants were not chosen as a lone option. Six of those who chose scholarship as a reason also indicated a particular voice teacher was part of their decision.

From the semi-structured interviews, Christopher stated “I liked my teacher” as a draw to attend the program which echoed David’s statement that the “voice teacher was the main draw for choosing the institution” while the curriculum was an afterthought and not a key factor in the decision-making process.

### **Current Occupation**

To understand where the vocal studies alumni were in their career, participants were asked to identify their current occupation. In Figure 2, the participants’ responses are outlined, with most vocal studies alumni identifying as freelance singers. One participant responded as both a freelance singer and teacher while another responded as a freelance singer and continuing their higher education.



*Figure 2. Current Occupation. Each survey participant identified their current occupation as a singer. Some respondents had multiple occupations.*

Overall, 17 of the respondents reported that they were full-time freelance singers. Two participants identified as teachers as well as freelance singers, and one additional freelance singer was also continuing their education to obtain a doctorate in music.

### **Career Goals after Graduation**

Within the survey, the question *What were your career goals when you graduated from the higher education vocal studies program?* developed a differentiation between the traditional trajectory of a vocal studies graduate and alternative trajectories. The traditional trajectory that was identified by participants of the survey and several interviewees followed this basic thought pattern: graduate with a master's degree in music; get into a Young Artist Program (YAP) at an opera company in the United States or become a resident artist in a smaller European opera company; obtain management/agent; then progress to a soloist opera singer in smaller regional opera houses before transitioning to larger, more well-known opera houses. A survey participant

from a music school also identified this trajectory by stating “I had no specific career goals which made it easier for me to explore alternative options rather than the typical operatic path...enter a young artist program, obtain an agent, then become a professional freelance singer.”

It became clear from the survey and interviews that as vocal studies alumni transitioned into their professional careers, they began looking beyond the traditional path towards becoming a professional opera singer as a necessity. A music school survey participant noted:

I only now feel like I'm on track to realize my goals. I went through a fach [pertains to voice classification, i.e. soprano or mezzo-soprano] change and that made all of the difference. I received high-level training at the [music school], but I can attribute my emerging consistent success to my own work ethic and commitment to myself.

The non-traditional trajectory that became increasingly apparent through the data was: graduate with a master's degree in music or vocal studies, continue trying to obtain an agent/manager, and audition for opera companies. This trajectory was identified by Matthew who mentioned, “I went into competitions and did well, then I was able to successfully begin my opera career with roles in smaller opera houses.” He identified that he did not do a Young Artist program. Christopher also took a different trajectory by stating, “I was not accepted into a Young Artist program, so I went to get a higher education degree after my master's. This enabled me to freelance as an opera singer while also continuing my voice lessons and developing my voice.” Mary is also on the non-traditional trajectory and commented, “I am still learning the business side of things.”



In analyzing the perceptions of the participants about where they were in terms of their career goals, it was important to identify what their career goals were when they graduated from their higher education institution. During the data analysis of the responses, a traditional trajectory of master's degree graduates emerged that included entering a Young Artist program, obtaining an agent/management, then performing as an opera singer in opera houses around the world. This trajectory allowed the freelance opera singer to make their livelihood solely from singing. One survey participant felt they were on track for this trajectory by stating, "because I am currently at a Young Artists program, and I am currently auditioning to attend another program and for management." Additional survey participants echoed this by noting, "I am considered successful because I have management and have done Young Artist programs." and "since graduating, I've participated in four different Young Artist programs, have strong global management, and am singing as a guest soloist at A & B level houses."

A second opera career trajectory began to emerge which involved graduating with a master's degree, possibly obtaining an agent/management, then freelancing with smaller jobs such as regular church performances or concerts. During his interview, Joshua noted, "I had aged out of most U.S. programs" meaning that he was too old to participate in traditional Young Artist programs. Therefore he "was not interested in staying in the U.S. as a gig singer." This ideology was also supported by a survey participant who acknowledged:

My goals changed as I became older and realized that there is no traditional trajectory.

My artistry grows and is influenced by life experiences on and off stage. I was not fortunate to be accepted into a program that would afford me the opportunities that I thought I could only get from those institutions, like Young Artist programs or certain competitions. Luckily, I've enjoyed my pace in the operatic world, and continue building

my working relationships in this field. Often times, being hired for a job doesn't always mean you sing the role well, but it could mean that folks liked working with you, they had a vacancy and wanted you to be involved.

It appeared that not being accepted into a Young Artist Program derails the traditional opera career trajectory. In turn, a non-traditional trajectory becomes the only option. It was noted by two respondents, Mary and Susan, that their higher education institutions did not prepare them for a non-traditional career trajectory that bypasses participation in a young artist program. Susan stated, “freelance musicians are entrepreneurs and typically go out into the world with no actual business skills.” Mary echoed this by noting, “the [performing arts conservatory] is a brand of its own. But it’s important to also move beyond it and find new ways forward.” Both participants saw this as major flaw in their higher education learning because there were not provided with the necessary tools from the institutions to reframe their career approach when the traditional trajectory did not fall into place.

As outlined in Figure 3, 25 out of 27 respondents notated that their end goal was to become a professional opera singer. Christopher noted his goal to be a teacher was born out of reexamining his trajectory as a singer, “I have an associate instructorship while I work on my higher education degree. This is a paying job that allows me to teach while still taking voice lessons.”

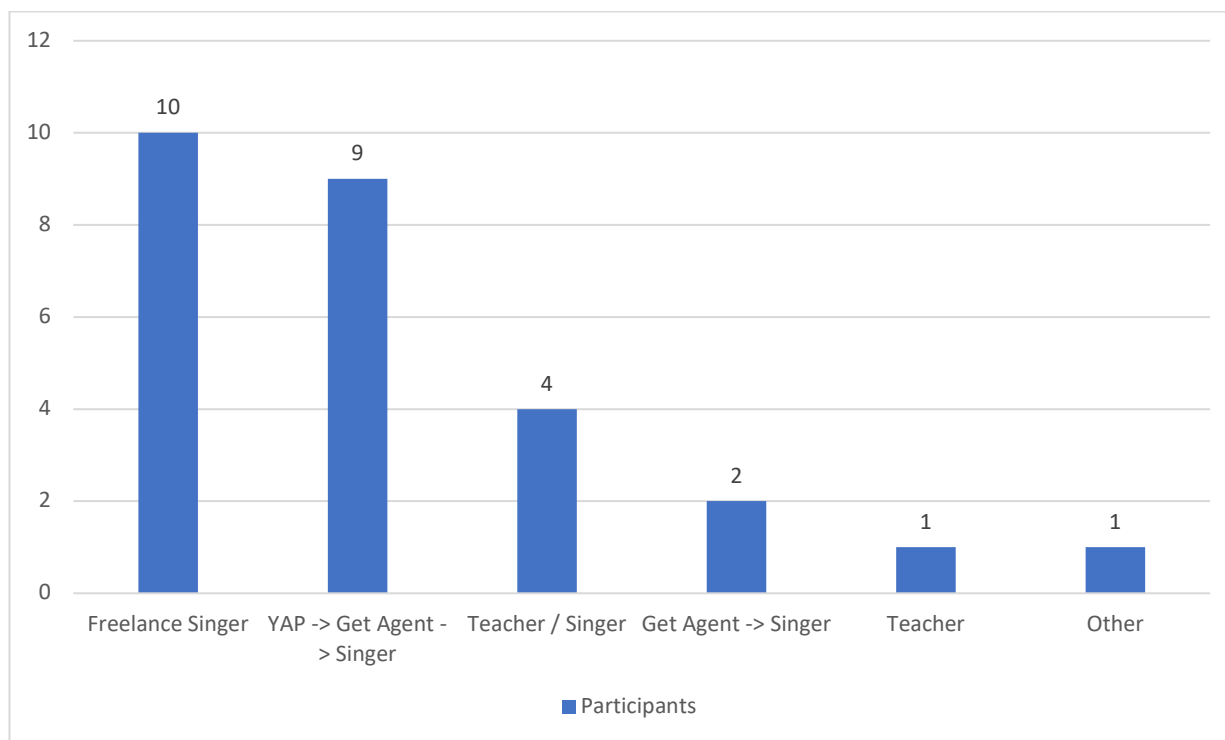


Figure 3. Career goals when graduating of participants from the electronic survey.

A few of the survey participants explained how their goals adjusted as they experienced the business of opera. One participant stated, “As a soprano, I have had trouble marketing myself, and I have had trouble with auditions.” A second respondent was more detailed in their reasons for adjusting their goals:

I realized a few years ago it wasn't going to happen for me. All my coaches in grad school and beyond were great and pushed me, but also said I was ready to be heard and that I would be a great asset. However, I never made it into a Young Artist program before the age of 32, so I had to re-evaluate things. I realized too late that knowing people in the biz was more important.

As graduates moved through the audition and performance processes, they found it necessary to supplement their income due to a lack of continuous work. This was noted by four participants from Figure 3 who responded as *Teacher/Singer*. As the survey participants began teaching, they found it fulfilling and realized their main goal of becoming an opera singer

became either equal or less than their new goal of becoming a voice teacher.

This study focused on the transition for vocal studies students from academia to the professional world, and as such, a question was posed to the participants about how they felt about being on track to realizing their career goals. Of the 27 survey respondents, 21 responded *yes*, indicating they were on track, and six *no*, indicating they were not on track.

