

The National String Project Consortium Turns 10 Years Old!

Addressing the String Teacher Shortage Around the Country

by Jim Przygocki

Ten years after the National String Project Consortium (NSCP) was founded in 1999, the organization has grown to include 35 string projects at universities around the country. These programs are addressing the shortage of string teachers for the public schools in the United States by training young qualified teachers ready to step into the profession. They are also increasing the number of children playing stringed instruments. Colleges, universities and conservatories in big cities, small towns, inner cities, rural communities, north, south, east, and west now support string projects. These teacher-training programs are currently providing instruction to more than 2,000 children and training and experience to more than 300 future string teachers.

String Project Beginnings

The string project movement grew out of a program at the University of Texas, and the vision of former ASTA President Robert Jesselson, distinguished professor of music at the University of South Carolina.

The University of Texas (UT) began its string project in 1948. In that year, UT viola professor Albert Gillis proposed a program for young children who would come to campus three times each week for instruction. Dean E. William Doty saw the potential of such a program and appointed professor Gillis as the first director, who served from 1948 to 1958. The program gained

exclusively graduate students. The USC program modified this to become a training program for undergraduate string students in order to attract young people to the profession. The program in South Carolina also grew, exerting significant impact on the university and the community in Columbia. In 1996, Jesselson presented the basic concept of this program to a conference on the future of string teaching at Wichita State University. Jacqueline Dillon, ASTA president, realized this success could be duplicated elsewhere. She encouraged Jesselson to use the USC String Project as a model upon which other universities could try to build the practical training component of their music education programs. When Jesselson became president-elect of ASTA in 1998 the organization began searching for foundations that might support this venture. The rest, as they say, is history.

ASTA was first awarded a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant from the United States Department of Education in July of 2000 to fund 10 new string project sites. I was fortunate that my school, the University of Wyoming, was among the recipients. FIPSE added three more sites in September of 2000. Then in March 2001, the fledgling consortium received a Knight Foundation grant for eight additional sites. Finally, the National Endowment for the Arts funded three more sites.

An Independent NSPC

By 2003, there were 24 new string project sites. Oversight of so many sites became difficult and an economic downturn made funding tighter. It was decided that the young string projects would benefit more if they emerged from under the ASTA umbrella in order to become a separate, nonprofit organization. And so the independent NSCP was born. Project directors and supporters met at the 2007 ASTA conference in Detroit to form a board, establish bylaws, and plan strategy to find funding in support of existing and new sites.

In 10 short years, the consortium has grown into a stable, nonprofit organization with a close affiliation with the American String Teachers

Association. New sites have been added and the consortium has been successful in grant writing to fund these sites, as well as the existing sites. Recent grants have been received from *Strings Magazine*, NAMM, the D'Addario Foundation, William Harris Lee, the Talty Foundation, the Dana Foundation, and the Music Lives Foundation, to name a few. Individual sites have found their own funding through various businesses, arts organizations and foundations.

The String Project Model

A string project is a teacher-training program that provides



national attention under the direction of Phyllis Young, winner of the 2002 Paul Rolland Lifetime Achievement Award from ASTA. Young ran the program for 35 years. It continues to flourish under the direction of Laurie Scott, employing more than 20 graduate students and providing instruction to more than 225 children.

In 1981, Robert Jesselson came to the University of South Carolina (USC), where he inherited a small string project that had been in existence for several years, based on the UT program. Jesselson, whose background was in performance, not education, met with Phyllis Young in 1982 for a crash course in running a string project. Teachers in the UT String Project were almost

lessons, classes, and ensembles for children taught by college students under the close supervision of a director and a master teacher. String projects serve as a supplement to existing public school programs and school participation is required when such programs are available. In many communities, string projects have spawned public school programs where there were none previously. The format emulates a public school string program, giving teachers experiences that will have direct, practical application when they enter the teaching profession.

The first stages of instruction are generally delivered in heterogeneous groups. Starting in third grade is common, two years prior to the age at which most public school string programs begin. After two years, children begin private lessons and ensembles. Often these feed into existing youth orchestra programs. Many sites have included music theory classes, chamber music, and experiences in alternative styles.



Virginia Tech String Project

Flexibility

Though there is a clear, established model that potential string project sites must meet in order to receive NSPC funds, there is some flexibility as well, allowing directors and master teachers the freedom to adapt it to their own situations. Some sites begin students at different grade levels, others meld into existing community music or Suzuki programs, but all share a common purpose of training teachers to build healthy string programs.

Teacher Experiences

Teachers are selected from among undergraduate string majors. Though most tend to be music education majors, many bachelor of arts and performance majors are attracted to string project teaching. Teachers meet regularly with a master teacher who serves as a mentor and teaching model. The master teacher and string project teachers plan classes, choose teaching material, develop curricula, explore pedagogical approaches, and provide valuable feedback for young teachers.

The undergraduate college students who teach in string projects find the experience invaluable. Some students recognize that the teaching profession is not for them and chose another field – but at least they come to this realization while they are still in college rather than when they have already started in a job. However most often students learn the rewards of inspiring children

and giving life-long skills to young musicians.

