A NOTE: THE ECONOMICS OF THE LIVE PERFORMING ARTS, AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Business and economics faculty can join those in the arts to increase consumer awareness of and sensitivity to the economics of the live performing arts. This note describes an interdisciplinary course designed to promote greater consumer understanding of the economic status of the arts and to be a vehicle by which to acquaint a diverse group of students with an application of some principles of economics and enterprise management. The course was formed and team taught by a college economics professor and a music professor.

The course was structured for a four-week term, the first two weeks spent on campus in class sessions devoted to providing the students with a broad understanding of the manner in which the live performing arts are financed in the United States and, for comparison, in western Europe. This was accomplished by a mixture of student library research, assigned reading, class discussions, and lectures.

The economic aspects considered in class included the following ideas: 1) The topic is relevant for examination in an advanced industrial economy in which the material needs of life in general are being met. At this stage of economic development the allocation of a nation’s resources in the pursuit of cultural enrichment gains increasing attention. 2) The live performing arts (along with other services such as educational, legal, and medical) lie within that sector of the economy where productivity cannot as easily be increased as the general rate. 3) Improvement in management practice will slow the downward trend of the arts in economic performance. 4. Most money given to performing groups in the United States comes from wealthy individuals, the larger corporations, and the foundations. Thus far, at least one-half of that total in fact has been a government contribution through operation of the tax laws. The implication for
philanthropy of recent federal tax legislation is another matter to include.

The class sessions also included study of the arts institutions and performances (theater, opera, symphony, dance) which the group attended during the second portion of the course. Indeed, a distinguishing and most successful teaching-learning feature of the course was the field experience gained during a week in New York City and another in Washington, D.C. During this phase the class conferred with a variety of persons involved in administering, funding, or other aspects of a range of arts institutions and also attended arts events.

Among the authorities with whom discussions were held included: president and managing director and the vice-president for education of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the president of the Associated Councils of the Arts of New York City, the executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts, the president of the New York Philharmonic, the director of finance of the Metropolitan Opera Association, a noted Broadway producer, the president of the National Symphony Orchestra, the program information director of the National Endowment for the Arts, the executive secretary of the Professional Employees, Council of AFL/CIO, a Kennedy Center administrator, the executive director of Arena Stage and president of the League of Resident Theatres. Sessions with these individuals provided the class with an incomparable, from-the-source extension of the knowledge developed in the preceding two weeks on campus. The response of the class to the field segment of the course was enthusiastic.

The class members were from academic majors ranging from art and business to mathematics and music. Such a course is of particular interest to persons majoring in the arts, e.g., music. As noted, the course provides them with knowledge of the economic underpinning of the performance facet of the arts. Students interested in business and economics would find much in the course to be a case study in economic and administrative analysis. To individuals specializing in other fields the course would be of general interest, especially if they have an arts area as an avocation. The limited enrollment in the course described