As the researcher explored in more detail the responses provided by the participants regarding if they were on track to realize their goals against their current occupation, it became even more apparent that there was a traditional and non-traditional trajectory for singers. As one respondent noted, “my goals changed as I became older and I realized that there is no traditional trajectory.” For those singers who reported being on track, they had obtained a position in a Young Artist Program or were able to land roles in opera houses in the United States, Canada, or Europe.

The survey responses pertaining to this question revealed a plethora of reasons why vocal studies alumni perceived if they were on track to reach their goals or not. The reasons ranged from a singer’s voice not being ready but acknowledging being on track with its development, to indicating a reliance on the institution’s reputation to open doors for auditions but not being able to take the final step to be hired for a role.

**Participants on track with career goals.** A survey participant from a performing arts conservatory mentioned that “bigger voices take time to mature, and I’m content to take my path slowly and carefully.” This correlates with self-efficacy of the voice, understanding the natural limitations of one’s voice, and acknowledging that every career trajectory is different. One important note was given by a survey participant from a music school who said, “I have been able to support myself by singing alone for the past few years.” Even though there was no

elaboration about the singer's transition, the singer identified being a freelance singer who had diversified their repertoire beyond just opera jobs to include new music and recital work to sustain themselves professionally. This diversification can be applied to the objective definition of success.

A survey participant from a performing arts conservatory stated, "during the final year of my singer's academic schooling, I was able to sign a fest contract with a European opera house which brought steady income, provided job security and opportunities to hone my voice and acting skills." While this participant did not begin a career with a Young Artist Program, the institution was able to assist with networking and audition opportunities, which the vocal studies student made the most of by landing the contract. This is a valuable resource because it creates a strong foundation for networking with important stakeholders in the professional opera world.

An additional participant from a performing arts conservatory stated that they are at the beginning of the "traditional trajectory because I am currently in a Young Artists Program and in the process of obtaining a manager."

**Participants not on track with career goals.** Multiple performing arts conservatory and music school participants from the survey admitted that they relied quite heavily on the reputation of the institution to further their careers once they graduated. There were eight survey participants who mentioned their institution's name and brand recognition as the reason for choosing to go there. As one respondent stated, "I chose the [performing arts conservatory] because I wanted to learn from professors who are considered the best of the best." It was acknowledged that the name of their higher education institution created opportunities to audition for opera companies and managers, such as noted by a survey participant who stated, "I wanted a bigger name on my resume because I went to a small state school for my

undergraduate. Students from the performing arts conservatory seemed to be getting on well with their careers and moving up in their fields”, but it did not guarantee them jobs. As noted by a survey participant, “I think most of these graduate programs try to funnel us into year-long Young Artist programs as if that's the only possible next step. I don't think my program prepared me for what the field is like if you choose not to take that route.”

One survey participant from a music school commented:

My goals changed as I got older and realized there is no traditional trajectory. I was not fortunate to be accepted into a program that would afford me the opportunities that I thought I could only get from those institutions, like young artist programs or certain competitions.

There was one participant from a music school who was not able to provide a black and white answer of yes or no. This survey respondent stated:

It is not a complete yes or no. I do not currently make a living just singing. I teach private voice and piano to fund my auditions. However, this is my first year with management and my first real audition season as a professional artist.

This participant identified that the timeline from graduation is potentially different for each vocal studies graduate. There are those who can obtain management before or shortly after graduating, while there are those who might take longer to achieve the traditional trajectory, if at all. One performing arts conservatory survey participant expanded on this notion by stating:

I feel they prepared us well for Young Artist programs, but not really for the actual career. I didn't feel prepared for how a freelancing life looks. I didn't know how to budget for lessons and coachings or which competitions to apply for or which grants to apply for to help with the costs.

Follow-up questions were asked of those who participated in the one-on-one semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of what appears to be traditional and non-traditional trajectories. Four out of nine of those interviewed mentioned they were on track for their goals, and the traditional trajectory was more apparent in their responses. Pointed out by a survey participant who felt they were on track for their goals, “I was accepted into an established opera studio program in Germany, which means a year long, monthly salary.” The opera studio in the European model can be viewed as equivalent to a Young Artist program in the United States.

Upon reflection, there was an acknowledgement by participants that not having business or entrepreneurial courses proved to be a detriment to helping them successfully transition to the opera world. As one survey participant noted:

As a soprano, I have had trouble marketing myself, and I have had trouble with auditions. There was no entrepreneurial class for graduate students. I believe there was a class mainly for undergraduates that focused on creating a resume, and so forth. There also was not detailed and technical instruction for acting and audition techniques.

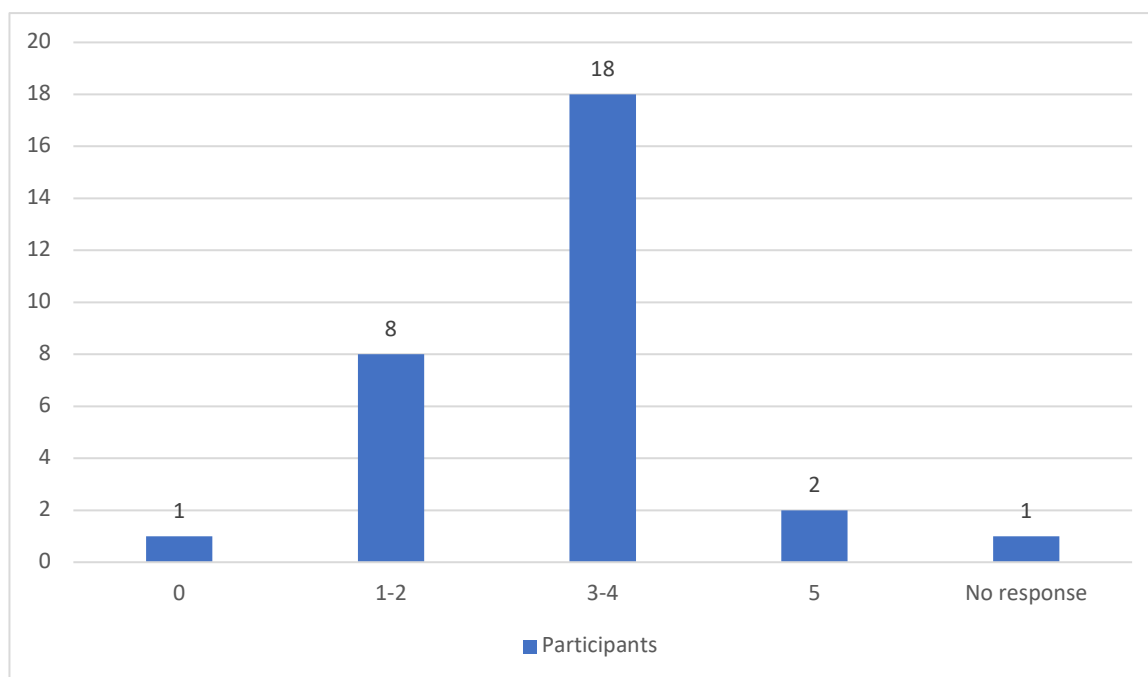
This lack was also echoed by an interview participant who expressed that they were not taught how to look ahead and develop a plan to maintain and build on the success that was being achieved in the school and transition it to the professional world. Mary recalled:

You are taught to believe you are the real deal, and maybe you are, and you've worked hard and made it to the other side of some crazy last-minute shows, live-streamed masterclasses, and main stage performances, all being well executed and remaining poised and confident. But then you leave this school where you have learned so much and had so many amazing opportunities and feel like you can do anything and you start

auditioning and start hearing some weird vocal things that used to not happen and you realize that you were so focused on what was going on in that building [the performances specifically], that you lost focus on yourself and what you need to be healthy. How do you become as successful in the real world as you were in school?

### **Institutional Preparation for the Transition**

Figure 4 shows the overall results to the question from the survey about how well participants thought their institutions prepared them for the transition to a performing career as an opera singer. This question established the perception that vocal studies alumni have about how their higher education institutions prepared them for their transition to the professional opera world.



*Figure 4.* Student perceptions about how well their institutions prepared them for a transition to the professional opera world. Participants were asked on a scale of 0-5, with zero being the least prepared, and five being the most prepared.



Twenty out of the 27 participants were happy with the curriculum at their higher education institution. As Jeffrey stated:

I could not be happier with how my institution prepared me for the transition to the professional world. The administration developed a great relationship with the local opera company. We were encouraged to audition and take roles with this company which expanded our networking and gave us professional performing opportunities.

The researcher's earlier review of the curriculum revealed that with the master's in music degree, the focus is primarily on building and maintaining a strong vocal technique along with performing opportunities and character development. Each participant became more confident in their vocal ability and this translated into their improved performing and auditioning skills.

Two participants from the survey rated their performing arts conservatory at five out of five, acknowledging they felt prepared as they transitioned to the professional world. One participant rated their music school at zero, not prepared at all for the transition. The ways in which the participants felt most prepared were in vocal technique, role preparation, and brand/institution recognition which helped open doors for the audition process.

Jeffrey, a graduate from a performing arts conservatory, felt completely prepared by his institution to make the transition to the professional world:

The administration creates an educational culture that develops a sense of independence for the students which is similar to what they will encounter in the professional world...

Each student is able to decide who their voice teacher will be, and they do not need to be in the school.

