

# The One Thing: Building Culture in a University Percussion Studio

By Michael Sammons

**W**hile a diverse array of factors determine the success of any organization, the value of culture cannot be overstated: it is the converging point for all other factors. This article will address the importance of culture to the university percussion program. Culture is the bass drum of a successful percussion program, so to speak. All successful directors, coaches, or CEOs consistently work on the culture of their organization, whether it is their first year or their twentieth, whether they are inheriting a good or a bad culture, whether they have already established a good culture or feel they need to make changes. The culture of the percussion studio is constantly evolving, developing, and even changing, based mostly on the cycle of graduating and incoming students.

In their best-selling book *The One Thing*, authors Gary Keller and Jay Papanasan challenge us to find the one thing that we can do that will make everything else either easier or unnecessary. I often think of this like dominos. What one domino can I knock down that will subsequently knock down as many other dominos as possible? Establishing a successful culture is that one thing.

Speaking of success, it is important to note that the definition of success is different for each individual person and program, and it is consistently evolving based on any number of factors, including philosophy, professional goals, broader university culture/directives, and many others. As university percussion directors, it is imperative that we spend time within ourselves to think about what kind of culture we want to establish realistically, logically, and logistically for our current time and place. We must define what our definition of success is now, six months from now, one year from now, and five years from now, no matter where we currently are in building our percussion culture. As my dear friend and colleague Dr. Paul Buyer (Clemson University) states, “Begin with the end in mind.”

In my first year of teaching, one of my definitions of success was that students were set up on time for percussion ensemble rehearsal with all of the required instruments. When that happened, the students and I celebrated and then raised the standard for the definition of success. As the program develops, so does your definition.

By defining culture as the “one thing” within our percussion program, we now

have to define not only what we want our culture to be, but more importantly (and also more elusively), how to implement changes.

## THE WHAT – DEFINING OUR CULTURE

Look up any “how to” book on building culture within businesses or other organizations, and you will find, in no particular order, references to words such as:

- Leadership
- Respect
- Positive Attitude
- Organized Goals
- Service
- Integrity/Character

These and other words characterizing a successful culture are important to think about, and are a great starting point for further discussion and implementation. I often refer to such words as our value words for the over-arching umbrella of our culture. However, in order to exert action in the development of our culture, we must weave these words into our everyday interactions within the percussion studio in an inclusive and, I dare say, *fun* way. I have found this to be the best way to implement change that is memorable and effective, and that the students themselves can

use, reference, and claim ownership of. This ownership is crucial in making lasting change, as the students will begin to hold each other accountable in a positive way without going against the culture you are trying to build.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRAND

For me and the programs I have worked with, there is an additional step beyond culture that has had a profound effect on the ability to create highly motivated, positive, and intrinsic cultures from within: the Brand. It has been our “one thing” that encapsulates not only the *what*, but also the *how* and the *why* of our successful cultures.

Why has it been successful?

- Shared vocabulary amongst all members of the studio, including faculty.
  - \* Allows for mentorship between older and newer members of the studio.
- Brand has been defined by the percussion studio itself. Each semester, we add to the vocabulary from within.
  - \* Students feel a sense of ownership.
  - \* We set aside time for group discussion, personal/group reflection, and faculty guidance. This includes studio class, rehearsals, and applied lessons.
- Focuses on positive goals rather than undesired or negative behavior.
- Can be used quickly and effectively. I can have a 20-minute conversation with just a couple of words from our established brand.
- Can be used in any environment, be it a full drumline rehearsal to a percussion ensemble rehearsal to a private lesson.
- Speaks to both musical and personal aspects.
- Can be applied to our group culture as well as individual student aspirations and goals. Students are asked to come up with their own personal

brand. They even design their own logo. Many of them hang their logos somewhere in their homes where they will see it on a consistent basis (the bathroom mirror is a popular place amongst the studio).

## EXAMPLES OF OUR BRAND

I refer to the day-to-day vocabulary used to implement and evolve our culture as our *brand* words. Most, if not all, of our brand words point directly back to the over-arching culture. Our brand words come from a wide variety of sources. The ones I hear students use the most are the funny ones that often come from humorous moments in rehearsal. These are the brand words graduating students will tell me they remember the most or that they use in their own teaching situations. Of course, most of these words have come from students. It has become a badge of honor for someone to “make the brand head.”