Here are some comments from these pre-service teachers at working in the string project in Sacramento State University String Project in California. They are typical of what we hear from college students around the country.

“The Sacramento String Project has helped me learn how to work with children with the same love and devotion that my teachers have shown me.”

Rei Luu

“I am sure that receiving the chance to serve an apprenticeship under a master teacher will remain one of the luckiest things to happen to me in my education. I couldn’t be more grateful.”

Timothy Stanley

“I used to shy away from group teaching, but the Sacramento String Project has prepared me for any music classroom.”

Holly Harrison

“I came to Sacramento State not intending on pursuing a music degree, but the string project changed my mind. I’m now convinced that I am meant to dedicate my life to music and inspiring others through teaching.”

Nicole Cleveland

“I came to Sacramento State as a performance major, but the string project helped me find the teacher that was always in me.”

Vijay Chalasani

“There are many joys associated with playing a string instrument. Sacramento State’s String Project has introduced me to what may be the greatest – sharing those joys with others.”

Hans Hoffer

String Projects as Laboratories

One of the most valuable facets of a university-sponsored string project is its role as a teaching laboratory for university students, professors, and master teachers. The University of Illinois String Research Project is a prime example. Paul Rolland used this to develop some of the most important and influential approaches and material that we have. Rolland used young children with no previous playing experience in a hands-on, results-oriented project that produced a wonderful body of pedagogical material. Although research was the primary goal of the Illinois String Research Project, this current trend continues in the NSPC programs around the country.

String projects in the consortium serve as laboratories for young teachers, directors, and master teachers, providing a real, hands-on environment in which to try new approaches and study teaching results. My own string project at the University of Wyoming provides an opportunity for my teachers and me to try various teaching methods. As a former student of Mimi Zweig at Indiana University, I have found it stimulating to see how effectively her approaches are applied to this public school model. Last year, she visited our string project in Laramie and had this to say:

“The students were all set up with natural physical playing positions, had good understanding of the

basic bow strokes, played repertoire together and in tune, and the icing on the cake was that they were vibrating. All of this was accomplished in a disciplined group setting with well trained university student assistants. It was uplifting for me to see that group instruction can produce results at this high level of competence.”

For me and for many of my fellow string project directors, a major goal is to cultivate an attitude of exploration that we hope will be emulated by our students throughout their careers. For example, at the Marywood University String Project in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Sophie Till, director, has written:

“We have been developing a new method of teaching which is now working at all levels of our project. For the last 18 months I have been studying the Taubman Piano Technique with Edna Golandsky of the Golandsky Institute in New York City. The Taubman approach is the coordination of identifiable body movements that allow the body to function at the instrument with ease, freedom, and maximum speed and power. Golandsky and I have been developing this work for the violin and now, in combination with my colleague Christiane Vaida, also on the cello. Marywood has become the focal point for the development of the Taubman approach to string playing and because our undergraduates who work with string project are also studying the approach, it is a thoroughly integrated part of our string program. I cannot communicate how exciting this work is and how much interest it is stirring up. It is wonderful!”

Community Support

The response from university students, children, parents, public school teachers, and communities to the presence of string projects in their communities has been encouraging and inspiring. In many communities, the presence of a string project has provided an impetus for public school string programs where none previously existed. This is true in Columbia, South Carolina and in a number of other communities.

“The most significant effect is that a large suburban school district has added a string program to their public school offerings because of the UTSA String

Project’s presence in the area. After two years of operations with those students coming to UTSA for instruction, they have recently begun their own string program with our support.”

University of Texas at San Antonio String Project

In my own community of Laramie, Wyoming, we enjoy a convivial relationship with our string project, our excellent String Academy and our fine public school string program. Susan Peel, one of our leading public school string teachers wrote this recently in support of the presence of the string project in Laramie:

“I can without reservation say that the U.W. String Project has had a huge, positive impact on the public school orchestra program in Laramie. The students that join the school program after studying in the UW String Project are set up well, understand the routine of practice, are great leaders, and are excited to be playing a string instrument! Since the UW String Project has evolved, I feel that I have been able to teach more complex concepts earlier in my classes since the basic skills are already solid from the string project experience. The number of quality players that continue on in their studies and in their school orchestras has also increased.

I have had the opportunity in the last couple of years to have student teachers that were previously teachers with the University of Wyoming String Project. The experience and mentoring they received put them way ahead of student teachers that I have had before the string project was in Laramie. My son Izaak also started violin in string project last year got a great start... largely because of his teacher, Jacie Reams. She took her job seriously and has had a huge impact on the success of her students.

I feel very lucky to be a part of such a supportive string community. I feel that the University of Wyoming String Project and the String Academy of Wyoming, and the Laramie Public School Orchestra programs have a very supportive relationship.”

Children and Parents

String projects are ultimately about bringing music to children. All good teachers have inspiring stories of how their teaching has touched the lives of their students. This is what keeps us going, our *raison d’être*. String projects around the country touch the lives of children in the same way, and it is a life changing experience for the teachers, parents, and children. In closing, here are some comments from parents whose children have benefited from this experience, our strongest supporters.