However, this notion was not felt by all the participants. This was because not all institutions provide students with the option to choose a voice teacher outside of institutional faculty. Voice

teachers are often within the institution and each student is assigned to a teacher for their entire time. Mary expanded on this notion:

It is difficult to switch voice teachers because of the politics involved and the perception given by administration that it is in a singer's best interest to stay with their current teacher to maintain a status quo.

There were three main reasons that participants felt their institution prepared them for a successful transition: (a) abundance of performing opportunities; (b) high quality of voice training; and (c) large amount of audition opportunities with agents, managers, and artistic administrators of opera companies. It should be noted that all participants said they received an abundance of performing opportunities by their institutions. It was also mentioned by all respondents that the faculty provided a strong foundation of vocal technique and character development. And finally, all participants noted that as the audition season approached, the administration were able to create exposure to agents, management, and artistic staff of opera companies for the students.

On the other hand, there were areas addressed by the survey and interview participants where they felt their institutions did not prepare them for a successful transition. Christopher, from the interviews, stated, "personal finance was something that was lacking from my curriculum at my institution." This was echoed by Jeffrey who mentioned, "seminars were offered but did not go into enough depth where they were helpful." Mary expanded on this by stating, "I did not have an understanding about how to approach the business side of my opera career." One survey participant expanded upon this by acknowledging that the industry of opera has changed over time stating, "The reality that opera is not what it used to be 50 years ago and we have to be [vocally] trained to work with opera in the 21st century."

There appeared to be a general lack of knowledge as it pertained to marketing/branding oneself in the opera industry as supported by Matthew from a performing arts conservatory who stated, “understanding business acumen were skills acquired after graduating.” This was echoed by Susan who mentioned “the school did not provide a firm understanding of these topics nor did they help to develop the skills associated with them.”

While it appeared that all the institutions offered various levels of business seminars, participants noted how they were not expansive enough to make a difference in terms of the students being able to apply the content to the professional world. Christopher stated that “the music school scheduled seminars were touch points with very basic information and were not overly helpful in terms of its usefulness.” This was echoed by a performing arts conservatory survey participant, “The courses were absolutely not enough. They had business professionals who had been out of the field for a while or had outdated knowledge who gave us instruction.”

### **Graduated with the Resources to Successfully Launch Career**

Participants were asked if their institutions prepared them to successfully launch a career as an opera singer after graduation. Sixteen out of 27 (59%) respondents said they perceived they graduated with the necessary resources.

Of those that responded *no*, the overarching reason was the institutions not having a strong emphasis on skills or knowledge beyond the vocal technique and performance opportunities. The vocal studies alumni in both the survey and interviews were appreciative of the opportunities to learn the business side of their opera career but felt the seminars did not delve deep enough to provide substantive knowledge that would have benefited them in their professional life. As one music school survey participant noted:

We had a great, short one-class period seminar on business (such as taxes), but that gap desperately needs to be filled with a Schedule C/1099 employee taxes course, a business skills course, grant-writing course, non-profit networking, and so forth.

**Resources that prepared students for an opera career.** From the survey, multiple participants from one performing arts conservatory mentioned there were plenty of opportunities to connect with agents and managers, along with opera companies that came to the institution to hold auditions for students. This created a strong foundation of networking and connecting for the vocal studies students who would then be able to maintain a relationship if they chose to do so. One performing arts conservatory survey participant noted, “a network of coaches and teachers, top-level management, connections with companies and administrators around the world leading to immediate debuts in smaller, regional companies and planned debuts with larger houses.” This was echoed by another survey respondent who stated, “yes, in that I had a network of people with whom I could continuously reach out to for guidance along the way. No two careers are the same and each path can vary greatly.”

**Vocal training and performance opportunities.** A survey participant mentioned:

At our [performing arts conservatory], we were required to take a specific course on becoming an entrepreneurial musician. This class was designed to talk about the business of opera with subtopics that included budgeting, making it in the field, and creativity all in order to help achieve being a full-time musician.

This was further collaborated by a survey participant, “Our [performing arts conservatory] offered resources about ‘how to do one’s taxes’ along with strengthening one’s vocal technique and developing one’s artistry.” This resource was not offered in depth by all institutions and remained one of the key areas where vocal studies alumni felt unprepared once they graduated.

Overall, the participants felt prepared for their career as performers. A music school survey participant explained, “I felt prepared because I was confident in my ability as a singer and a teacher. I gained a pretty solid technique and a solid education in pedagogy.” However, they did not feel prepared with regard to their business or entrepreneurial skills.

### **How Institutions Should Prepare Students**

A major focus of the study pertained to how successfully the institutions prepared the vocal studies students for their potential careers in opera. The question: *How well do you think the institution prepared you for the transition to a performing career as an opera singer?* was posed to the survey participants to obtain their perception. A participant from one performing arts conservatory mentioned that the institution focused on getting students into a Young Artist Program but really nothing else. “I don’t think the program prepared me for what the field is like if you choose not to take that route.” An additional survey respondent from a music school mentioned “I had no idea what to do next aside from audition for summer programs and YAPs.” As noted by two performing arts conservatory survey respondents, “tax and financial planning could have been clearer,” and “I feel they prepared us well for Young Artists programs, but not really for the actual career.” And finally, a survey respondent from a performing arts conservatory stated, “little to no understanding of how the opera business works in Europe.” This alludes to the tax and financial planning needs that were expressed by other participants. Matthew spoke about how difficult it was to be a freelancer and receive multiple tax forms from multiple countries in multiple languages. He mentioned, “not knowing where to start in terms of filing taxes as a freelance singer is proving to be difficult. I spend most of my free time figuring out the business side of the opera world.”

Expanding upon what non-technical skills would serve vocal studies alumni in their transition from student to professional, even those whose institutions offered some training in these areas reflected on whether those entrepreneurial and business courses were enough. A performing arts conservatory survey participant stated: “the courses were absolutely not enough. They had business professionals who had been out of the field for a while or had outdated knowledge who gave us instruction.” This was echoed by a fellow vocal studies alumnus from the same performing arts conservatory, Joshua, who expanded upon this mentioning “mixing concrete skills and resources with overarching questions about defining ones creative and artistic focus.”

In reference to additional business or entrepreneurial courses, Susan stated:

We had a great, short one-class period seminar on business (such as taxes), but that gap desperately needs to be filled with a Schedule C/1099 employee taxes course, a business skills course, grant-writing course, non-profit networking, etc. As we explore the options for adding certain topics to the vocal studies curricula, having the accessibility to develop a more in-depth course about the business side of professional opera would be an integral part of creating that strong foundation.

An additional survey respondent supported Susan’s statement, “we didn't have those classes but would have been VERY helpful.”

### **Lack of Training and What is Needed for a Successful Career**

Music school respondents from the survey noted the following resources that were lacking which they perceived as important in their professional careers. One participant noted, “practical [not academic, there was a difference] experience, common knowledge of what's expected/industry standards (i.e. when attending an audition, how to dress, how a resume should

look, how to appropriately choose rep to get a job, and so forth).” This was further echoed by a music school survey respondent, “I had no training on small business, entrepreneurship, fundraising, marketing, or any of the other essential skills other than singing and acting and movement. I've had to learn to become a businessperson on my own.”

A music school survey participant stated the need for certain topics to be taught because of his or her professional experiences. The survey participant noted:

The faculty at my [music school] did not help to set up their Master’s in Music graduates for success. There were hardly any suggestions of what to do next. Everyone thinks it is a linear path of undergraduate degree, master's degree, possible artist diploma, YAP [Young Adult programs] after YAP until you get an agent or start being offered roles regularly. We need resources for how to create our own path: networking skills, marketing skills (websites and recordings), entrepreneurship skills (creating your own opportunities like recitals or other self-produced shows).

This note is of interest to the researcher because it once again highlights the traditional and non-traditional trajectory that vocal studies alumni experience. What it also highlights is how the curricula of the higher education institutions do not account for the non-traditional trajectory. As Susan mentioned:

At our [music school], we were not educated at all about how to make the transition from student to opera singer. We were only told “it will be hard”. We didn't receive any training in terms of budgeting, how to get management, how to create a social media profile, or how to network and build a team.

The following section will discuss what non-vocal skills might be needed to successfully transition from academia to a professional opera singer. Participants were asked to report

whether they had training to develop their skills and/or knowledge in a series of entrepreneurial areas including marketing, self-promotion, networking, entrepreneurship, management, fundraising and development, creative problem solving, strategic thinking, budgeting. They were also asked to evaluate the usefulness of the skills and/or knowledge training they received on a 5-point scale: 5 being *most useful*, 4 being *more useful*, 3 being *neutral*, 2 being *less useful*, and 1 being *least useful* in their professional career.

**Marketing.** It was expressed by 12 (44%) survey participants that learning skills associated with marketing would have been most useful in their career. As one performing arts conservatory participant stated, “I picked them up [marketing skills] along the way afterwards in nonprofit opera companies and starting my own business.” In terms of marketing or branding oneself as a singer, interviewee Emily from a music school, stated it is important to “be able to write about yourself like a product that you want to promote to the world.” This was echoed by Jeffrey who stated that “using social media has been the most successful form of promoting their voice and career.” There is something to be said for keeping an individual’s activities up to date on social media platforms. Two other interviewees, Frank and Matthew, both from the same performing arts conservatory, stated that websites do not actually prove to be helpful in terms of networking or auditioning. They found that social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were more successful in promoting their work than a website.

