

2020-06-05

For distribution

Dear members of the Faculty of Music Alumni community, particularly those signatories of the Call to Action document of June 4, 2020.

Thank you for your Call to Action communication. It is both much appreciated and timely.

I very much endorse your call to “make addressing systemic oppression, racism, and coloniality a strategic, faculty-wide goal,” and comment further on some of your specific requests below.

As a community we are appalled by recent incidents of brutality, armed forces response, and amplifications of ongoing socioeconomic and race-based inequities. The Faculty of Music, in solidarity with The University of Toronto, condemns anti-Black racism and all forms of discrimination. Please read President Gertler's message of solidarity with the Black community, which includes details of university events, support and resources, such as the Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office (ARCDO).

We recognize that, although the situation in the United States is driven by some profoundly different current and historical contexts, Canada still has much to account for and a long way to go in realizing its objectives of a just, free, and equitable society.

The Call to Action from our Music Alumni is offered in the context of a Strategic Academic Planning process for the Faculty of Music that is currently underway. It is important to emphasize that the online planning consultations over the past two days are not at all the end, but at most the midway point, of an ongoing process of consultation. The consultations are not limited to a “committee,” but involve the community as a whole: faculty and librarians (appointed and sessional instructors), students (undergraduate and graduate), and support staff.

The results of the two recent planning sessions will be reported forward at subsequent stages, one focus of which will be a planned Retreat in the Fall of 2020 (which we hope will take place, at least in part, in person). The goal of the strategic planning consultation process is to address the positive elements as well as the shortfalls of the 2016–2021 Plan in order to formulate an extension of the Plan (nominally for 2021–2023) that is undertaken in part to posit concrete action on precisely some of the points raised in the Alumni Call to Action.

The specific requests in the Call to Action—that we develop focused efforts in public programming (concerts & lectures), support issues-based events (public & internal), and provide professional development and awareness training (for faculty, students, and staff)—are excellent goals and, in my view, with additional focus through the planning process, quite realizable.

The strategic planning process is also part of a parallel undertaking required of academic units at the University of Toronto, such as the Faculty of Music, to consult widely to develop a Self-Study Document (the last done in 2015, the current one to be completed by Fall 2020) that is followed by an External Review (where several outside specialists examine the documents, visit the institution, and conduct additional interviews; which review was to take place this October but is now delayed due to COVID-19). Gathering information from current students as well as alumni is a key part of the Self-Study Document process and we will be reaching out to you to seek your input on a range of issues, which will understandably include your current concerns. This request for further input can be expected sometime over the next two months.

By way of context, in 2015, it was important to formulate—for the first time—statements of mission, vision, and core values (as well as core constituencies) for the Faculty of Music at that juncture. Many of us were very conscious that the statements made were critically important, yet lacked (as these documents often do) much by way concrete action plans and measurable outcomes. The resultant 2016–2021 Strategic Academic Plan did not directly acknowledge issues concerning music and the oppression of women, racialized groups, sexual orientations, Indigenous communities, and the socioeconomically underprivileged. We have, I believe, over the past few years, made some progress in programming and critical response to begin to address these issues, some of our actions impressively driven by our students, but we must do much better going forward.

In particular, the Alumni Call to Action is a compelling request that we embed our stance against systemic oppression, racism, and coloniality (as variously understood) within both the artistic and academic practice of the Faculty, so that it forms not only part of our public statements but becomes a key programming and curricular force. That some things are not so easy to change, and that some take more time than others, does not ginsay the matter.

More challenging of course will be the ongoing response to what the Call refers to as “outdated programming” and “pedagogical conservatism”. This is an undeniable reality in university-based (and even more so in conservatory-based) teaching and learning in the performing arts. Again, in my view, some progress has been made on those fronts, but there is a long way to go. The challenge of finding a balance is perhaps captured in the current Plan’s core value of “tradition and innovation, reaffirming fundamental practices while creating new ones”. Recent examples would include the reinvigoration of the traditional art song form through our song writing course and our student-led Celebrating Our Diversity concerts.

Yet, I cannot agree with you more, that if we want to achieve our stated vision to become an internationally significant “place for transformative teaching and learning, and for artistic and academic excellence in music creation, performance, education, and research,” we cannot do so without addressing the issues you raise so compellingly in your call to action. And we cannot do that without your support—critical, challenging, articulate support—as our recent alumni. We welcome your ongoing input. I invite you to continue the dialogue by reaching out to us further. You can be sure we will be reaching out to you both within and beyond the current planning process.

Finally, in the extensive list of signatories to the document, several of you have offered testimonials on the challenges you faced personally and on the structural inequities you experienced during your studies in different programs here. Speaking both as an alumnus myself and as the current head of our institution, I know these reflections can be difficult to express and are sometimes painful to hear. But I cannot thank you enough for articulating your concerns so directly, and I will do my best to bring these issues forward not only as part of the planning process but also to ensure that they inform our subsequent actions.

With much appreciation for your engagement and best wishes to all,
Don

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