

Being Relevant

Alexis Davis-Hazell



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In her first column, new NATS President Alexis Davis-Hazell articulates a vision for the relevance of NATS in the 21st century. She reflects on the original objectives of NATS' charter members and explores questions that help form an organizational outlook reaching into the year 2044. Davis-Hazell introduces a philosophy of retention involving representation of multiple cultural and professional identities, generations, and musical genres within chapter, district, and region leadership. She challenges current members to nominate more independent teachers for leadership positions and to support the investment in technological advancements for the association that will move us toward fulfilling NATS' vision.

- 1) To establish and maintain the highest standards of ethical principles and practices in the profession.
- 2) To establish and maintain the highest possible standards of competence in the Voice Teaching Profession; to conduct and encourage research and to disseminate resulting information to the profession at large, and to encourage effective cooperation among vocal teachers for their protection, welfare, and advancement.

— Minutes of [NATS] Organization Committee Meeting Luncheon, Netherland-Plaza Hotel, Cincinnati, OH, March 23, 1944¹

SIX YEARS INTO TEACHING at Chandler-Gilbert Community College in the Phoenix metro area, I was encouraged by my colleagues to join NATS and my local chapter. Balancing multiple roles was normal; while teaching adjunct and running a small private studio out of both my apartment and an instrument rental location, I intermittently took semesters off for international touring engagements and was fortunate to always have a part time teaching job waiting for me. It was 2010, and the membership application process had been recently streamlined. A new chapter was being formed from a split of Central/Northern AZ NATS and named “Valley of the Sun NATS” at the very first meeting I attended. My colleagues made sure I was included and given jobs to do right away.

Beyond my respect and deep appreciation for chapter and region members who continue to strengthen me with their friendship and mentorship, I found myself continuously impressed in 2010 by the genius inherent in NATS' representative leadership structure. Months after my installation as national president-elect in 2022, I became acutely aware of the brevity of a two-year term in the scope of large range goals for our organization. I questioned whether I could ever have the capacity to see any of them to fruition. Attending the 58th Biennial NATS Conference in Knoxville reminded me that, brief though the term of service may seem when looking ahead, it

is enough. I learned from my days in Valley of the Sun Chapter that no one in NATS leadership can be effective alone. Effectiveness comes not through self-reliance, but reliance on a team. We rely upon the multiplicity of interdependent coalitions of leadership steered through the overlapping six-year commitments of those who serve as president-elect, president, and past president, all in partnership with our NATS board, executive director, and executive staff, as established in our bylaws².

It was clearly demonstrated in Knoxville, as is done at every conference, that the NATS team creates magic all the time. As your newest president, I am enough, because we are all enough. Within our mission, vision, values and strategic planning goals lay the seeds of NATS transformation in our time.

WHAT WILL LAST? BEING VISIONARY

In 1944, a small and mighty crew of AATS, NYSTA and Chicago Singing Teachers Guild members took the maiden voyage from an MTNA conference in Cincinnati to form a new organization. Through enthusiastic effort and what second NATS President Leon Carson (1946–1948) called “missionary work,” NATS Membership grew more than 500% in two years, from 100 charter members in 1944 to 523 registered NATS members by 1946.³ They surely intended their legacy to continue into an unknown future but may not have imagined what fruits could be borne.

In the eighty years that followed, NATS has grown from that sturdy boat to an ocean liner with multiple decks of constituents and stakeholders. Our representative areas of passion, profession, and expertise are not meant to compete for dominance, but to contribute to a cooperative whole. They facilitate articulation of our individual and collective value to society as educators, researchers, and artists. NATS members continue to create a lasting community that hones our vision and distills the mission that defines us.

When asked to submit my interpretation of a vision for NATS as part of the nomination process in 2021, I articulated a ten-year plan focused on five areas: 1) intention, 2) retention, 3) inclusion, 4) accountability, and 5) modernization. After serving as president-elect for two years and contemplating the association’s eightieth birthday celebration in Knoxville, the need for

a twenty-year outlook impressed itself upon me. What gives NATS its cultural and intellectual currency, and an industry credibility that will be vibrant and influential through its one hundredth anniversary?