**Self-Promotion.** Three of the interview participants expressed the importance of understanding how the business of opera works and therefore understanding how one can self-promote their voice to obtain work. Susan mentioned, “while talking with artistic administration of an opera company it helped to bring the conversation to a different level and show how vested you are as an artist in the business.” Susan further stated that in order to maintain a constant



social media presence, she needs to “make sure her website is constantly up to date with her schedule and reviews in order to maintain a presence.” However, Susan was not given the tools to set up or develop a website from her university music school. Those skills were developed on her own after graduation. This was echoed by Jeffrey who stated, “because as an artist it is important to understand the business you are in and this will inevitably help promote yourself as a singer.” Emily, from a university music school who participated in the interviews, stated, “I never learned how to promote myself until a summer program offered me an opportunity.” Emily did not have the opportunity to take classes in entrepreneurship or marketing and mentioned “I do feel like I know so little about the marketing side of this industry.” This was echoed by Mary who stated that she “found it difficult to know the next step to promote her voice in the opera world”.

Multiple participants from another performing arts conservatory commented in the survey that they are “still learning how to network” and this was echoed by a performing arts conservatory survey participant who stated, “all I learned about branding I learned in Young Artist programs, not school.”

**Networking.** All institutions brought administrators from opera companies to audition their students along with agents and managers prior to students graduating. The institutions opened the door for the students, and it was up to the students to present themselves and try to land the job or representation.

Susan stated that her “networking is closely related to how they interact with the professionals, both singers and administrative staff of the opera companies who employ them.” In addition, there are networking skills that she must rely on when she is conversing with board members who can be an integral part of progressing her career. Susan was adamant about the

importance of keeping her website up to date to continue promoting herself and giving necessary information to the administrators of opera companies.

Joshua made an interesting statement about networking saying that “networking and ideas of strategy have always been closely linked.” The overall strategy of networking is shared by Mary who stated that she had received small singing jobs due to her ability to be proactive with members of her audience.

During his interview, Christopher echoed the importance of developing a professional working relationship with the opera companies where a singer performs. Mary also mentioned how “networking has contributed to performance jobs that came from word of mouth.” Performing well, which goes back to self-efficacy and confidence in one’s talent, can be beneficial in promoting one’s voice. If an audience enjoys your work, producers of the performance will keep a performer in mind for future events.

At least one survey participant acknowledged that networking was a topic that was not addressed in their institution. This participant from a performing arts conservatory stated “Networking is the biggest void in my education. How do you get someone to vouch for you? I still don’t know. I can sing the house down, but I don’t know how to network.” It was also echoed by Christopher from a music school who stated that not knowing how to network made it difficult to expand exposure to job opportunities.

**Entrepreneurship.** Overall, there was little to no entrepreneurial programming that was offered at any of the institutions, according to survey and interview participants. The participants provided mixed opinions in terms of the importance of entrepreneurship. Frank, an interview respondent, stated:

The entrepreneurial courses would have been helpful for me since I was looking to start a non-profit organization. Learning and understanding how to apply for a 501c (3) would have been a tremendous help. However, for those who are not interested in starting their own non-profit, entrepreneurial courses may not prove as beneficial.

This was a common theme that emerged during both the survey and the interviews regarding the extent entrepreneurial courses were important to the needs of singers transitioning to a professional career. Christopher stated, “I don’t think it would have been helpful for me in my master’s program to learn about more specific entrepreneurial skills because my focus was on singing and teaching. Perhaps something more in line with business skills would have been better.”

Those participants who scored their institution highly made the connection about how, in addition to the strong foundation of education and vocal technique, their school created an institutional culture that they could apply to a career once they graduated. One survey participant from a performing arts conservatory stated:

The institution I attended was centered around a learn-by-doing approach. I was released to work in real-world situations while still at school where I picked up how to do things like self-promotion, network, etc. I still hold this approach critical to the main benefit of my education.

There was an understanding from these participants that tools such as networking were addressed by their institutions.

What did seem to be unanimously important, but missing across the board in both the survey and interview responses, was the business side of the profession. Matthew mentioned:

There was no introduction to taxes, contracts or contract negotiations, or production vocabulary that would have proven beneficial as a base of knowledge...how to deal with taxes from four different countries which also meant taxes in four different language.

**Management.** Twenty-two out of 27 respondents noted they had excellent access to managers at their respective institutions. However, understanding the manager's role in the opera business was not explained to help guide the students. As one music school participant noted, "Connections with important conductors, directors, opera management officials [were made]", but as another performing arts conservatory stated:

A faculty member also brought in managers for one session. While I appreciate that she thought of this, I didn't get much out of it. It would have been more helpful for the prior session to be used to prep us. Give us ideas of what questions to ask, what exactly the relationship is between singer and agent, etc.

This strongly implies the need for a deeper conversation about how managers work with singers in the professional opera business.

**Fundraising and development/creative problem solving/strategic thinking.** The researcher sorted these three together because it was noted through two of the interviews that these skills related more to creating a business, such as a non-profit company, rather than to the career development of freelance singers. When asked if knowledge in these areas would have helped him in his professional career, Frank noted that it would have "saved me a lot of time searching out the appropriate avenues of knowledge and researching entrepreneurial techniques. There would have been less trial and error." He expanded on this line of thought by stating, "Fundraising and development" would have proven beneficial to learn during his higher education. In support of Frank's response, Joshua stated in his interview:

I think the barrier to entrepreneurship is that we end up spending the lion's share of our energy on staying in the game professionally, staying afloat (rent, insurance, et cetera), and the resources (foundations, grants, et cetera) that support this type of work generally support project costs, but not artist fees or artist livelihoods.

While the fundraising and development courses might have proven helpful, creative problem solving and strategic thinking skills should also be viewed as important components of the vocal studies curricula. One performing arts conservatory survey participant stated, "I was able to hone my creative and strategic thinking skills not through any explicit instruction but through having to navigate the near-impossible expectations of the institution." This student's experience denoted how the higher institution did not incorporate creative problem solving and strategic thinking skill development into their vocal studies program.

**Budgeting.** Only 10 out of the 27 survey respondents and eight out of nine interview participants noted this as a more useful skill and would have liked it included in their master's degree programs. As noted by two survey participants in their responses, "Budgeting would have been very helpful." and "We do need to look at ourselves as small businesses, including budgeting." During the interviews, this skill became one that professional freelance singers increasingly relied upon when approaching their careers, especially during times between performance contracts. As Matthew mentioned, "it is important to know how to budget your finances as well as your time." Susan echoed this by stating, "we needed to learn how make money through the times of unemployment."

Three of the survey respondents who did not respond how important this skill was in their career were freelance singers who had transitioned into professional careers with management and contracted singing engagements in the near future.

## **Psychological Effect of Performing**

The psychological effect of performing results were obtained from three different questions: *1. Do you believe you graduated with the resources you needed to successfully launch a career as an opera singer? 2. Briefly describe the ways in which you felt prepared for your professional career when you graduated. 3. How well do you think the institution prepared you for the transition to a performing career as an opera singer?* Survey participants provided responses to the preceding questions that could be analyzed and applied to the psychological effects of performing.

Participants in both the survey and the interviews were confident in their approach to performing. Multiple survey and interview participants mentioned that, with a master's degree in music, there is an increased focus in performance opportunities and character development that enable a foundation of confidence to be built in one's performance abilities. As one music school participant mentioned, "I did feel vocally capable of beginning a career in opera. I had several large roles and stage experience under my belt as well as a fleshed-out technique." Another survey participant from a performing arts conservatory stated, "I can put on a show very well. I know how to move and embody a character," which allows for confidence while performing. Additionally, interview participant Mary stated, "I felt confident walking onto stage and performing."

Also at play for a performing artist is the psychological factor of rejection and how an artist responds to it. As a survey respondent from a university music school stated, "rejection is a continuous cycle." Another survey participant from a performing arts conservatory commented "fellow students felt very confident and assured that they would make it, and they felt totally crushed by the reality of the hustle and the grind" that includes constant auditioning for opera

jobs and the rejection of not getting many of them. Interviewee Emily from a university music school stated “you almost always feel very hopeful and confident. As you get to know the industry, you will realize that luck doesn’t come to those who aren’t ready.” The audition process for freelance singers potentially contains rejection and it is how the artist is set up to handle it that will guide the psychological outcome.

### **Self-efficacy in Vocal Performance**

Self-efficacy in vocal performance was determined from two questions: *1. What topics beyond the vocal technique training would have proven beneficial for your professional career?* *2. How well do you think the institution prepared you for the transition to a performing career as an opera singer?* These questions enabled the researcher to understand from the survey participants how and if the institutions were able to provide a foundation of study where the students were able to continue their vocal technique and artistic development beyond the confines of the higher education institution.

One performing arts conservatory has developed an institutional culture and ideology that promotes self-efficacy from the beginning of a vocal studies student’s master’s degree program in music. Each student has the ability to choose a voice teacher for the duration of their program, even if they are not affiliated with the higher education institution. This ideology helps to prepare the students to take their own comfort level and vocal needs into account which is in a similar vein to the professional world. As Jeffrey mentioned, “The head of the program had many people come in to hear us. This led to management and jobs opportunities for many people.” This statement was corroborated by David who said the institution curated “connections with important conductors, directors, opera management officials, managers, donors, and auditions.” This resulted in him having “multiple jobs and auditions lined up as a direct result of being a

student at the institution. I also got my manager while a student there.” Both alumni were able to take these connections and develop a network and expand their reach in the operatic world, thus continuing their self-efficacy. When asked if the institution had a strong alumni connection, he said, “It was average, but they developed an independence within the student body that there was no need to go back for any real support to continue one’s opera career.”

