

ATHE Guidance on those with Theatre/Performance Graduate Degrees Working Outside Traditional Theatre/Performance University Departments

Non-Traditional Positions

The update to the [ATHE Tenure and Promotion Guide](#) (which will be uploaded online in late 2021) defines the skills, tasks, qualities, and expectations that promotion and tenure committees should use to adjudicate members of ATHE who serve in traditional faculty positions within theatre, performance, and English departments. As the job market for those theatre/drama positions has contracted during the twenty-first century—from the recession of 2008 to the global financial crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21—many people with graduate degrees in theatre/performance have found other employment that uses their degrees and skills.

A survey of people with PhDs, MFAs, and MAs in theatre/performance who work in non-traditional positions conducted in June 2021¹ found that members of ATHE generally fall into one of the following three categories:

1. Theatre/performance PhDs working as faculty in adjacent academic fields
2. Theatre/performance PhDs, MFAs, and MAs working in non-faculty positions at universities (such as admin or staff)
3. Theatre/performance PhDs and MFAs working outside the academy and outside of theatre

This section of this document is a reference for folks with graduate degrees in theatre/performance working outside traditional positions in theatre, performance, or English departments to refer their supervisors to make a case for promotion. It also serves as a reminder that many members of the ATHE community are not serving in traditional, tenure-track theatre department jobs.² As this trend continues, ATHE needs to work to be a welcoming place for those who still participate in theatre in higher education but not in the ways that the organization anticipated when it was founded in the 1980s.

¹ This survey was conceived and co-written by Lauren Beck, Megan Geigner, and Christine Simonian Bean in consultation with Greg Mitchell. The survey authors sent the survey to thirty-four individuals and received 30 responses (29 surveys and 1 email response). The population of the respondents was: 19 PhDs in theatre or performance studies, 10 MFAs in theatre (directing, design, acting, theatre for young audiences); and 1 MA in theatre. All those surveyed work in non-traditional positions.

² It is worth noting that some of the respondents had held more traditional university appointments within theatre departments, but the nature of those jobs has significantly changed in the last decade or so to make them untenable. One respondent with an MFA in costume design said, “In twelve years of academic positions, all of them have been non-tenure track.” She is no longer working in the field. Another respondent explained that department expectations to do both daytime teaching and evening and weekend production work made parenting impossible; she is also no longer in the field.

1. People with Theatre and Performance PhDs Working as Faculty in Adjacent Fields

Many PhDs in theater or performance work outside the field in adjacent departments. While many of these adjacent fields will turn to their own professional associations (i.e. American Studies Association, Communication Studies Association, etc.) to adjudicate faculty for promotion and tenure, ATHE encourages chairs, deans, and committee members to consider the unique training, knowledge, skills, and qualities that their faculty with theatre and performance training bring to the job.

A survey of those who earned PhDs in Theatre or Performance studies between 2008 and 2020 shows that many no longer work in theatre departments. Instead, a growing number of PhDs in our field serve in departments and programs of:

- Africana Studies
- African American Studies
- Anthropology
- Black Studies
- Humanities
- Languages
- Speech and Communications Studies
- Women's, Gender, and/or Sexuality Studies
- Writing

These faculty members have adapted to their new fields, but their theatre and performance background, expertise, and training remains paramount to their work. Faculty members in myriad departments research and write and teach, but those with theatre and performance degrees bring further skills such as creating content, working collaboratively, putting on events, managing projects, and perfecting interpersonal communication, among other skills. **Figure 1** demonstrates the percentage of the PhDs in theatre or performance who work in adjacent academic fields surveyed in 2021 who use each specific skill from their PhD training in their current academic position:

Figure 1: Skills Theatre and PS PhDs use as Faculty in Adjacent Fields

Argumentation	78%
Author and content creator	78%
Big-picture analysis	56%
Collaboration	89%
Community building	78%
Editing	56%
Ethnography and autoethnography	67%
Event logistics	67%
Interpersonal communication	78%
Interpreting human relationships	67%
Performance and public speaking	67%
Proposal and grant writing	67%
Researching	89%

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Those who work in departments outside theatre/performance/English sometimes face issues with regard to the consideration of performance work when it comes time for promotion and tenure.