Finding the answers begins with talking to people today. The conversation regarding the centrality and dominance of the classical tradition in voice vis-à-vis the student and teacher body is ongoing. The rise of Musical Theatre, Pop, Rock, Gospel, Jazz, Blues, Hip-hop and other folk and commercial musics, from marginalization to incorporation into formalized studies, has occurred both in scholarly and cross-cultural avocational spheres. To accept that NATS must stay “in the lane” of classical musical genres that inspired its creation is to also accept that the organization will mirror the contraction of exclusive spaces, as classical arts organization patronage declines and education business models shift to larger percentages of part-time and contingent faculty. Approaches to repertoire, opinions regarding whom should study, and concepts regarding who should teach and how, once controversial, are taken for granted today. Through the addition of the new National Student Auditions (NSA) categories, many NATS members have now been affirmed in their longtime service to children and youth. Singing teachers work as part of gender-affirming care teams, rehabilitative care teams, and support singers through all life stages. Our association lifts up our collaborative pianist colleagues and provides a natural home with open space for partnership. Add the velocity of technological innovation to our experiences, and the twenty-first century shows us something as profound as it is intimidating—clinging solely to performing arts education as an aesthetic compliment to, or cultural bastion of the American twentieth century middle class, will ensure our diminished influence.

RETENTION IN A NEW WORLD: BEING WITH THE PEOPLE

“Great vision without great people is irrelevant.”
—Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don’t*⁴

Consider the following philosophy of retention: know your people; embrace your fellow members and support one another in your various professional identities; publicly acknowledge the needs of your colleagues and

publicize the solutions. NATS finds itself in a unique position today. Our membership statistics of recent years reveal two important things: 1) a diverse age range indicating a generational shift in process, and 2) a noticeable migration in primary professional identity from professorial to entrepreneurial. A comparison of the distribution of member age ranges between 2020 and 2024 is shown in Table 1.

Recent trends show that as our longtime respected colleagues who have been central to the leadership transition into advisory and mentorship roles as they retire, we need new generations stepping into positions of leadership. This transition is happening as NATS continues to grow in international presence, and diversity of musical, business, and professional interests. Therefore, involving younger teachers, researchers, and performers in our mission is crucial. Formal and informal NATS mentoring initiatives at chapter, region, and national levels (especially those focused on composition, early career internship, and mentored teaching experiences available to all NATS members), speak to this need. There is room for more. As our teaching authority becomes increasingly affirmed and informed by established voice science, mentorship and collaboration need to be fostered between independent teachers, academic teachers, voice researchers and medical professionals.

RISE OF THE ENTREPRENEUR TEACHER: BEING AWARE

“We don’t accomplish anything in the world alone and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one’s life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that create something.”⁵

—Sandra Day O’Connor

The reputation of NATS being an association primarily catering to university professors is an outgrowth of its origins, but not an accurate reflection of our modern community. We continue to support practitioners, entrepreneurs and professors seeking to stay current on pedagogical and industry trends, while continuing to support singing scholarship and research. In 2020, the number of independent teachers had overtaken college or university instructors by a small margin. Through May 2024, nearly 44% of members indicated

TABLE 1. Comparison of active NATS member reported age ranges.

Age Distribution Snapshot			
June 2020		May 2024	
1940 and earlier (80+)	3%	1944 and earlier (80+)	4%
1941–1950 (70–79)	10%	1945–1954 (70–79)	13%
1951–1960 (60–69)	24%	1955–1964 (60–69)	18%
1961–1970 (50–59)	21%	1965–1974 (50–59)	19%
1971–1980 (40–49)	21%	1975–1984 (40–49)	21%
1981–1990 (30–39)	17%	1985–1994 (30–39)	16%
1991–2000 (20–29)	4%	1995–2006 (18–29)	4%
		Undisclosed	5%

TABLE 2. Distribution comparison of active NATS members reported primary professions