A survey participant from a performing arts conservatory commented, “When I graduated, I had a great name on my resume that got me into auditions, and I gained some wonderful connections.” This was echoed by multiple survey and interview respondents with comments such as “my voice was stronger” to “I felt prepared in terms of my skills as a musician and singer” to “I felt musically and professionally prepared. I knew how to act in rehearsals, read music, act, sing, and deal with languages.”

Self-efficacy was well established at all the institutions that the participants attended. Each participant felt confident in their ability to audition and perform. The faculty and administrators at the higher education institutions were very supportive of this endeavor, according to participants. What was identified throughout the survey was that self-efficacy went beyond maintaining vocal technique and performance ability. One survey participant from a music school commented on their “ability to be my own teacher. This is an important factor in terms of how vocal studies’ students transition to the professional world.”

### **Higher Education Vocal Studies Curriculum**

Sixteen out of 27 respondents felt that their higher education institution holistically prepared them for their professional opera career. Survey respondents from performing arts conservatories and music schools gave very similar responses in terms of their experiences with the curricula. The question *What courses that were included in your education did you find were*



*not helpful in the transition to your performing career?* was asked to help identify those courses that proved key in providing a solid foundation for their professional career.

A survey participant from a performing arts conservatory described how they felt prepared by the institution for their professional career by detailing their “experience on the stage, fantastic vocal training, audition experience, and a fundamental understanding of how the opera business works,” as highlights of their curriculum. This was echoed by a music school survey respondent, who stated “I felt musically, and professionally prepared. I knew how to act in rehearsals, read music, act, sing, and deal with languages.”

In terms of skills developed that go beyond vocal technique, one survey participant mentioned, “I can build a character, stage combat, carry myself through a rehearsal process, pace myself with staging, and I can create when given less guidance or ideas revolving around a character.” This music school respondent sheds light on the nuances that define a performer in the rehearsal room and onstage. And finally, as Matthew noted in the interview, “When I graduated, I had a much better idea of how the American opera system worked.”

While the participants generally felt prepared for their transition, the responses from the survey and interviews identified areas where the curricula missed key topics, such as business and tax courses. The vocal studies alumni believed they would have found them helpful during and after the transition from academia to their chosen professions as freelance opera singers.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to determine if the current core curricula at master’s in music programs at performing arts conservatories and university music schools are comprehensive, or if there is a need for further curriculum development focusing on the entrepreneurial aspect of the performing arts world, particularly in the vocal arts as it pertains to

careers in opera. Vocal studies alumni who graduated from university music schools and performing arts conservatories were surveyed and questioned to obtain their perceptions about their graduate education experiences. The study identified topics and courses within the curricula that were useful, less useful, or not present that would have proven beneficial in the students' transition from academia to professional opera careers.

This researcher received 27 survey responses and conducted nine one-on-one semi-structured interviews that gathered information about the vocal studies alumni experiences at their respective institutions. The study was able to identify what aspects of the curricula did not prove useful and what missing elements in the curricula would have been useful to providing increased career success of graduates.

The findings of the study presented a misalignment between the curricula of the higher education institutions and the entrepreneurial/business skills and knowledge that the vocal studies graduates required as they transitioned to their professional worlds. While the participants had confidence with their vocal technique, performance abilities, and characterizations, they did not feel confident in their ability to promote their voices as a business. They also did not have a strong grasp of the business of opera such as taxes and networking. In Chapter 5, the researcher interprets the findings, discusses the implications of the study, makes recommendations for action items and additional study, and provides a conclusion to the study.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to establish what essential and appropriate curriculum is for graduate students in master's of music in vocal studies programs. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to determine if the current core curriculum is sufficient or if there is a need for further curriculum that focuses on the entrepreneurial aspect of the performing arts world, particularly in the vocal arts as it pertains to careers in opera. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) noted, "IPA is concerned with human lived experiences and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people express upon it" (p. 134). Using surveys and interviews, the study explored vocal studies graduates' perceptions about their vocal studies training programs, the appropriateness of core curriculum, and what they perceived was missing from their education that would have been useful in transitioning to a professional career as an opera singer. As reflected by the Department of Labor (2019), Baker (2014), Bjørnali and Støren (2012), and Schnipper (2017), the researcher anticipated the data would point to the importance of establishing specific entrepreneurial, marketing, business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that performing artists require to successfully manage their careers.

This study involved respondents to the researcher's survey who graduated from a master's level vocal studies degree program within the last 10 years. The respondents' perceptions of their experience in the graduate level program was recorded and analyzed. The researcher then determined a smaller sampling of survey respondents who had agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews.

This study answered the following questions:

1. What are the key entrepreneurial, marketing, and business skills, knowledge, and attitudes that vocal studies students require to successfully transition from academia to the professional world?
2. What is the appropriate higher educational programming in the vocal studies that will prepare the students to successfully transition to their professional careers?

### **Interpretation**

Survey and interview questions were used as instruments to obtain the perceptions of vocal studies alumni as they relate to their higher education experiences. The researcher determined through analysis of the initial survey and subsequent semi-structured one-on-one phone interviews data that eight key phrases representing the participants' experience could be compiled into initial categories. Through additional data analysis, eleven subthemes were identified around four themes: 1) perception of core curricula as it pertains to high quality vocal technique training, auditions, and character development, 2) effectiveness of networking through audition opportunities with artistic administrators and agents/managers, 3) the need for entrepreneurial and business courses at higher education institutions, and 4) understanding of the opera business and necessary skills and knowledge to successfully transition to a professional singing career. The identified themes recorded the perceptions of the vocal studies alumni about their higher education institution experiences and how the institutions properly prepared them for the transition from the academic world to the professional world.

As the vocal studies students transitioned to the professional world, the institutions had successfully prepared them for a successful segue from student to professional. However, this transition only pertained to vocal technique and performance skills. The key factor that appeared

to be missing across the board was the understanding of the opera business and how to navigate the world of freelancing.

As stated in Chapter 4, it is essential for the singers to be able to define and revise their own career paths and be able to navigate the less traditional career trajectories in order to build sustainable careers. They need to have skills and knowledge that allow them to create opportunities for themselves outside of the traditional trajectory of Young Arts Programs leading to establishment of their careers. It seems reasonable to expect at least some of these skills and knowledge to be acquired in their graduate studies, at whatever the institution they complete their studies. In cases where the educational programs do not offer these skills and knowledge, the graduates must be able to identify what skills and knowledge they will need to acquire outside of their education institution.

### **Theme 1: Core Curricula**

All participants identified that they received high quality vocal technique and faculty support from their respective higher education institution regardless if it were a university music school or a performing arts conservatory. Three subthemes were identified within the core curricula of higher education institutions. They are: 1) Vocal technique training, 2) Character development, and 3) Performance opportunities. The strong foundation of vocal technique that was acquired by the singers proved fundamental in their preparation for becoming a professional singer. This was supported by a performing arts conservatory survey participant who noted, "I felt that I was offered the necessary technical skills to be an operatic singer: vocal technique." A music school survey participant echoed this sentiment by stating they had "fantastic vocal training." The confidence that was created from having strong vocal technique allowed the vocal studies alumni to better approach an audition without trepidation, as noted by a music school

participant, “I also had enough confidence in my vocal technique, so as to defend myself from the seemingly inevitable barrage of critiques, reviews, and opinions.”

**Vocal technique training.** Vocal Technique training proved to be the most important factor in a vocal studies student’s higher education training. This was further supported by the Department of Labor (2019) findings and definitions for the career of a *Singer* where it articulated the need for vocal technique and performing abilities as important factors in developing a strong career foundation for opera singers. All 27 respondents mentioned that their vocal technique training proved the most beneficial part of their experience. A music school survey participant supported this overall perception by noting, “I was lucky to have good vocal technique training.” This was echoed by Mary who stated, “I felt that I was offered the necessary technical skills to be an operatic singer: vocal technique and language facility.”

**Character development.** This area also pertained to the vocal studies alumni once they were hired to sing a role in an opera. As mentioned by Thomson, Jaque, and Baltz (2016), vocal studies students are in an environment where “singers worked musically, dramatically, and physically without fear of criticism” (p. 482). The character development techniques they acquired during their academic time was perceived as an excellent resource that they utilized after graduation. As they explored and reflected on their experiences, they noted the techniques learned created a self-efficacy that parlayed into a deeper understanding of the roles. As one music school survey participant stated, “I received TONS of time onstage, I had a great acting class my first year where we learned how to research a character and how to act WHILE singing. I think that's invaluable.”

**Performance opportunities.** As mentioned by the Department of Labor (2019) and their findings and definitions for the career of a *Singer*, skills included vocal technique, performing

abilities, and practice as key factors for building a strong foundation in that profession. The survey and interview participants responded positively to the plethora of performing opportunities that were presented to them at their higher education institutions, as supported by survey participants. A performing arts conservatory respondent mentioned the “high level performance opportunities” as a highlight of their education. This was echoed by a music school participant who stated, “Performance opportunities of varied genre (opera, recital, concert, musical theatre, etc.)” proved beneficial. These opportunities were perceived by the vocal studies alumni as crucial to developing their self-confidence in successfully transitioning to the professional world.

