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Why so Touchy? Navigating Physical Touch in the Performing Arts

Joseph Skillen
jskillen@uncc.edu

Gretchen Alterowitz
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, gretchen.alterowitz@uncc.edu

Michelle Reinken
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Michelle.Reinken@uncc.edu

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Title: Why so Touchy? Navigating Physical Touch in the Performing Arts

Abstract (25-50 words): Physical touch is endemic to instruction in the Performing Arts. Two Performing Arts Chairs and the University's Title IX Coordinator share approaches and solutions to navigating challenges resulting from the use of touch in student-instructor interactions.

5 keywords: Title IX, Physical Touch, Consent, Music, Dance

Presentation (300-500 words):

Performing arts disciplines in higher education face a changing landscape related to student preparedness for college in terms of mental health concerns and expectations of faculty relationships with students. As chairs of Music and Dance Departments, we are tasked with building support structures in disciplines that tend to create close relationships with students - we often work in one-on-one situations, for extended hours, and outside normal working hours. Physical touch can be a valuable teaching tool for Dance and Music, but can lead to legitimate complaints against faculty, discomfort or harm that might retraumatize survivors, as well as lead to general misunderstandings between all involved parties. Our disciplines in academia face a rising number of sexual or interpersonal conduct complaints while in our professional fields, intimacy coordination is gaining traction and processes for the use of touch and consent are becoming standardized.

UNC Charlotte, North Carolina's Urban Research University, is comprised of high achieving students where approximately one-third of our student population identifies as first-generation, BIPOC, and/or Pell-eligible. Our performing arts students come to us because of our community-engaged mission and seek to explore their disciplines through that lens. This brings to our classrooms a diverse level of student artistic experience and expectations when working with faculty that expect excellence across all performing arts disciplines. Acknowledging the instructive power of physical touch in offering pedagogical examples and physical corrections, we also recognize that that same instructive touch may conjure issues of consent, bodily autonomy, and power dynamics between individuals. To foster a healthier environment, we hired an external Intimacy Director to present "Facilitating Consent in High Contact Disciplines," workshops in separate sessions for faculty and students with the goal of seeking a shared set of tools and language to address the topics of physical touch and consent. The presentation addressed the creation of supportive spaces for students and faculty to do their best work while fostering safer spaces and student autonomy.

In the days following the sessions, students and faculty sought follow-up support. The sensitive nature of the session dialogue raised emotions for some, while others examined past decisions and questioned their actions. We see this workshop series as the first portion of what will be a continuing conversation. It will be necessary to explore future steps, such as yearly workshop offerings and the development of guidelines around common language and best practices.

All university employees, including faculty are required to comply with Title IX guidance and related institutional reporting obligations and must create departmental practices that support students' health and wellness. This session shares two performing arts chairpersons' experience with providing similar resources to faculty and students, as a proactive response

based on feedback from the university Title IX coordinator, with the understanding that both of these populations navigate the space of touch and consent together. We will engage the audience in an interactive experience and discussion following our presentation.