

BY PAUL BRYAN

# HIGH MARKS

The reaccreditation process requires us to study how we teach and how we learn. Then comes the exam.

PHOTOS BY PETE CHECCHIA



## Every ten years, Curtis is put to the test.

The elaborate reaccreditation process of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education “ensures institutional accountability, self-appraisal, improvement, and innovation through peer review and the rigorous application of standards within the context of institutional mission.” If all goes well, it results in a necessary and public stamp of approval, which Curtis is now on track to receive this fall.

Having played a leadership role in three reaccreditation cycles at Curtis since 2003, I can attest to the fact that this decennial evaluation—with all that it requires of the Curtis community—is quite an undertaking. As with most valuable efforts, what we get out of it is directly proportional to what we put in.

## We’re Curtis! Why do we need accreditation?

As a highly respected institution with alumni of equally high regard, why should Curtis be accountable to the standards of an external commission? Why should we subject ourselves to its process?

Schools and their students see substantial benefits from accreditation. First and foremost, a degree from Curtis is recognized by other similarly accredited institutions of higher education. Our graduates can qualify for master’s and doctoral programs, and credit earned at Curtis can be transferred to other schools based on their policies.

Perhaps more crucially, our status with Middle States allows Curtis to provide federal Title IV funding to our students in the form of loans to assist with room, board, and other qualifying expenses. In 2016–17, Curtis disbursed \$340,474 in direct loans and Pell Grants—a significant number and one that allowed 75 percent of our students to receive some form of financial assistance, over and above the full-tuition scholarships that all Curtis students receive.

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### The heart of the process: self-study

While Curtis’s reaccreditation effort culminated in a four-day evaluation team visit last spring, the real work began two and a half years earlier, with the creation of an institutional self-study document. This allowed Curtis to measure itself against the standards Middle States requires all institutions to meet. Self-study also gave us a chance to look inward, examining all facets of Curtis and determining how we can better fulfill our mission.

From the beginning, the process was purposely inclusive. I had the pleasure of creating and chairing a 17-member steering committee comprising faculty, administrative staff, students, alumni, trustees, and a former member of the Curtis board of overseers. Then seven subcommittees were formed, each concentrating on a specific Middle States standard of accreditation; these involved an additional 36 members of the Curtis community. Personally, I found the steering committee and subcommittee meetings energizing. Each participant brought a genuine and thoughtful presence to the meetings and a determination to make the self-study process useful. I was especially struck by the level of engagement exhibited by the performance faculty members who participated—a benefit the school needs on a more consistent basis.

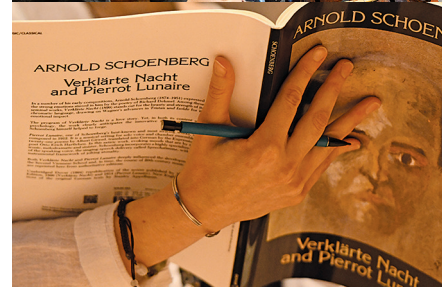
Meanwhile, in an effort separate from the Middle States reaccreditation process but running parallel with it, the Task Force on Curtis’s 21st-Century Education examined the strengths and weaknesses of the Curtis education across all areas of learning. Led by musical studies faculty member Mia Chung, this group provided valuable context and findings that further informed the reaccreditation process and self-study document.

### What we discovered about Curtis

The self-study process provided us with a valuable opportunity to assess the institution’s current strengths and weaknesses, and recommend ways in which the school can be improved.

Our look inward reaffirmed that Curtis is indeed a mission-driven institution. Our mission—to educate and train exceptionally gifted young musicians to engage a local and global community through the highest level of artistry—helps give the school, as well as its programs and operations, a distinct focus. The visiting team concurred in its final report, complimenting Curtis on the clarity of its mission and its integration throughout the curriculum.

Curtis is filled with overachievers—whether students, faculty, or staff—and the culture of the school mirrors that quality. The administration and faculty want to do everything we can to send our graduates into the professional world of music fully equipped to deliver on the school’s mission. As Dr. Chung noted in the final Task Force report, the learning opportunities Curtis makes available to students have grown rapidly over the last decade. The career studies department, according to the report, has “given students opportunities to build career-based skills and to understand music’s social impact through work with individuals and groups that might not otherwise have exposure to classical music.” The report also credits the musical



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studies and liberal arts departments with building “a robust set of required and elective courses” and establishing “more consistent attendance and homework requirements to develop essential abilities in the areas of reading comprehension, critical thinking, analysis, writing, and public speaking.”

These learning opportunities are critical companions to the lessons, coachings, ensemble experiences, and performances that lie at the heart of a Curtis education. Because all these are so important, some constant themes emerged in our self-study meetings and discussions. We kept encountering the need to balance and prioritize within the school's programs, to integrate the performance and academic curricula, and to improve assessment of all our curricular offerings.

If we consistently apply these themes in conjunction with each other, each student will realize greater benefits and meaning from each learning opportunity. So we must create clear goals for each project, assignment, or performance. We must ensure that pertinent faculty and staff are involved in assigning the right opportunities to the right students at the right times. We must connect the skills being perfected in lessons with those being built in the classroom and in communities outside Curtis.

### The process has ended! Now what?

The inclusive nature of the self-study process has shown that input from the entire Curtis community is essential to our improvement as an institution.

The self-study document recommends that every staff member, going forward, play a role in how the school's annual strategic priorities are determined and met. These plans and goals will be set at organizational, departmental, and individual levels.

Representatives of the performance and academic faculties will begin to gather regularly, as a faculty council. This group will consider, discuss, and advise the administration on relevant topics that affect the school, its programs, and its students.

Students will continue to have numerous outlets for involvement in shaping Curtis, both as individuals and as represented by the student council: town hall meetings, administrators' open doors, regular attendance at board committee meetings, and offering feedback through anonymous evaluations of all of the school's programs and activities.

Back in 2015, as we began our self-study process, I spent some time re-reading Curtis's 2008 Middle States self-study—a document I co-authored with my friend and faculty colleague Jeanne McGinn. I was amazed at how much Curtis had progressed in seven years and how many past recommendations had been realized in that time. I look forward to a similar experience seven years from now. ♦

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