## **Theme 2: Entrepreneurial and Business Curricula**

Both survey and interview participants unanimously confirmed there were skills they needed to aid in their successful transition to professional opera careers that went beyond vocal technique, acting, and performance skills. Many of them, though, said that they had to learn these skills after graduation. The study applied a theoretical framework that was defined as the entrepreneurial bricolage theory as it pertains to arts entrepreneurship. Bricolage was put in context as a “theory of production based on an economic state of resource constraint” (Essig, 2015, p. 234). The study examined the details of how this theory related to master’s of music in vocal studies alumni who were transitioning to professional opera singers as it related to the identified gap in research. The responses of both survey and interview participants indicate that inclusion of this non-vocal training seems important enough to include in the core curriculum, rather than leaving students to learn it on their own after graduating. As one performing arts conservatory participant noted, “I do think having a course structure can be a useful way to organize a sequence of necessary tasks and introduce resources that we might not come across on

our own (grant databases, design tools, excel shortcuts, and fiscal sponsorship).” The fact that most graduates are functioning in an environment of scarcity upon graduation makes the argument to include business skills in the core curriculum even more compelling.

**Marketing.** Schnipper (2017) and the Department of Labor (2019) emphasized the need for having the time to develop marketing and networking skills. While most respondents wrote comments about the importance of self-promotion and networking in launching and developing their careers, all who answered the survey question evaluating the training they received in that area saw marketing as either unimportant or lacking in the correct content. Out of the 27 survey respondents, 10 respondents (37%) rated that marketing classes they received as least useful in their training due to the lack of depth in the content delivered. Seven respondents did not respond to the question about marketing, and additional four saw marketing as not useful and did not see the connection with this skill and the tools needed to promote oneself. A music school survey participant noted, “I haven't gotten to a point where I need to think about a larger branding or marketing scheme.” The researcher believes that there might be a correlation between the length of time after graduation and when a professional then needs to fully utilize marketing skills to their full extent.

**Self-Promotion.** As determined by the Department of Labor (2019), “there is a need for additional emphasis on networking and self-promotion required for graduates.” All participants noted at some level that self-promotion was an important skill to learn as they transitioned into the business of opera. A music school survey participant noted, “Getting hired in the real world is more difficult than just doing an audition and hoping. There's too many singers in the field and not enough jobs.” This entails making oneself stand out from the crowd and be creative in one’s approach to their profession. This was echoed by a performing arts conservatory participant who



sated, “Self-promotion was mentioned as an abstract idea, at least at my [performing arts conservatory].” It seems there is a definite need to develop more-in-depth and relevant content to be taught and applied in marketing classes for these graduate programs.

One performing arts conservatory participant took it one step further and noted, “professional social media and promotion [are] obligations.” This is echoed by Matthew who mentioned, “My institution already holds some weight when it comes to branding, so there's a step up when we start our self-promotion journeys. Our courses did prepare us how to dress, market, and process what is unique about us.” And finally, a performing arts conservatory participant stated, “But people now want someone who maybe has a social media following, a brand, something that sets them apart from the other thousands of singers out there.”

Applying the behavioral theory of entrepreneurial bricolage as a framework focused the study on developing the necessary entrepreneurial skills and business acumen for vocal studies students that would allow them to become creative with opportunities that are presented. Baker and Nelson (2005) “developed an integrative definition of bricolage as making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (p. 333).

Entrepreneurial bricolage theory plays a pivotal role in understanding what higher education students at music schools and performing arts conservatories need as resources to successfully transition into singing careers.

The business seminars and classes that were presented at the institutions did not go into enough detail and therefore did not provide the necessary information that could be applied to the professional world. The length and information provided in the seminars and classes need to be further developed and taught by educators who are current with their knowledge. As one performing arts conservatory survey participant noted, “They had business professionals who

had been out of the field for a while or had outdated knowledge who gave us instruction.” As literature stated by Bjørnali and Støren (2012) asserted that “a greater emphasis on the development of entrepreneurial skills among students through project and problem-based learning” (p. 417). This aligned with the data that was provided by the survey and interview participants. As one survey participant stated,

While taking this class we talked about the realities of making it in the field, budgeting, side hustles, statistics and creativity all in order to help achieve being a full-time musician...I know it's much easier said than done but this class is what most prepared me for the life of a musician.

As the literature states from Daniel and Daniel (2015), “all higher education institutions should consider this balance or investigate the extent to which their curricula are providing graduates with sufficient skills to develop and maintain viable careers” (p.423). To further emphasize this point, an additional survey participant noted the lack of content in entrepreneurial or business courses, “They were a nice introduction to prepare us for what we would 'probably deal with if we ever find the work.' There could have been more intensive courses.”

The study showed the lack of business content interspersed in the graduate vocal studies curricula results in students transitioning into a professional world with not only limited resources, but limited skills to overcome them. The entrepreneurial bricolage theory describes the lack of resources which not having certain business courses confirms. While there was an indication from the participants that they received some, albeit a small amount, of coursework and understanding of the opera business and how to navigate it, they indicated that there was a lack of information that would have proven helpful to them.

### **Theme 3: Need for Networking Skills**

The participants were complimentary of the exposure and opportunities to audition and initially networking with artistic administrators of opera companies, agents, and managers. The responses from both the survey and the interviews corroborated with the literature about the importance of networking. As Baker (2014, para. 29) stated, “There is a need to have networking at the top of the list. This is an important skill because it is this that can create opportunities for jobs and performances.” This was also echoed by a music school survey participant who stated, “Networking. Understanding that the gig doesn't always go to the most talented, the most skilled, or the most trained.” One additional music school survey participant added, “I graduated with little to no knowledge of how to email managers, symphonies, small companies to request auditions. Self-promotion and marketing was not a priority.” It is in this area that the gap between needed skills and the curricula of additional skills is most lacking.

**Networking.** As the study delved further into the networking skill, participants began to express the need to understand how to continue the successful initial networking moment. As Mary responded during her interview, “I don't know the first step to take to continue the networking past the first introduction.” This was echoed by a performing arts conservatory survey participant who stated, “I mention networking again. Having had a chance to gain perspective outside of academia I realize that nuance, finesse, and artistry are only appreciated once you have 'arrived'.” Participants noted a general need to understand how to portray their image and identity while identifying a networking strategy that would work best for them and implementing it in a way that will create opportunities.

**Self-Efficacy.** The study identified the importance of self-advocacy which was also noted as concrete theme throughout the literature as noted by several researchers (Baker, 2014;

Cacciotti & Hayton, 2015; Thomson et al., 2016). Self-advocacy was also echoed by Baker (2014) who mentioned “It’s totally an entrepreneurial business. You are your own product” (para. 3).

A performing arts conservatory participant stated, “I had gotten to [a] point in my vocal training where I felt I could practice my craft in public and present myself confidently as a young professional singer.” This confidence is an imperative factor for professional singers as they navigated through the business and psychology of opera. Supported by literature from Gangi (2014, p. 57) who mentioned, “self-instruction, time management, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation are essential” and Cook (2001), who was cited in Thomson et al., (2016) stated, “Self-esteem is the capacity to view the self as worthy; it is a strong marker for well-being and self-efficacy” (p. 480). This theme was echoed by Emily who mentioned, “Self-awareness is very important. Every step of this journey makes me realize how much closer or further I am in this industry.” Administrators and faculty would do well to add budgeting courses to develop self-efficacy skills as they relate to personal strategies for finances and budgeting to aid singers during times of unemployment between performance contracts.

**Auditions.** A music school survey participant stated, “There also were not detailed and technical instruction for acting and audition techniques.” The transition from academia to the professional world begins with auditioning for managers, agents, and artistic administrators of opera companies. As one performing arts conservatory participant mentioned, “When I graduated, I had a great name on my resume that got me into auditions, and I gained some wonderful connections.” This was echoed by Mary who stated, “I think that having the name of the institution on my resume has helped especially in scenarios where you are either granted an audition or not solely based on resume’.” It seems the name and networking opportunities at the

institution potentially opened doors for their students. As Mary mentioned, “When I graduated I had a great name on my resume that got me into auditions, and I gained some wonderful connections.” The brand recognition appears to be recognized by students, as name recognition was a draw for 10 out of the 27 respondents when they were deciding on which institution to attend.

Scheduling an audition, succeeding at the audition, and capitalizing on contacts made at the audition however, seem to be three very different skills sets. Name recognition of the school attended, and contacts facilitated by an institution for their students, appear to be both important and well handled by most institutions according to the survey and interview respondents. Training on how to succeed at auditions and having the skills to capitalize on contacts made at auditions seems less consistent in the school programs.

A music school graduate participant stated how the institution did not fully prepare them for the audition process by noting, “As a soprano, I have had trouble marketing myself, and I have had trouble with auditions.” Based on this response, the institution needs to continually develop the student’s skills as they pertain to the audition process and the transition from initial networking connections to more developed professional relationships.

