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Teen Council Devising Workshop with Jenni Miller of Hand2Mouth. (Photo by Kate Szrom/Courtesy of Portland Center Stage at The Armory)

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As Ever, Theatre's Teen Council Programs Point the Way Forward

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As theatres begin to emerge from pandemic restrictions, many are recommitting to programs designed to engage their youngest stakeholders.

BY JERALD RAYMOND PIERCE

Earlier this month, producer **Ken Davenport** **tweeted out a thought**: that high school musicals should incorporate more of the roles typically seen on Broadway shows. Training, he posited, should begin with teenagers not only acting and building sets, say, but doing the jobs of producer, press agent, and company manager for their school productions. Reasonably, responses to his tweet ranged from whole-hearted agreement to calls for those roles to be paid if students are bearing any brunt of the work. But the idea itself isn't new. In fact it's one that U.S. regional theatres have been experimenting with for a while through the use of teen council and youth ensemble programs.

I recently talked to a number of education departments at theatres around the country about how these programs can serve in this supplemental role. It was universally agreed that programs like a teen council—in which a group of high school students from around a regional theatre's local area gather to see, practice, and learn about all areas of theatremaking—can have precisely the effect Davenport had in mind. While many education programs seek to take art into high schools via teaching artists or touring productions, or aim to supplement performance practices, these teen councils focus instead on leadership, career pathways outside of performance, and the chance for students to learn the administrative side of the field while having a sizable impact on their local theatres.

“In a theatre program in high school, you get to learn a lot of wonderful things,” said Bridget Cavaiola Stone, director of learning at **La Jolla Playhouse**, herself is a former high school theatre teacher. “But you don't get to learn about this side of it. I don't think a lot of kids go into college going, ‘I want to be a teaching artist,’ or ‘I want to be an arts administrator,’ because those are not pathways that they are exposed to.”

Though it's been over a decade since I had to go through the college selection process myself and despite having a high school theatre program that allowed me to work as a playwright and director, I look back now and can see clear gaps in my education about the many r

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the field that keep the art alive. For many students, the technical administrative sides of the art form are simply not presented to them before they're asked to make significant choices about their future.

Portland Center Stage's Kelsey Tyler (he/him) said that PCS's teen council sees students attend from across the Portland metro region. As the program tries to bridge the gap between students' high school experiences and their future pursuits, he said, the teen council works to build and develop a deeper relationship between the students and PCS itself. To do so, the program is offered for free, allowing students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to connect with this side of theatre the chance to take classes or workshops. This is why, when the pandemic hit, it was crucial for this teen council, and similar programs around the country, to pivot quickly.

Stone said that La Jolla Playhouse, which transitioned to Zoom after the pandemic caused in-person classes to shut down, saw its largest teen council turnout during the pandemic-affected 2020-21 season. The program, now more accessible, was able to reach students who, either because of time or transportation restrictions, may not have been able to participate in the in-person version. She said it was especially beneficial for a large county like San Diego, which has 42 school districts covering the country's eighth most populous city.

"Kids were just really hungry for something to do outside of their school day," said Stone, "because a lot of extracurriculars were cut back and cut down, especially drama programs."

"There's all these great, smart, talented young people who wanted to work in the industry and there was not really a direct pathway for them to access those careers backstage."

Early on, programs like [Roundabout Theatre Company's Youth Ensemble](#) program for public school students in New York City, saw students eager to adapt to a medium that gave many institutions pause. Director of education Jennifer DiBella (she/her) said that, while many theatres were still figuring out how to accomplish digital theatre, students in their youth ensemble were diving headlong into the new opportunities, with work that DiBella said was “just as innovative, if not more innovative, than some of the work that we were seeing early on in the pandemic in terms of digital theatre.”

These day's PCS's Tyler admits that the program has started to see some Zoom fatigue, a sentiment echoed by [Milwaukee Repertory Theater's](#) associate director of education, Jeffrey Mosser (he/him). By this past summer, Tyler said, they were back to offering an in-person teen council, with an eye on how a digital option can still be incorporated in the future. Stone, on the other hand, said that La Jolla Playhouse is moving forward with hybrid meetings for their teen council program, allowing but not requiring students to come in person if they are able to or want to.

“We're in this for the long term,” said Stone. “It's just more inclusive. It's kind of lovely because there could be a student that's swamped with homework or has to babysit or whatever it is, and they can still tune in and join us and be a part of the discussion and the meetings and the decision-making, even from home.”

There's something to be said for the agency that a hybrid model offers. These programs all aim to put control in the hands of the students. Or, as Mosser put it, these programs are “for teens, by teens.” Everyone I spoke with emphasized the importance of allowing the program to adapt to the interest and passions of the students rather than trying to dictate what the learnings should be. At PCS, this translated to students at the first teen council meeting of this year being asked to write what they'd like to see from the program on giant Post-it notes on the wall.