Primary Profession Snapshot	June 2020	May 2024
Active/Retired Singer	8%	6%
Arts Administrator	1%	1%
Choral Director	5%	4%
Collaborative Pianist	2%	2%
Medical Professional or Voice Therapist	1%	1%
Student-Doctoral level	1%	1%
College/University Instructor	39%	37%
Independent Instructor	41%	44%
K-12 Instructor	3%	3%

“independent instructor” as their primary profession and approximately 37% of members reported primary work as a college/university instructor. NATS has recognized the standing of independent teachers, especially by creation of the Independent Teacher column in the *Journal of Singing* and the Independent Teacher Fellowship, as well as the intentional consideration of selection of independent master teachers for the NATS Intern Program. However, there is room for more. The entrepreneur teacher rising in prominence in the NATS community demands a re-examination of leadership representation. A comparison of the distribution of member reported primary professions between 2020 and 2024 is shown in Table 2.

Our economies and the businesses of live performance and academia press forward on their trajectory. Add to this fact, the life experience that many NATS

members know explicitly: the majority of college professors are contingent faculty. We do not survey for full-time employment status among our membership, but according to The American Association of University Professors March 2023 Data Snapshot (which provides government data on faculty appointments and graduate student employment in US higher education), the percentage of the part-time nonmedical academic workforce in the US has increased from 33% to 48% over the years 1987 to 2021.⁶ Full-time appointments of nonmedical non-tenure track or contract faculty with no tenure system have increased from 13% to 20% over that same time frame.⁷ Arguably, the very profession of arts and social sciences professors have become entrepreneurial.

Clearly, the growth trend of our independent entrepreneur members will not move back in the opposite direction. The data confirms the need for us to resist subscription to professional silos within the singing field; each constituency provides a vital contribution to the life blood of NATS. Academics are incentivized by institutional expectations to research and serve; entrepreneurs take risks, challenge the status quo, and push boundaries via innovative practical applications. Harnessing the powerful synergy of these modalities will be the engine of our advancement.

Independent teachers: we need and want more of you in leadership. Representing the diversity of professional standings within chapter, district and region leadership will positively impact the national executive board and facilitate further growth in exciting and productive ways. We are ready to benefit both from traditional and reverse mentorship models of collaboration. This new culture will require a transformation of communication: leveraging technological connectivity.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY: BEING SAVVY

NATS has several areas to establish or uphold which concretize the relevance of our work as voice professionals, in the following order of importance: 1) investing in new digital platforms and engaging with technological innovation; 2) networking and collaborating between entrepreneurs, academics, and industry professionals; 3) mastering the craft of singing 4) demystifying the instruction of functional vocal techniques; 5) advocating for vocal health.

Why is vocal health not at the top of the list? Why list technological innovation and networking first? The answer is, we must examine how to connect our passions with the world and achieve measurable success; in order to stay current, we must reverse the conventional order. This reordering is not a priority of teaching and learning, but it is of professional and organizational practice. In today's climate, networking and collaboration do not happen effectively without leveraging technology. And whatever apprehension there may be about social media and artificial intelligence applications, adapting to digital platforms and technology is crucial for all of our professional lives. Digital materials in the marketplace of goods, services, or ideas will either inspire confidence or skepticism in those who are looking to engage. These tools, put toward the service of craft, technique and vocal health, will guarantee their impact on those goals.

A glimpse into the power of online applications was demonstrated at the 2020 Virtual Conference, a watershed moment in the history of NATS. This timely, brilliantly executed event of unprecedented access provided exactly what the membership needed in a time of turmoil. The leadership of our Executive Director Allen Henderson in the association's response to COVID-19, the increased attention on underrepresented populations and repertoire, significant history and real-world topics brought to light by plenary speakers such as Rhiannon Giddens, were all gains that became a springboard into a new normal. The initiatives to expand cannons of repertoire and work towards inclusion and equitable leadership in the association are evidence of this shift.