#### **Theme 4: Additional Resources Needed**

Respondents acknowledged that they transitioned from their higher education institution to the professional world without key resources. These included business, tax/finance and budgeting knowledge. As Baker (2014) stated, “it can be difficult to make the jump from academia to the professional world” (para. 14). Survey participants from both music schools and performing arts conservatories identified budgeting skills as an important topic beyond vocal technique that would have proven beneficial for their professional career. As a performing arts

conservatory survey participant stated that there was “No instruction on how to budget for projects or even budget in our personal lives.” This was also established by a music school survey participant that, “My degree did not cover networking, budgeting, or fundraising except maybe one time at a seminar.” It became apparent through the data analysis that the vocal studies alumni need a stronger foundation in a variety of business skills prior to their graduation in order to manage business aspects typically associated with freelance work.

**Budgeting courses.** Schnipper (2017) described the business culture that performing artists face, “We no longer possess the infrastructure to transform abject creativity into financial success” (p. 18). This reality could be instrumental in understanding the need for freelance singers to prepare themselves for interacting with multiple organizations. In his interview, Matthew mentioned that, “How to budget for reimbursements that come months later,” was a key component of comprehending his contracts and then budgeting for the present and future. This is an important part of understanding how contracts are created and implemented at different performance organizations. The concept of budgeting through unemployed times was echoed by Susan who stated, “learning how to make it during the potential months between one performance contract and the next would have been helpful.” As mentioned in the literature by Daniel and Daniel (2015), “Apart from particular creative skills or knowledge, an understanding of the commercial side of creativity is frequently mentioned,” (p. 422) which implies that the artists need to be flexible during those times of unemployment. This ideology could be incorporated into budgeting courses in terms of how to utilize a performer’s income to last through times of unemployment or invested to develop other sources of income beyond the singing engagements.

**Tax Courses.** Schnipper (2017) states about performers that, “It is also about making more money, at the very least, and about earning a living at the same time” (p. 16). The Center for Cultural Innovation (2014, para. 2) also mentioned that key business skills include “business basics, including taxes,” as important aspects of working musicians. Twelve out of 27 survey participants noted that learning about taxes would have been helpful in preparing for their professional career as a freelance singer. As a music school survey participant stated, “A very in depth, focused tax training for working in multiple countries” course would have proven beneficial as a course beyond the vocal technique training. This was echoed by another music school survey participant who mentioned, “Managing taxes was a huge undertaking and something I wish was explained just within some sort of 'business for musicians' class.”

Matthew and Joshua both stated that having a course that would create a better “understanding of international taxes” during their time at the higher education institution would have proven beneficial. Having to navigate the international tax codes from several countries “takes away time from other aspects of my opera career” as further mentioned by Matthew.

**Psychological support.** The psychological aspect of performing is closely aligned with a singer’s confidence based on their training at the higher education institutions. Roland (1997) mentioned “singing can be intimidating: performance anxiety is well documented” (as cited in Hughes, 2014, p. 260). Emily also noted the importance of “Self-love and the ability to let go,” as an important component in her opera career. To further enhance these programs and aid the potential for intimidation and performance anxiety, institutions should incorporate developing psychological skills for students that will combat nerves.

The study identified four key themes based on the data collection from the survey and interview participants: 1) perception of core curricula as it pertains to high quality vocal

technique training, auditions, and character development, 2) networking through audition opportunities with artistic administrators and agents/managers, 3) the necessity of entrepreneurial and business courses at higher education institutions, and 4) understanding of opera business and necessary skills and knowledge to successfully transition to a professional singing career. It was evident in the data that many school programs offered little to no guidance outside of technical skills and related audition opportunities to aid the students in their transition to professional careers. Schnipper (2017) mentioned an important point, “You can be the greatest musician in the world, but if you do not take the time to market, network, and cultivate your audience then you are essentially an artist without a voice” (pp. 17-18).

### **Implications**

During an IPA analysis, the researcher understood, acknowledged, and interpreted the perceptions of the participants as they pertained to their experiences at their respective music school or performing arts conservatory. Listening to perceptions about their academic experience helps to identify and learn about which coursework was, and was not, well covered in school curricula from individuals who lived the experience. Twenty-five out of 27 survey participants stated that they were freelance singers with the remaining two participants being resident singers in a U.S. opera company. In terms of specific preparation in the skills needed to support entrepreneurialism, the study contributed to further understanding about what these vocal studies alumni lacked, which in turn could prompt institutional stakeholders, such as educators, administrators, and leaders, to develop additional educational coursework that would prove beneficial to current and future students.

From a leadership perspective, the findings outline entrepreneurial and business topics that vocal studies alumni have identified as integral to promoting successful transitions to



professional singing careers. The internal stakeholders at higher education institutions should recognize the need for these additional courses in their curricula to better prepare their vocal studies students for a more successful transition into the professional singing world. As Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor (2015) wrote, “the focus of curricula has often shifted from a focus on knowledge acquisition to knowledge and development of work-related skills” (p. 664). In his interview, Jeffrey further echoed the importance of the higher education leadership understanding and promoting coursework that would provide an easier transition from student to professional, stating that his school helped to create “a real-world situation while still at school, where I picked up how to do things like self-promote and network, et cetera. I still hold this approach critical to the main benefit of my education.” To echo this statement, Brooman et al (2015) write about the institutions responsibility to provide, “a process of facilitating better engagement for learning” (p. 664). This is imperative to higher education leadership who are tasked with cultivating appropriate curricula. Identifying the inner workings of the opera business and encouraging the vocal studies students to have a comprehensive understanding of said opera business would have the potential to create more well-rounded artists.

Without additional non-technical skills, many graduates do not have adequate resources for transitioning to a career, as exhibited by the bricolage entrepreneurial theory. The Department of Labor (2019) “articulates the need for sales and marketing, customer and personal service, fine arts, music or sound editing software, social perceptiveness, critical thinking, judgment and decision making” to establish a solid base of creativity. Therefore, these topics, and potentially others that did not appear in the researcher’s study, should be considered by higher education institutions to provide students with the necessary non-technical skills and knowledge of the opera business.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the findings of this study, the following section details three recommendations for action. The recommendations are: 1) Provide In-Depth Opera Business Courses, 2) Create Additional Marketing and Networking Practicums, and 3) Recognize and Evaluate Curricula as it Pertains to Limited Resources. As was mentioned by at least two survey participants, “We didn't receive any training in terms of budgeting, how to get management, how to create a social media profile, or how to network and build a team.” and “I had no training on small business, entrepreneurship, fundraising, marketing or any of the other essential skills.” Importantly, the literature also concludes, “According to many studies, entrepreneurial skills associated with entrepreneurial behaviour are learnable” (Støren, 2014, p. 797).

#### **Provide In-Depth Opera Business Courses**

This was a common theme that emerged during both the survey and the interviews regarding the extent that the few entrepreneurial courses were lacking and inconsistent with the needs of the singers to transition to professional careers. Ten out of 27 survey respondents noted how the courses, and in three cases only seminars, did not cover the content in ways that provided deep and useful comprehension of the topics addressed. This is reiterated in the literature by Daniel and Daniel (2015) who stated, “there is currently an insufficient balance between artistic and non-artistic skills, the latter involving the capacity to understand, navigate, create and capitalize on industry opportunities and realities” (p. 423).

There may also be a need for certificates or continuing education opportunities in professional skills for freelance singers in the performing arts. This could be accomplished in some degree through the school alumni office by bringing graduates back for symposia to

address business and entrepreneurial skills that were identified as lacking in the vocal studies programs. This could also create lasting alumni loyalty and support in the long term.

### **Create Additional Marketing and Networking Practicums**

During two interviews with the researcher, there emerged a discussion about the importance of not only creating and implementing a course on marketing and networking, but the need to teach the content in a practical context. Frank mentioned, “It would be even more helpful if the course included putting the topics learned in the course into use.” This was echoed by Jeffrey, who agreed with this notion in his interview, “Only learning in a classroom would not be something that I [could] turn around [and] actually apply in the real world without practice first.” The participants were interested in applying the marketing and promotional techniques that were taught in the seminars and courses. Although the content taught in these sessions were not explored fully, any practical application would have proven helpful. As Mary mentioned, “My degree did not cover networking, budgeting, or fundraising except maybe one time at a seminar. In reality, aside from voice and performance, these are the most important skills an opera singer can have in today's opera world. She continued by stating, “My [performing arts conservatory] hardly encouraged any sort of strategic or creative problem thinking at all.” One music school survey participant mentioned, “We had a great, short one-class period seminar on business (such as taxes), but that gap desperately needs to be filled with a Schedule C/1099 employee taxes course, a business skills course, grant-writing course, non-profit networking, etcetera.”

In terms of networking and putting ideas to use, understanding the protocols and foundation of good networking skills could only contribute to a positive experience for all stakeholders. There is benefit to learning both the production and administrative aspects of the

opera companies which in turn contributes to singers having better conversations and professional relationships with artistic administrators and board members of the opera companies. As Susan stated in her interview, “Knowing more about the production and administrative sides of the opera company enables me to have deeper conversations with the artistic staff and board members.” This will benefit the freelance singers, along with the internal and external stakeholders, who can then have more in-depth conversations and create better networking opportunities. This collaborative effort can be effective in producing better policies and procedures within the organization. In addition, it will create inclusion among the stakeholders that can develop a stronger sense of community.

