Perspective on the Arts

It’s not often that one can have it all, but it works just that way in the arts at Hope College.

Hope is large enough to offer programs that are broad and deep, but small enough to provide students with one-on-one attention and a rich variety of opportunities to perform and do art. The faculty are gifted and respected artists and scholars who are also thoroughly committed to the students they teach. And even as students in the arts (art, creative writing, dance, music and theatre) benefit from the strong programs and their outstanding faculty, they learn in a broader context that in turn informs their art and gives them many more options after graduation.

Hope is on the map nationally for the quality of its arts programs. The college is one of only a handful of institutions nationwide to be accredited in art, dance, music and theatre, and is the only exclusively undergraduate liberal arts college to hold the distinction.

It all starts with the faculty.

“The most important aspect of our program is the caliber of our faculty,” said Dr. Margaret Kennedy-Dygas, professor of music and chairperson of the department.

She counts off several examples from among her music colleagues—concert tours abroad, appearances at Carnegie Hall and other noted venues, recordings, leaders in their research fields. “You’d be hard pressed to find as many nationally and internationally respected musicians as we have at Hope,” she said. “It just doesn’t end.”

One advantage of the college’s size is that even as individual faculty members are outstanding artist-teacher-scholars, the departments are large enough that students can find mentors for multiple specializations within each discipline.

“I think we’re unique in that we offer through our faculty and basic course instruction a really broad range of artistic materials,” said Steve Nelson, associate professor of art and chairperson of the department.

The mix of opportunities to perform with excellent classroom instruction is a deliberate and exceptional characteristic of arts instruction at Hope. Pictured is “The Way Within” by guest choreographer Jon Lehrer during Dance 33 last year.

“The dance department was crucial in making my decision to attend Hope. It was difficult finding a college whose program focused equally in the four major dance forms (ballet, tap, jazz and modern) like Hope’s program. A lot of dance programs focus on either ballet or modern, so Hope is really unique in that respect.”

Lindsey Ferguson ’09
dance performance and choreography major,
communication minor
Fredonia, N.Y.
When your topic chooses you, you have to know how to find out more about it. Dr. Sellers said. “I never have creative writing students questioning about learning.”

“This is the lab. This is the conservatory. The liberal arts curriculum,” she said. “It supports the other work.”

The multiple programs on campus can also give students in the arts additional career options. The departments are seeing a growing number of students pursuing dual major programs. The studies in dance and management can open a career path in arts management; a major in French can add crucial language skills to a major in art history.

In addition to the instruction by the faculty, the college brings in several guest artists each year both to perform and to share their expertise and career stories with students. “Almost every one of our artists meets with the students in some way,” said Denk Emerson ’91, arts coordinator at Hope. “The dancers and musicians do master classes. The theatre companies speak with them about acting and playwriting. They get to learn from these people, plus they get to see them in a different way.”

Learning from faculty and visiting artists is just one way Hope students study the arts. All of the programs offer a blend of theory and practice. Students take the classroom and apply it beyond it.

“There’s certainly a grand partnership between the academic component of the theatre major and the production component,” said Michelle Bobe, who is professor of theatre and director of theatre and dance costume designer. “We give them the building blocks and the foundation in the classroom, and then our performances are the labor where they get to try those out.”

There is, in fact, no substitute for the experience of performing for the public.

“The true test of their ability, their emotional, mental, physical, physical coordination, comes through that connection to the audience,” said Linda Graham, professor of dance and chairman of the dance department. “It’s the place where you actually give your art. That doesn’t happen in the classroom,” she said. “The adrenaline difference between a rehearsal and a performance is huge.”

The opportunities are plentiful. The theatre department, in both studio and art management, schedules more than 100 events each year, as well as multiple student-directed plays. The department of dance’s major concert (Dance 34 this year) regularly runs to full houses during its three nights in the DeVitt Center main theatre. Some community groups have been known to drive from as far away as Detroit, three hours away, to attend an event at Hope. Jim and Donna Brooks of Holland, Mich., have been co-chairs of the Patrons for the Arts, which is the arts advisory board for area arts programs in particular as a resource that makes an important difference in the area’s quality of life. “Both of us have lived in this city for years here in lessons and recitals, and this makes an important difference in the area’s quality of life.”

The West Michigan audience becomes a key partner in the arts together and even enjoy additional opportunities to explore several aspects of the theatre.”

“I’ve taken a wide variety of classes at Hope—philippines of China and Japan, black and white photography, ancient western civilizations, classical guitar, world religions, etc. And these other disciplines have had a great impact on my writing.”

Kelly Sina ’08
English major, writing minor
Grand Rapids, Mich.

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