Next-level modernization through investment in technological tools is pivotal to fully advancing the culture of NATS, to realizing strategic planning goals, and to launching beyond them on the way to our 100th anniversary. We need to invest in the technology of access by supporting the development of high-quality online options for programs and services, and creating truly outstanding communication. Current goals include the development of audition scheduling and adjudication software. Imagine what NATS could also do by adopting a Learning Management System platform equipped for content streaming, and administering training programs through subscription service for voice professionals that are accessible anywhere in the world.

CONCLUSION: BEING RELEVANT

Witnessing sea-change occurring today, I reflect on the privilege of gaining an incredible education through NATS service, especially during the past eight years under the guidance of NATS presidents advancing programmatic innovation: Linda Snyder (2016–2018), Karen Brunssen (2018–2020), Carole Blankenship (2020–2022), and Diana Allan (2022–2024). My dearest hope is to contribute to the precedent set by these leaders, championed through NATS' first-ever strategic plan. This and future strategic planning activities are not only groundbreaking progress towards professional fundraising, development, and capitalization, but an open door to rigorous and uncompromising self-examination; this is required to ensure the relevance and utility of the association in the coming years.

The original objectives of the charter members have not expired, and still hold us accountable to meet their standard in a way that is applicable in the present. The appreciation of genres and acoustical approaches will continue to expand as we continue to conduct and encourage research, and encourage cooperation among ourselves for our protection, welfare, and advancement. We will need to continue mobilizing fundraising efforts to make dreams come true as we identify needs for our programs, services, students, and our singing communities.

A vision is extending now beyond where the five-year strategic plans of 2020–2025 and 2026–2030 will end, and the ingredients are brewing now. I welcome your ideas for the next generation of NATS strategic initiatives and capital campaigns at president@nats.org.

NOTES

1. Harvey Ringel, *History of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* (Jacksonville, FL: National Association of Teachers of Singing, 1990), accessed May 23, 2024, https://issuu.com/natsinc/docs/na_of_teachers_of_singing?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ.
2. National Association of Teachers of Singing, "Bylaws, Article X.," October 20, 2022, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.nats.org/bylaws.html#article10>.
3. Leon Carson, "Acceptance Speech of President-Elect Carson," *The Bulletin: Official Organ of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, Inc.*, March/April 1946; John C. Wilcox, "The Detroit Meeting of N. A. T. S. Members," *The Bulletin: Official Organ of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, Inc.*, March/April 1946.
4. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . And Others Don't* (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2001), 42.
5. Dennis Abrams, *Sandra Day O'Connor: U.S. Supreme Court Justice* (New York, NY: Chelsea House, 2009), 41.
6. Glenn Colby, "Data Snapshot: Tenure and Contingency in US Higher Education," *AAUP (American Association of University Professors, March 16, 2023)*, <https://www.aaup.org/article/data-snapshot-tenure-and-contingency-us-higher-education>.
7. *Ibid.*

Alexis Davis-Hazell is a singing actor of opera, concert, and musical theatre repertoire. Her performance highlights include operatic and symphonic works with regional organizations in the United States and Mexico, over 130 performances of *Porgy and Bess* at international venues, and contributing to the GRAMMY™-winning album *Grechaninov: Passion Week* with the Phoenix Bach Choir and Kansas City Chorale. Davis-Hazell has over twenty years of teaching experience in adjunct college, tenure-track university, and private studio owner roles, and a variety of higher education administration experience. As an interdisciplinary collaborator and session presenter at conferences and arts research alliances, her research interests include African American folk and art music, Russian art song literature, and lyric diction pedagogy. She served in chapter leadership roles immediately upon joining NATS in 2010. She was a NATS Emerging Leader Award recipient in 2014, and accepted regional appointments in the Cal-Western and Southeastern Regions, as well as national committee appointments. Prior to a focus on NATS' strategic goals as President-Elect, Davis-Hazell was instrumental in the development of a comprehensive membership retention and recruitment guide for district NATS leaders. Davis-Hazell is Assistant Professor of Voice and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies at The University of Alabama School of Music. <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9558-1092>