### **Recognize and Evaluate Curricula as it Pertains to Limited Resources**

The internal stakeholders, in this case the higher education institution administration and faculty, should evaluate current curricula to identify gaps in student outcomes and develop additional courses or incorporate specific business and entrepreneurial skills into existing courses. There is an importance for the internal stakeholders to address the limited resources that alumni will have upon graduation. With the resources that the educational institutions have at their disposal, there can be a false sense of entitlement as some participants noted as they relied on the brand of the institution to open doors for them. In addition, the institutions need to recognize that their name recognition is not enough, even if it enables the freelance singers to obtain auditions. What the name recognition does not do is provide a framework for ongoing management of a freelance singer’s career.

The focus, therefore, should be on creating and developing realistic expectations for the students to better prepare them for the transition to the professional world. A performing arts conservatory survey participant mentioned, “I really didn't feel like I knew enough about

managers, about the realities of how often I'd be away from home, and the need to self-pacify in order to deal with loneliness.” In managing the student’s expectations, implementing additional skills such as creative thinking and problem solving, could potentially change a student’s approach in becoming a professional singer, and allow for better flexibility through turbulent times. As a music school survey participant stated, “Some sort of business class is a must for a musician in these days - something with budgeting, marketing, creative thinking, and certainly fundraising.” This ideology creates a broader foundation for the freelance singer to get through periods of instability.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine if current core curricula are sufficient or if there is a need for further curriculum development that focuses on the entrepreneurial aspect of the performing arts world, particularly in the vocal arts as it pertains to careers in opera. Through data collection and analysis, the study identifies additional key topics that the researcher recommends for further study. The researcher recommends further study of the following themes: 1) Study Performing Artists of Other Arts Genres, 2) Study and Determine the Difference Between Entrepreneurial and Business Skill Needs, and 3) Study How Unforeseen Events Affect Opera Singers as Freelance Artists. The three recommendations look to address how adding business and entrepreneurial coursework could positively or negatively affect performing arts professionals in other performing arts genres. As such, further exploration of the impact of adding business and entrepreneurial courses beyond core curricula, and what material, if any, might be removed from current curricula that are perceived as outdated in today’s modern society. And finally, how performers are adversely affected financially and psychologically, due to circumstances that are out of their control, such as an economic downturn or the closing of a

performing arts company.

### **Study Performing Artists of Other Arts Genres**

Additional research should look at how other performing arts genres can benefit from additional business skills training for their professions. Entrepreneurial bricolage theory likely relates to more than just vocal arts as mentioned by Essig (2015), due to the fact it occurs in any “resource-poor environment” (p. 234); therefore, additional research in other arts genres is recommended to identify whether business and entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and attitudes would benefit other arts graduates as they transition to their careers. Many performing arts conservatories cater to performing arts genres such as dance, acting, and music. It can be implied that there is a similar path towards understanding the arts business that can be incorporated into these programs as well. As mentioned by Essig (2015), bricolage is a “theory of production based on an economic state of resource constraint” (p. 234) which can then incorporate all types of arts genres. With artists being defined as entrepreneurs (Department of Labor, 2019), there can be an argument made for developing the *making do* ideology when it comes to “tools, skills, and materials at hand” (Levi-Strauss, 1967) for entrepreneurs. The researcher proposes looking at the similarities and differences of the different performing arts genres as they pertain to transitioning from the academic to professional world to identify how courses and content can be addressed for all performing arts students.

### **Study and Determine the Difference Between Entrepreneurial and Business Needs**

Throughout the study, there was an underlying theme that pertained to the key differences between entrepreneurial and business skills and classes. Clarifying and specifying the very specific entrepreneurial or business skills will contribute to identifying the appropriate skills for each type of arts career. Frank mentioned in his interview that, “Entrepreneurial classes would

have been helpful since I was developing and creating a collaboration with other artists and wanting to make a 501c(3) organization.” This was echoed by Matthew who stated, “I would not have found entrepreneurial classes helpful, but I would have found business classes that focused on taxes and the opera business more helpful.” Four out of the nine interview participants were keen on exploring this difference which alluded to the fact that different classes were needed to address the difference in topics.

There is a need to develop additional parameters that would look even more specifically at how business knowledge and skills would benefit vocal studies students. It will be important to identify those vocal studies students who only intend to pursue a career as a freelance opera singer compared to those who are thinking in more entrepreneurial terms and creating or running their own company. Those singers who were planning to create opera productions or start non-profit organizations would benefit from developing business skills but would also benefit from additional entrepreneurial courses and skill development.

### **Study How Unforeseen Events Affect Opera Singers as Freelance Artists**

It was discovered through the study that learning how to budget for times without a performance contract is an important skill to learn while at the higher education institution. Integrating the development of entrepreneurial skills in the vocal studies curricula could enable creative thinking that would potentially be needed during those times a freelance singer is faced with adversity. The study conducted by Daniel and Daniel (2015) in determining the importance of creative skills and how “an understanding of the commercial side of creativity...as is a desire to have learnt more about the intricacies of how industry works and operate,” (p. 422) can prove beneficial is an important ideology. Bjørnali and Støren (2012) supported this notion by stating, “the length and depth of a course could fundamentally change the approach to developing the

necessary entrepreneurial skills,” detailing that a short seminar or workshop would not develop the necessary skills. In addition, creative problem solving can prove to be beneficial in a performing artists career to aid in self-efficacy, for example. Essig (2015) stated that artists and art entrepreneurs “often work in environments of severely constrained resources and are acculturated to improvisational activity (sometimes through formal training)” (pg. 234).

The researcher is also proposing further study into how unforeseen events, such as a quick economic downturn and closing of opera companies, can affect freelance singers and test their creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Understanding these impacts would help them plan for and develop the necessary resources to get through times of lost wages and jobs to continue on their desired career paths. Implementing such a study would help the higher education institution administrators address how to prepare the students for interruptions in their careers, whether it be an injury, economic downturn, or other unforeseen circumstance.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study gathered data from 27 recent vocal studies graduates to determine the appropriate curricula at performing arts conservatories and university music school’s master’s in music vocal studies programs. Entrepreneurial bricolage theory was used to interpret the data and establish themes and recommendations for this study.

Data from the participants acknowledge that the higher education institutions are excelling with their coursework as it related to vocal studies, such as vocal technique and performance opportunities, but it was clear that they needed to develop their non-vocal coursework to include business and entrepreneurial topics. Alumni participants viewed business skills as important areas that need to be addressed in graduate programs to help graduates transition into a professional singing career. Data from this study may aid educators and



administrators in developing coursework that will promote a successful transition for vocal studies graduates into a professional opera career.

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Skill/Knowledge Training	Part of Your Master's Program		Rate on a Scale of 1 to 5, with 1 Being the Least Useful and 5 Being the Most Useful in Your Professional Career				
	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Marketing	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Self-Promotion	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Networking	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Entrepreneurship	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Management	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Fundraising and Development	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Creative Problem Solving	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Strategic Thinking	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Budgeting	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5
Other*	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5

\*If you selected other, please name those topics: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you believe you graduated with the resources you needed to successfully launch a career as an opera singer? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
  - o If no, what resources do you feel you needed that you did not have? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Briefly describe the ways in which you felt prepared for your professional career when you graduated: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Briefly describe the ways in which you felt underprepared for your professional career when you graduated: \_\_\_\_\_
10. What knowledge or skills did you need to acquire on your own after graduating? \_\_\_\_\_
11. If the institution had non-technical skills, such as business or entrepreneurial skills/knowledge, were those entrepreneurial and business courses enough?

Yes  No  No non-technical skills were included in my program.

12. Based on the programming you received at your conservatory or music school, describe how you benefitted or would have benefitted from entrepreneurial skills being included in the program. \_\_\_\_\_

13. What topics beyond the vocal technique training would have proven beneficial for your professional career? \_\_\_\_\_

14. What courses that were included in your education did you find were not helpful in the transition to your performing career? \_\_\_\_\_

15. How were you able to use your education to market or brand yourself? \_\_\_\_\_

16. What is your definition of success? \_\_\_\_\_

17. What advice do you have for future vocal studies students as they embark on their careers as opera singers? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Would you like to volunteer to participate in a more in-depth semi-structured interview?

Yes You will be redirected to a link where you can provide contact information

No Thank you for your participation in the survey

**Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions:**

1. What higher education institution did you attend?
  - Can you please elaborate on why you chose the higher education institution that you graduated from?
2. Can you describe your transition from academics to your professional opera career?
  - What types of jobs have you found to be in line with your education?
  - Are there certain types of singing jobs that you find are not attainable?
3. How well do you think the institution prepared you for the transition to a performing career as an opera singer?
4. When you attended your institution (identified from participant), did they have courses in entrepreneurship/business?
  - Which ones?
  - Do you believe those courses were helpful to you in starting your career?
  - Were there courses that you found were not helpful?
  - If some of those courses were electives, did you choose to take them? Did you wish you could have if you did not?
5. Based on the programming you received at your conservatory or music school, do you believe you benefitted or would have benefitted from developing and learning business/entrepreneurial skills?
  - What knowledge or skills would you find most useful?
  - What knowledge or skills would you find least useful?



6. There are conservatories that offer courses in business and entrepreneurship such as *The Entrepreneurial Musician*. Were any of those types of courses part of your program? Would they have been helpful to you in starting your career?
7. What entrepreneurial or business classes did you have during your graduate education?
  - How were these skills helpful to you in starting or advancing your career?
8. How were you able to use your education to market or brand yourself?
9. What types of skills do you use to establish and sustain your opera career? How did you acquire those skills?