### Highlighted brand words from the University of Utah percussion program

#### OVER-ARCHING

“Passion”

- The One Thing.
- “Drum bug”
  - i.e., Passion. Do you have the drum bug?
- “Ride for the Brand”
  - Represent the group and your role within the group.

#### THE FUN ONES

“Purple”

- Sound quality; balance and blend.
- “Get me to the 20”
  - Refers to student preparation and includes a football reference. Their job individually is to get me/us to the 20-yard line so that we can score touchdowns!
- “Be the gardner”
  - Take care of our people, yourself, and the studio, both musically and professionally. Reap what we sow.

“Just groove!”

- Nike states “Just Do It.” We state: “Just groove!”
- “Live on the party deck”
- Look up. Don’t stare at your music. Find your partner or the conductor. Play like a chamber musician.
- “Push the rock”
  - Don’t worry about where you currently are on the mountain, just keep pushing the rock upwards. This reflects a process-oriented work ethic.
- “Over prepare, then free-fall”
  - Trust your preparation and the process in performance. Relax, have fun. Take risks.
- “Don’t worry about the mule going blind, just load the wagon”
  - Be present. Control what you can control in the moment.
- “Clean and green”
  - How we keep the studio looking. Organization, instrument maintenance.
- “Crock pot”
  - How to practice/performance preparation.
- “We want the sun”
  - Just a fun way to deal with the heat!
- “Ruth’s Chris”
  - Great steaks, great brand.
- “The Price of poke is always going up.”
  - Never settle. Always take your performance to the next level. Each year/semester, we ramp up the challenges.
- “Cold Reps”
  - Simulate performance
- “Keep your head down and feet moving”
  - Dealing with adversity. Life/percussion is not a race. Process not product driven in personal practice.

#### MORE SERIOUS

“Vulnerability”

- Take risks in rehearsal and performance, with staff and with each other.
- “Model of Music Education”
  - Pay attention to how we rehearse. Become a true pedagogue and spread the word.

# The National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy

By Lisa Rogers and Lance Drege

The National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy (NCPD) will celebrate its twentieth anniversary during its conference slated for May 17–19, 2020. Current NCPD Executive Director Lisa Rogers along with Alan Shinn will host the conference at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. The beginnings of the organization were born out of discussions by NCPD Board Member, Past Executive Director, and Founder Dr. Cort McClaren with college students, college percussion teachers, and elementary and secondary music educators at various meetings and conferences including PASIC. McClaren believed there needed to be a conference devoted to in-depth conversations, discussions, and exchanges of ideas and concepts regarding percussion pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

The resultant NCPD organization and conference has indeed allowed for concentrated time for discussions, presentations of research, percussion literature related performances, and the creation of pedagogical materials such as the National Standards for Percussion Equipment and Facilities. Additionally, McClaren organized a NCPD Board of Advisors whose membership reflected percussion pedagogues at multiple career stages, music education specialists, and composers who all had vested interests in percussion pedagogy.

## Original NCPD Board of Advisors and Executive Director

Lance Drege – University of Oklahoma  
Dennis Fisher – University of North Texas  
Richard Gipson – University of Oklahoma  
Robert Lee – Haven, Kansas  
Cort McClaren – Executive Director, University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Laura (Phillips) Franklin – Brevard College  
Bill (William) Rice – James Madison University  
Lisa Rogers – Texas Tech University  
Joe Shively – University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Pat (P. Thomas) Tallarico – Bowling Green State University

## Current NCPD Board of Advisors and Executive Director

Lisa Rogers – Executive Director, Texas Tech University  
Josh Armstrong – Delta State University  
Lance Drege – University of Oklahoma (retired)  
Laura Franklin – Lewis University

Josh Knight – Missouri Western State University  
Cort McClaren – C. Alan Publications  
Chal Ragsdale – University of Arkansas  
Joseph Shively – Oakland University<sup>2</sup>

The inaugural NCPD was held on the University of North Carolina at Greensboro campus in 2000. This conference and subsequent conferences were loosely modeled on sessions presented at such conferences and conventions as the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy, National Association for Music Education Conference, and state-level music education conventions. Research presentations, lightning talks, open and panel discussion sessions, smaller breakout sessions, conducting workshops, “how to” performance practice sessions, and solo/chamber/and percussion ensemble performances related to specific literature parameters are/were just a few of the session formats that have been included throughout the years. Although the conferences do not include exhibits and exhibitors, percussion-related companies such as Vic Firth/Zildjian, Yamaha, and Ludwig-Musser have offered their generous support of the conference through assistance with daily refreshments and evening receptions, as well as individual presenters.