One survey respondent says:

“My program added language specifying that it would count creative work such as performances, creative writing, film-making, multi-media creation, etc. toward tenure and promotion. It did not, however, specify "how much" it would count. For example, it is unclear whether a memoir "counts" the same as an academic monograph from a university press. How much is a performance piece worth? The same as an article? Two articles? I don't think a formula is the right mechanism, per se, but all three lines in my program are now held by people with Performance Studies PhDs and/or PS backgrounds yet the wording remains vague. In the end, I achieved tenure but did so without doing any performance or creative work yet I think departments need to think more about this. It was also my experience on the job market that when I interviewed at other schools for other jobs (including anthropology, Black studies, Cultural Studies, and other gender/sexuality studies departments), none of them had clear information about how to value/evaluate creative work in a tenure portfolio.” [...] If a department doesn't already have a clear articulation of how to value performance or creative work, then this could create real hurdles for junior faculty.

ATHE encourages supervisors in adjacent departments to use this information to help adjudicate any and all PhDs from theatre or performance studies for tenure and promotion, with special attention to the preceding sections in about how to weights and evaluate creative work.

2. People with Theatre/Performance graduate degrees working at Universities or within the Academy in non-faculty positions, such as staff or administration

In addition to taking faculty positions in departments outside theatre and performance (and English), a significant number those with theatre and performance graduate degrees work in university positions outside of academic departments wherein they serve as administrators, program directors, and other staff. The survey shows a growing number of theatre/performance graduate degree holders serve universities in

- Academic support and resource centers
- Admissions
- Centers for research
- Offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Offices of undergraduate research
- Teaching and learning centers

Theatre/performance degrees orient those who earn them to use their work to build and advocate for communities; to create immersive experiences; to program and plan events; to manage projects, and to assess the impacts of initiatives and programs, among other skills. **Figure 2** demonstrates the percentage of theatre/performance graduate degree holders who work in

university centers or administrative or staff positions surveyed in 2021 who use each specific skill from their graduate training in their current position:

Figure 2: Skills theatre/performance graduate degree holders use in non-faculty university positions

Community building	67%
Community outreach and advocacy	67%
Creating immersive experiences	67%
Event Logistics	89%
Programming events	100%
Project management workflow	67%
Public speaking	100%
Proposal and grant writing	56%
Understanding the impact of programs and initiatives	89%
User experience research	44%

Additionally, a respondent remarked, “I have found that people from the humanities are a valuable (and valued) commodity in university administrations, as most STEM/Econ-type folks struggle to engage with the humanities/arts parts of campus.”

Each unit within a university will define their own parameters for promotion, however, ATHE encourages those adjudicating their co-workers with theatre/performance backgrounds to consider the unique training, knowledge, skills, and qualities that they bring to the job.

3. People with Theatre/performance PhDs and MFAs working Outside the Academy and Outside Theatre

Finally, a growing number of people with terminal graduate degrees in theatre/performance work outside of the academy and outside of theatre altogether. While positions vary quite broadly, a sample of the position titles from the survey include:

- Consultant
- Court reporter
- Design Engineer
- Director of Drafting and Engineering
- Inclusion Leader
- Independent Content Creator
- Independent Editor and Indexer
- Information Security Business Associate II
- Program Manager for Neighborhood Partnerships + Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow
- Project Manager
- Senior Director-Strategic Planning,
- Sign Designer
- Store owner

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People in these positions work in different fields and types of businesses—from commercial design and custom fabrication concerns such as Coherent Design, Black Walnut, and Ravenswood Studio Inc. to local not-for-profits such as the Chicago Humanities Festival and the Special Olympics of Illinois to large, international companies such as Gensler, Ace Hardware, and Trader Joe’s.

Theatre/performance degrees orient those who earn them to analyze the big picture, to collaborate, to create immersive experiences, to hire and write contracts, to manage projects, and to consider the user experience (UX). **Figure 3** demonstrates the percentage of theatre/performance terminal graduate degree holders who work non-academic and non-theatre settings surveyed in 2021 who use each specific skill from their graduate training in their current position:

Figure 3: Skills theatre/performance graduate degree holders use in non-academic and non-theatre positions

Big picture analysis	83%
Collaboration	83%
Creating immersive experiences	50%
Hiring and contracting	42%
Project management: budgeting	58%
Project management: workflow	75%
Researching	75%
Understanding the impact of programs and initiatives	50%
User experience research	58%

Each of these industries and positions will have methods for considering advancement, but ATHE encourages those adjudicating their co-workers with theatre/performance backgrounds to consider the unique training, knowledge, skills, and qualities that they bring to the job.