“I want to give credit to the the USC String Project for its wonderful influence in our family’s life. I am the parent of two string project students and I am so blessed by the experience we have had. It has been wonderful for my two boys. They are both ADHD and the music gives them a place to express themselves. They are comfortable and secure among the young adult artists. They both experience an acceptance in the music community that lacks in their



Wayne State University String Project

academic world. I never imagined them performing at this age... They gain positive role models in the teachers and I am especially grateful to the young men we know at string project."

Celeste Smith, University of South Carolina String Project

"Early in my daughter's third-grade year, Sherry Sinift and several of her University of Wyoming undergraduates who teach in the University of Wyoming String Project, visited my daughter's elementary school to encourage students to join the program. Siena came home thrilled at the prospect of learning to play the viola. She had just started piano lessons, but with her enthusiasm to do both, how could we say 'no'? Siena is now in her sixth year of viola studies. Siena has matured in her playing, but more importantly, has gained a new level of self-confidence that I attribute directly to her participation in the UW String Project. Expectations of students by the program director and supervising teacher are very high and clearly communicated to both children and parents. From what I have seen, the students respond by meeting – and often exceeding -- those expectations; in other words, the children are learning to play a string instrument, but also learning to accept the responsibilities that go along with that privilege. In summary, the UW String Project has changed my daughter's life and that of many other children in our small city."

Patricia J. S. Colberg, University of Wyoming String Project Parent

NSPC Board Members

Robert Jesselson, Executive Director, University of South Carolina
 David Lusterman, NSPC Board Chair, Publisher, *Strings Magazine*
 Adriana La Rosa Ransom, Illinois State University
 Neil Lilien, Erwin Otto Stringed Instruments
 Daniel Mason, University of Kentucky
 Michael Palumbo, Weber State University
 James Przygocki, University of Wyoming
 Judy Weigert Bossuat, Sacramento State University
 Bruce Wood, Texas Tech University
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National String Project Consortium Member Sites

Arizona State University — Tempe, Ariz.
 Ball State University— Muncie, Ind.
 Baylor University— Waco, Tex.
 California State University — Sacramento, Calif.
 Central Washington University — Ellensburg, Wash.
 Cleveland State University— Cleveland, Ohio
 Crane School of Music, SUNY — Potsdam, N.Y.
 East Carolina University— Greenville, N.C.
 Illinois State University— Normal, Ill.
 Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Pa.
 Ithaca College— Ithaca, N.Y.
 James Madison University— Harrisonburg, Va.
 Lawrence University— Appleton, Wisc.
 Marywood University— Scranton, Pa.
 Point Loma Nazarene University— San Diego, Calif.
 Texas Tech University— Lubbock, Tex.
 Temple University— Philadelphia, Pa.
 University of Georgia— Athens, Ga.
 University of Hartford— Hartford, Conn.

University of Nebraska— Kearney, Nebr.
 University of Kentucky— Lexington, Ky.
 University of Massachusetts — Lowell, Mass.
 University of New Hampshire— Durham, N.H.
 University of North Texas— Denton, Tex.
 University of Oklahoma— Norman, Okla.
 University of Redlands— California
 University of South Carolina— Columbia, S.C.
 University of Tennessee — Chattanooga, Tenn.
 University of Texas— Austin, Tex.
 University of Texas— San Antonio, Tex.
 University of Wyoming— Laramie, Wyo.
 Valdosta State University— Georgia
 Virginia Tech University— Blacksburg, Va.
 Wayne State University— Detroit, Mich.
 Weber State University— Ogden, Utah

String Projects by the Numbers

- 35 Current Sites
- 24 States currently have String Projects
- 2,168 Children enrolled currently in a String Project
- 307 University students currently serve as String Project teachers
- 8,000+ Children of public school-age who have studied in String Projects since the inception of the NSPC
- \$2.7 million Grant money raised since 1999
- 250 New public school string teachers in the past five years that have been received training and experience through String Project

The NSPC is now accepting applications to start new string project sites at universities in order to address the string teacher shortage. The deadline for this round of applications is November 17, 2009. Each new string project will receive \$10,000 from grants to start their program in the first year, and continued support for five years.

The NSPC is a coalition of string project sites based at colleges and universities across the United States (U.S.) The NSPC is dedicated to increasing the number of children playing stringed instruments, and addressing the critical shortage of string teachers in the U.S.

The NSPC now consists of 35 string projects at universities throughout the U.S. These programs are training about 300 string teachers each year. Recent grants from NAMM, the D'Addario Foundation, and the Dana Foundation have enabled new String Projects to be created at Baylor University, Virginia Tech, University of New Hampshire, Central Washington University, James Madison University, East Carolina University, Wayne State University, Cleveland State University and the University of Nebraska at Kearney. For more information and the application form, go to the website at www.stringprojects.org or contact Robert Jesselson at RJesselson@Mozart.sc.edu.



James Przygocki is a professor of music at the University of Wyoming where he teaches viola, string education courses and conducts the UW Chamber Orchestra. He is also the director of the UW String Project, winner of the 2009 ASTA Award for String Project Excellence. The UW String Project website is: <http://uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/STRINGPROJECT/>