

Regional

Lana Hagan teaching acting a hard act to follow

Budgets for the arts in public schools are under serious threat. Not only has funding been diminishing, but many programs have been disappearing altogether.

Pressure exists from politicians, school administrators, and even parents for schools to concentrate on teaching "useful" skills. Yet, some are making the case that to weaken or eliminate arts programs in schools will only jeopardize the future success of students — no matter what career path they follow.

One advocate for maintaining the arts in our schools is Lana Hagan, an instructor and head of theater education in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Evansville, Ind., Hagan initially wanted to be a journalist and obtained her bachelor's degree in literature and language from Webster University in St. Louis. She later shifted her interests and received her master's degree in theater and directing from Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Hagan said that she exemplifies someone who started down one career path and ended with another because of what she learned about theater education.

"I wanted to be a journalism teacher," Hagan said. "Yet, because I wanted to be more marketable when it came to finding a job, I also pursued speech and theater certification. At the end, they offered me a drama teacher job. Life takes you places you never thought you would or could go."

One of the courses she teaches at SIUE is introduction to acting, but she sees very few students coming out of high school with any theater experience.

"I think an acting class at the high school level should be for people who want to improve their presentation skills, but most schools in Illinois do not have academic theater programs, only extra-curricular ones,"

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

she said.

Her teaching, she said, leads her students to build confidence in their abilities.

"When you teach someone to speak clearly, that makes them feel more comfortable so they lose some of their inhibition," Hagan said.

She said that she does not think that a person needs to be especially talented to do well in theater.

"It is a work ethic," Hagan explained. "If you are interested, you can acquire the skills. Some very talented actors never make it."

Hagan said that she believes the main benefit of getting training in acting is the improvement of communication skills. "I can't think of any profession where presentation skills are not key to being really successful," Hagan said. She added that acting skills can be useful in everyday life.

"There are times in life when you play a role that you should play honestly," Hagan said. "I have even used my acting skills to talk my way out of speeding tickets."

Hagan said that while there are many talented theater educators in Illinois, she is concerned that many public schools in the state do not have theater specialists on their staffs.

Hagan said that she also sees a number of other benefits that come from art education.

"Many students stay in school because of the arts," she said. "They become better readers. Statistics show that students with arts backgrounds do better."

Hagan offers a number of opportunities to her students at SIUE, such as a course titled "The New York Experience" where she

takes her students to the Big Apple. Some of the students in the course, she said, have expressed to her how much of a life-changing experience it was. In fact, some of her students ended up working in New York City theaters.

"Many students are so involved in their own performances that they don't get to see enough theater," she added.

Hagan also travels to summer festivals to recruit students for the theater program at SIUE. "They are not only fascinated by the program but also by the beauty of our campus," she said.

Her advocacy for theater led her to create the "ARTS for All" program that provides free theater tickets to university students — an initiative that has been replicated by other programs on campus. "We still get students who have never seen a play," Hagan added.

She is also involved on a revision of the National Standards for Arts Education, a nationwide statement that describes what all young Americans should know and be able to do in different areas of the arts. Additionally, Hagan wrote the script for an interactive educational video titled "The Business of Show Business," which shows schools how to actually make money off of the arts.

"A lot of school theater programs need to generate box office dollars," Hagan said. "To know how to run a theater department or a theater group is essential for survival. My video is about how to get people excited about theater."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Alan Buxbaum

Professor Lana Hagan with students in New York, from left, Hagan, Ryan Weichmann, Gabe Taylor, Meagan Onneil, Emily Speight, Prof. Matt Paris, Kristina Cirone, Katie Allison and Johanna Beck.