Testimonials of the Issues faced

A significant number of theatre/performance graduate degree recipients work in non-traditional (sometimes called “alt-ac”) positions, and ATHE is wise to keep this in mind when drafting documents for the community. People working outside of traditional faculty lines in theatre, performance, or English departments face unique challenges in having their theatre/performance training recognized, evaluated, and celebrated, and ATHE should continue to be a resource for them.

Several people surveyed suggested that **ATHE could create more welcoming spaces** for those working outside traditional faculty jobs:

“It is true that I would feel more disciplinarily at home at ATHE if folks in alt-ac positions were better acknowledged/legitimized. I didn't lose my expertise in theatre/performance studies just because I'm not in a tenure-track faculty role. In fact, I have significantly more to offer the community now than I did as a graduate student, although I feel much less accepted.”

“I would love for the conversation about the value of the degree beyond direct application to be louder and more meaningful. The only people who really value the skills theatre teaches you are theatre people who are trying to market themselves as someone capable of more than reciting Shakespeare.”

“It would be great to create a community of folks who have PhD/MFAs but are working in other fields. I think we could be more powerful as a community.”

Furthermore, the people surveyed expressed how important the skills they bring as theatre/performance experts are to their work and how frustrating it can be to feel as though they are not legitimate or to feel as though their educators and mentors did not spend enough time explaining the applicability of their degrees outside theatre and the academy or acknowledging the reality of the job market. For example:

“I think a really important part of this conversation is the fact that I get how my education is relevant, but I have to fight for others to understand it. There is a definite problem that the corporate world doesn't understand the value and versatility of the degree. Even when folks want to bring in someone to teach improv skills (something I am trained to do), they would prefer to have an outsider come in. There is an assumption that if I was good at it, it would be doing that full time. When in reality, I graduated at a moment when full-time positions in academia were falling victim to the Uber-ization of higher education. I was spending more time and money driving to an adjunct gig than I was making just to stay “relevant” in academia.”

“I believe my MFA and PhD training prepared me for the career I have chosen. I see so many of the skills I learned in those programs transferring into the work I do and adding to my success. I would be happy to join conversations about how theatre MFAs and PhDs can transfer the skills they are learning into a variety of academic and non-academic careers. I am wary of the #alt-ac moniker as I don't think that is a fair representation of the variety of careers available, and creates a somewhat false dichotomy between types of careers.”

“As someone who is outside the academy, it's disheartening to see the situation theatre PhD graduates find themselves in. There are fewer and fewer jobs, and it seems a lot of time and effort has to be devoted to simply justifying their existence. The ground changed significantly from when I started my program to when I finished it, and I worry about long-term prospects.”

“I don't want to dissuade people from following their passion--but it needs to be made clear, I think, that their path is at least as likely, if not more likely, going to be outside the academy. That being the case, it's also difficult to encourage people to take on the burden of student debt when the likelihood of ever paying it off is so slim.”

“Arts programs often do a tremendous disservice to their students by not emphasizing all the things an Arts education can do for you outside of the Arts. So programs fill students with optimism without exposing the realities of the struggle. Other programs teach the reality, but don't equip the students to do anything about it. Let's face it, very few people with degrees in the Arts work in their field of study for a living. Many of us find tertiary or adjacent fields (live events, broadcast, etc.), but there are a lot of folks working in HR, public relations, advertising, brand management, and a myriad of other professions. It takes a special personality to pursue the arts,

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self-motivated, curious, and somewhat tenacious. These are traits that are vital in many industries. I don't know if any of that is relevant to your task at hand. I know I'm biased, but I strongly believe that Liberal Arts education is the best education a person can receive as it provides a wide range of contextualized knowledge, encourages curiosity and creative problem solving, and provides a host of skills that are useful in almost any setting.”

