

Goal Setting in the Applied Percussion Lesson

By James W. Doyle

“If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.” —Yogi Berra

Setting goals is an essential part of success in life. Many college students begin their studies with a general sense of what they would like to do upon graduation. Developing a process of clear goal setting with continual review and revision can greatly aid students in realizing their initial goals. These goals will guide their progress and focus throughout the semester, and ultimately give shape to their entire college career. In addition, collaborative goal setting provides the applied instructor with the information necessary to create a flexible and individualized curriculum that will meet the unique needs of each student.

In this article, I will present several goal-setting techniques that have been successful in my percussion studio. I recommend goal setting as a consistent, structured, and integrated process in applied lessons, as well as in studio class and advising. A systematic method of documenting and record keeping can be organized to be both efficient and effective. Prior to the first lesson of every semester, each student should fill out a personal goals worksheet; I use Google Forms for this process, which allows access for both the student and me. The categories on the form could include semester goals, degree goals, and short- and long-term career goals. The information from this form is saved in a spreadsheet, which allows the collection and maintenance of this data for tracking throughout each student’s degree program.

At the first lesson of the semester, the student and instructor review the information from the goal worksheet to ensure the student has established well-articulated, realistically attainable, and measurable goals. This also provides an opportunity to align semester and degree goals that support career goals. Connecting semester and degree goals with career goals lends motivation, relevance, and value to their current work. These goal worksheets are then reviewed together at mid-term, and again at the conclusion of the semester to evaluate what goals have been met, which goals are to be continued, which goals have changed, and which need to be adjusted and perhaps redefined.

Angela Myles Beeching, former Director of Career Services at New England Conservatory and author of *Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music*, says, “Careers are developed over time...and long-term career goals are realized through everyday choices about the use of time, energy, and money.”¹ Throughout the year, goal setting should be part of regular conversations, formal lessons, and facilitated through group discussion in studio class. This thread is woven throughout the degree as well, providing ample opportunities for exploration and growth. Thinking about the future is an exciting, yet potentially intimidating process. It is through consistent reflection, practice, and application that students gain confidence and mastery in their goal-setting skills.

When I mentor students on goal-setting practices, I encourage them to start with the desired outcome in mind. Early goal setting should allow an individual to examine every possibility without thoughts of limitations. David Cutler, author of *The Savvy Musician*, suggests to “think big, and never forget what is truly important to you...don’t allow yourself to put up roadblocks, making excuses for why these things can’t happen.”² Students begin the goal-setting process by defining their long-term degree goals. These will likely change over time; however, it is important to have a career goal in mind to allow for structuring immediate goals.

These long-term outcome-based goals provide the inspiration and direction required to achieve the end result.

Often it is easier for students to envision a long-term goal than it is to learn to define short-term goals. This is when mentoring becomes an integral part of the process. When reviewing goals with students, I assist them in creating goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, and process-based.

Specific goal setting is always recommended and preferred over general goal setting. Goals should be clear, concise, realistically attainable, and measurable. For example, rather than, “I will memorize my assigned concerto,” a student might say, “I will memorize measures 1–50 in the first movement of my assigned concerto by the 15th of the month, at quarter note equals 120 beats per minute.” Specific goals are more attainable, and progress toward meeting these goals can be readily observed and measured, which is essential for evaluating progress. The specificity of goals allows for measurement in a way that generalized goal setting does not. Measurements can include auditions, juries, self-evaluation of recorded samples, peer evaluation in studio class, and self-reflections. Many students struggle with setting specific goals initially, but with guidance and mentoring they become adept at this skill.

Establishing a balance between moderate and more elaborate goals is essential to progress. Some students will need guidance in determining the right level of challenge. I recommend that students choose a goal that is a challenge, yet still attainable. Noa Kageyama, author of the blog *The Bulletproof Musician*, suggests “picking a goal that is exciting, motivating, and feels like a real challenge at the upper edge of what you believe you are capable of. When trying to figure out where your upper limits are, trust your gut and don’t forget that we have a tendency to underestimate our abilities.”³ Discussion between the student and the applied instructor can be invaluable in establishing this balance.

Process-based goals and outcome-based, or long-term, goals are both important, but it is through achievement of the process goals that progress is made. The difficulty with outcome-based goals, such as, “I will win the principal timpani position with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra,” is that much of it is out of our control. Someone else with the same outcome-based goal may have a better audition, be better prepared, or appeal to the panel in a particular way. These outcome-based goals serve as a focusing tool, and as motivation, but the process goals remain essential to individual growth. Mastering the tempos, articulation, intonation, sticking, phrasing, and dynamic range of the audition repertoire are examples of process goals. With careful attention to detail with the process goals, an individual can be as prepared as possible for an audition. Examples of process goals include developing technique and repertoire building, and ultimately it is the combination of process and outcome goals that will lead to success.

In music, as in life, success depends on more than having a specific set of musical skills. With fewer traditional jobs available to musicians, developing a broad skill base prepares students for a variety of career opportunities. Identifying strengths in areas beyond specific musical skills and developing these areas can be essential in today’s job market. David Cutler recommends creating a “personal inventory” and evaluating your skills within the following categories: primary musical skill, secondary musical skills, non-musical skills, and unique skills.⁴ In addition, evaluate personal qualities, identifying strengths as well as those in need of further growth. Ask for feedback from colleagues, teachers, and mentors

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who may have a different view of you than you have of yourself. Use this feedback to assist in refining your personal inventory.

A valuable exercise is the development of the “future résumé.” Students are assigned the task of finding résumés belonging to musicians in careers to which they aspire and then reverse-engineer the résumé. Through careful examination, students determine what experiences, skills, and accomplishments they must gain before becoming competitive in their chosen field. Using their current résumé, they then create a future résumé, inserting in italics, or in red, their goals for the future. This document can serve as a guide to the specific goals and objectives to be achieved as they move toward their career goals.

Another valuable exercise is creating a career map, a professional road map that allows you to “visualize where you are, where you want to go, and possible routes to get there.”⁵ Examine your values, interests, personal inventory, and vision for the future. When you have a clear picture of where you currently are and where you hope to be in five, ten, or twenty years, look for potential obstacles between the present and the future, and brainstorm strategies to overcome these challenges.

Although these strategies require an investment of time beyond the teaching of repertoire, the value is exponential. Beyond the value inherent in becoming exceptional at primary skills, another reason for a student to complete a music degree is to get a job. With regular guidance, students can acquire the ability to set goals, develop a personal inventory and map their careers, useful skills for all pursuits, musical and otherwise.

ENDNOTES

1. Beeching, Angela Myles. *Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 9.
2. Cutler, David. *The Savvy Musician: Building a Career, Earning a Living, and Making a Difference*. Pittsburgh: Helios Press, 2010, 3.
3. Kageyama, Noa. “Goal-Setting Strategies that Work.” *The Bulletproof Musician*. Accessed February 8, 2014. <http://www.bulletproofmusician.com/goal-setting-strategies-that-work/>
4. Cutler. *The Savvy Musician*, 14.
5. Still, Lauren. “A Guide to Mapping Out Your Career.” *The Grindstone*. Accessed February 9, 2014. <http://www.thegrindstone.com/2012/02/06/career-management/a-guide-to-mapping-out-your-career-696/>

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