Tyler said that listening efforts like this one at his PCS program allow this key education offering to naturally evolve over time, driven by what the students would like to work on most. For many programs, including La Jolla Playhouse's, that passion includes working with initiatives like [#ENOUGH](#), which [earlier this month](#) closed submissions for new 10-minute plays about gun violence from writers in grades 6-12.

“We can talk about all the positives and the wonderful things about them because they’re entirely so resilient,” said Stone. “To be the generation of young folks that have experienced active shooter drills in their schools, this is very much on their brain. They were all very interested in tackling this subject this year.”




Students participate in a teen council meeting at La Jolla Playhouse.

Meanwhile, [Roundabout's Youth Ensemble](#) produced a show about the lack of resources in city schools and the inequities between public and private schools, including looking at the nuances of charter schools.

“The mission of our education programs is to use theatre to promote social equity,” said DiBella. “We’ve always encouraged our young people to be super civically engaged. Although we don’t say that the plays they are creating have to be about anything social justice-related, they often are just because young people are so civically engaged.”

The youth ensemble, like all of these programs, is about putting students in the driver’s seat as leaders, making their own artistic choices and deciding what stories to tell and how their leadership extended beyond content, DiBella noted. It was the youth ensemble’s

interest in areas beyond performance that became a seed from v 

theatrical workforce development program, a backstage training program for 18- to 24 year-olds, developed in partnership with the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), sprung. DiBella said there had been frustration seeing the field losing talent because access to these technical and backstage career pipelines had been traditionally closed or at the very least hidden.

“There’s all these great, smart, talented young people who wanted to work in the industry and there was not really a direct pathway for them to access those careers backstage,” said DiBella.

It’s a solid example of how theatres can grow from listening to the students involved in these programs, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. Stone said that La Jolla Playhouse even renamed their program from a “student board” to a teen council to reflect the fact that they’re advisors to the theatre as much as they are students receiving mentorship and access to the inner workings of the Playhouse.

“If you want to make your theatre a place that is relevant to teens, I think the only way to do that is to invite them into the entire process.”

In Wisconsin, one emphasis of Milwaukee Rep’s teen council is teaching the students about arts advocacy. Mosser said the company works to educate students on how government and public policy affects the arts, especially important for an art form continually advocating for funding that matches its **more than \$2.8 billion** contribution to the country’s economy. In this, Mosser said, students are passionate about supporting their peers in the art and fostering excitement in the arts among others their age.

“They’re really interested in connecting with other teens in the city,” said Mosser. “Students really are interested in doing something that is very city-centric and something that’s driven to connect to their community and connect with their peers. I think they see the opportunity to create resources and create opportunities for one another.”

Examples Mosser gave were the students’ interest in finding ways to lift the work of their peers who were doing more performance-based programs, like working with True Colors Theatre as part of the [Next Narrative Monologue Competition](#), and looking for ways to work with other local groups, like local children’s theatre [First Stage](#).

Additionally, these programs offer students a chance to give feedback to the theatre, both on the theatre’s programming and the theatre’s mission and direction as the industry looks to create more equitable and antiracist environments. Stone noted that at La Jolla Playhouse, students are able to see shows and present their thoughts on the productions, bringing any conversations they see as important into the space. They’ve been able to analyze and give feedback on the company’s newly revamped equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments, and to discuss what institutional accountability is and what it should look like. Stone said that those conversations have made their way from the teen council into other rooms and meetings in the company.

Stone added that it’s always been reassuring to see how welcoming, inclusive, and truly kind the students are with each other. Staff members who have entered the teen council space to share their work come out with a realization that these students already know so much about what an equitable space should look like and how it should function. As the Alliance Theatre’s resident artist and teen programs manager Samantha Provenzano (she/her) put it, these students have their finger squarely on the pulse of the future. And as her colleague, director of education and Alliance associate artistic director Christopher Moses (he/him), pointed out, if theatres are hoping to attract a younger audience, they would do well to listen.

“If you want to make your theatre a place that is relevant to teens, I think the only way to do that is to invite them into the entire process,” said Moses. “So they are among the first to know what shows we’re considering, they get to come to all the first previews. We want to make sure, if we’re claiming that we’re making this place a space for teens, that they have a voice in all of that. There’s an injection of hope and an antidote to cynicism by having teens in your theatre, and I think that’s really important. That’s the gift back to us.”

The hope is that these programs can create a nourishing relationship and teens, both to open often overlooked career paths and to create a bond between a theatre and its future audience. As Stone said, the hope really is that the students will return, considering these theatres to now be their artistic homes, even long after they've gone off to college. Maybe some will even return as employees one day. While working on La Jolla Playhouse's [Without Walls](#) festival, which focuses on interactive and site-inspired theatre, she was excited to see the name of a former teen council member pop up in the programming.

"That's just really cool, because that means they felt like they had a place here and that they feel like they can come back," said Stone. "That's where we want to be heading with the work that we're doing."

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5