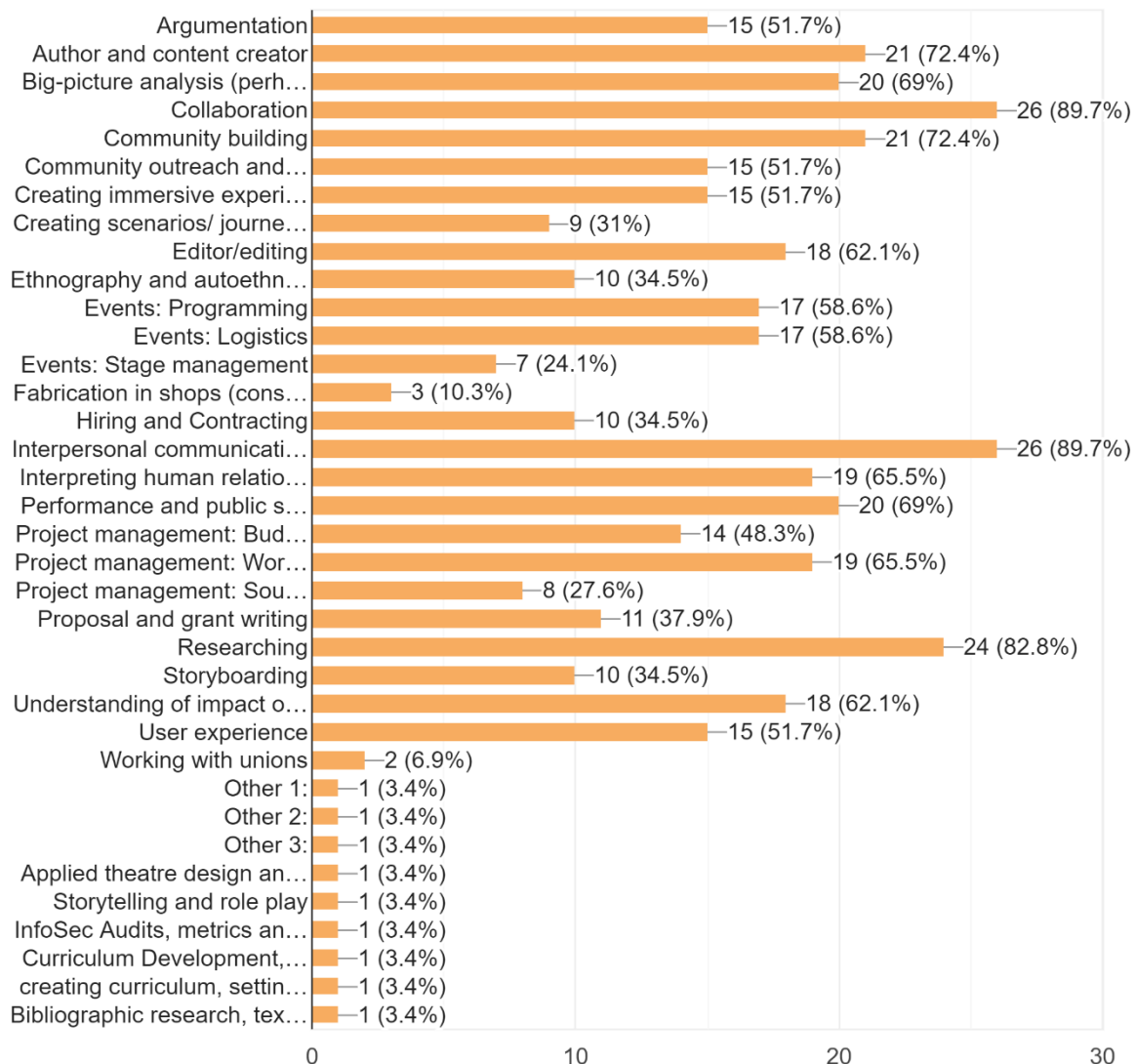
ATHE and those who work with ATHE should center these concerns while considering people for promotion and tenure and also determining the way they speak about theatre/performance degrees more broadly.

Appendix

Figure 4: Full response to survey

Which of these skills do you use frequently in your current employment? Please check as many as apply.

29 responses



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