

12 May 2020

Dear ASTR Colleagues:

We hope the members of our ASTR community along with their friends and families are well and safe in this extraordinary and challenging time.

The Empowerment Committee was designed to advocate for an equitable and sustainable future of the fields of theatre and performance studies in higher education. In light of tough decisions about hiring freezes, furloughs, and even departmental suspensions due to COVID-19, ASTR's Empowerment Committee offers the following **RESPONSE TO COVID-19**. This collection of recommendations is to aid all ASTR faculty who can advocate for those whose jobs are at risk. This letter includes recommendations for those who are contingent faculty who would like to take action. At the same time, we wish to avoid adding additional uncompensated labor to contingent faculty and recognize the precarity of their employment.

This collaborative document is composed by members of the ASTR Empowerment Committee, whose representatives work across the academic spectrum, from adjunct to dean. Our aim is to provide ASTR members with suggestions to aid them in being active in ways they deem appropriate to their different institutions, positions, and workloads. Promoting collaboration, cooperation, transparency, and community-building at this time may help provide inclusive, equitable, and accessible environments to a diverse population of theatre and performance makers and scholars.

We encourage ASTR members to capitalize on the collaborative, creative, and embodied methods of instruction and inquiry that are unique to theatre and performance studies, and bring those skills to the decision-making tables of their home institutions. The suggestions that follow include taking action to retain theatre and performance studies programs and career paths while also advocating for equity, diversity, inclusion, and access. They are intended to be considered by all who are interested and as they are able (administrators, faculty, and students) to support institutional and departmental endeavors undertaken to sustain theatre and performance studies in academia in the present moment and in light of an uncertain future.

I. Identify Challenges to our Discipline and Higher Ed in light of COVID-19

The current moment presents practical, financial, professional, and health-related challenges. Uncertainty about what will happen next may lead departments, colleges, and universities to employ fewer faculty and production staff members. It may also enfranchise potentially toxic power structures and abandon promotion and hiring practices that enable diversity, equity, inclusion, or access. Graduate students, many of whom are already undercompensated for their educational labor, are now weighing the costs and benefits of completing their programs. Specific challenges may have to do with the practical nature of maintaining a high-quality learning environment within a variety of educational scenarios.

Access to funding, food, and adequate housing for graduate and undergraduate students represents a significant challenge to the recruitment and retention of a socio-economically diverse student body.

II. Propose Generative Solutions

For those who want to take an active role in the process of reopening, some considerations might include: organizing for staggering staff on site; employing hybrid forms of teaching both live and online; reducing class size; modifying types of courses offered; spreading the academic year out over the summer to reduce the number of people in hallways, classrooms and on campus; using study abroad sites for international students who may not be able to reenter the country; adjusting the institutionally-recommended percentage enrollment of students to maintain faculty during this crisis; and, making adjustments in major and minor requirements. Consider developing new courses that address the needs for new skills like virtual production, new modes of spectatorship, acting for the camera, international collaboration in an online setting, making theatre at home, radio plays, theatre live and not live, on-demand acting, etc.

A. Short-term strategies to retain faculty, funding, and programs: Actively advocate for Theatre Studies, Performance Studies, and artistic practice at every level at your school and university.

1. Request that a faculty committee be formed in your department to help brainstorm the best path forward.
2. Form or join a graduate student coalition to ensure that graduate students' concerns are represented at COVID-19 planning sessions.
3. Advocate for equity, diversity, inclusion, and access during COVID-19.
4. If lines are in danger of being cut in theatre and performance studies departments, look for ways to partner with other departments and interdisciplinary programs or diversity hiring initiatives.
5. Work with on-campus childcare and family programs to create pathways and partnerships with faculty, staff and students who need such assistance to do their jobs and make their art.
6. Connect with campus and/or community food banks to create ways for faculty, staff or students to access the food they need.
7. Request to be on a school committee to advocate for the arts. Campus committees that need arts advocates could include:
 - a. Tenure and Promotion, where you can provide examples and explanations for what constitutes rigorous processes and commendable scholarship in our fields.

- b. General Education Committees, where you can advocate for the retention, establishment, continuation, and growth of arts course offerings within core curricula.
 - c. Curriculum Committees, where you can provide justification for new or updated arts courses and other curricular changes that come under review.
 - d. Strategic Planning Committees, where you can press for strategies that include the arts as central to the sustainability of your institution.
 - e. Research Allocation Committees, where you can defend and explain arts research processes to ensure that funding within your institution may go towards excellence in theatre and performance studies scholarship and professional practice.
7. Find a way to convene a virtual Faculty Town Hall meeting to discuss the changes afoot.
 8. Attend Faculty Senate meetings, join the Faculty Senate.
 9. Gather resources about teaching performance online.
 10. Begin conversations about high quality distance-education platforms for embodied practices.
 11. Take a distance education course and bring what you learn to the faculty.
 12. Engage educational support staff and bring their expertise to the faculty.
 13. Make an appointment with your chairperson and/or academic dean to discuss your tenure packet in light of COVID-19 and the process of deferring your application if needed.
 14. Invite contributions/ideas from contingent faculty that recognizes their knowledge of the student body and course-load adaptation experience.
 15. Advocate for adequate compensation for the extra labor asked of contingent faculty to accommodate the current crisis.
 16. If you are able to take a leave without pay, offer to do so in order to maintain a contingent faculty member.

B. Long-Term Strategies to Strengthen Theatre and Performance Studies within Academic Institutions

1. Assume an administrative role where you can advocate for theatre and performance studies.
2. Be visible as an arts professional on-campus.
3. Make interdepartmental collaborations.
4. Create inter-institutional collaborations.
5. Propose ways to include theatre studies, performance studies and artistic practice in the core curriculum and other school-wide curricula such as:
 - a. First-Year Experience programs

- b. General Education and Core curriculum options
- c. Honors programs that enable students to do individual research.

III. **Conclusion**

We recognize that many of the suggestions in this letter are broad and difficult to achieve in a short time frame. Not all faculty, students, or staff are able to navigate agency within the frameworks of their institutions to the same degree, nor should they be expected to do so. In the spirit of the Empowerment Committee's mission, we recommend that individuals take action where they can, and use this moment to voice concerns and propose creative solutions to the unique problems presented by COVID-19. In doing so, it is our hope that ASTR's community of theatre and performance studies scholars, artists and administrators will be able to retain lines, departments, and programs while also laying the foundation for a sustainable future.

ASTR Empowerment Committee

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