Founder McClaren said of the conference: “NCPD has proven to be an ideal source for educators and performers to share ideas about teaching/learning music. Three days of intense discussion, where everyone operates on an equal basis, is a remarkable undertaking. Every year the conference inspires percussion teachers to rethink our approaches and our goals. Most importantly, the camaraderie developed over the past 20 years has encouraged improved communication and information. It’s been a joy to experience.<sup>3</sup>

The conference was held somewhat bi-annually from 2000 to 2009 and then annually starting in 2009. NCPD has been held at various sites including the University of Arkansas, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, University of Oklahoma, University of Texas at San Antonio, and Texas Tech University.

The purpose of NCPD has remained the same over the past 20 years guiding the NCPD Board of Advisors and is visible for conference attendees on each conference program and on the organization’s website.

**PURPOSE:** The National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy is designed to provide a forum for elementary and secondary music educators, university percussion pedagogues,

professional percussionists, university music education specialists, and undergraduate and graduate students to explore the status of percussion pedagogy in the United States as well as to outline strategies for improving the teaching and learning of percussion instruments. The conference will provide a forum to increase awareness of “what is happening,” to guide us toward identifying “what should happen,” and the means for “making it happen.”<sup>4</sup>

NCPP attendees and their school affiliations reflect participation from across the United States as well as North and South America, including such provinces and countries as Manitoba, Canada, and Patagonia. Many of the attendees through the years are/were PAS members as well. Some of the attendees who have attended eight or more conferences include David P. Eyler, Randy Fluman, Kathleen Kastner, Neil Larrivee, Tom Morgan, James Strain, and Pete Zambito.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 20 years, NCPP has tackled specific areas of percussion pedagogy by creating the following documents for percussionists to examine and utilize such as the National Standards for Percussion Equipment and Facilities (2008) and the Marimba Performance Standards (2014), and *The Journal of Percussion Pedagogy*, Vol. 1 (2008) and Vol. 2 (2012). Articles found in *The Journals* that may be of particular interest include: “Rethinking a Pedagogy of Beginning Four-Mallet Technique” by Kathleen Kastner, “Understanding the College/University Percussion Program” by Laura Franklin, Dennis Fisher, and Chalon Ragsdale, and “Music Wellness & Injury Prevention: Healthy Practice & Performance Measures for the Percussionist” by Susan Martin Tariq and Sherry Rubins.<sup>6</sup>

By the summer of 2016, the organization had its own website, [percussionpedagogy.org](https://percussionpedagogy.org), housing all documents, previous conference programs, and in particular research abstracts and other handouts from sessions presented at conferences starting with the 2017 conference. Research abstracts and session handouts that may be of interest are: “Inventory, Repair, and Maintenance, Parts 1 and 2” by David P. Eyler, “Available Smart Phone Technology for Enhanced Practice and Performance” by Oliver Molina, and “Understanding and Helping Young Percussionists with Mental Health and Wellness Issues” by Brad Meyer.<sup>7</sup> Also in 2016, the organization started its own Facebook page entitled National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy at <https://www.facebook.com/percussionpedagogy/>.

The 2008 National Standards for Percussion Equipment and Facilities continue to educate and inspire college-level percussion teachers for further collaboration with administrators to ensure adequate facilities and equipment at the collegiate level. These standards are also available on the

PAS website under resources-education-pedagogy (<https://www.pas.org/resources/education/pedagogy>).<sup>8</sup>

Good news! The NCPP Board of Advisors has recently revised the National Standards for Percussion Equipment and Facilities to reflect more current collegiate needs. These revised standards will first be available at NCPP 2020, May 17–19, 2020, at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. The NCPP Board hopes to see you there; let’s continue the percussion pedagogy discussion!

## ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Cort McClaren, phone conversation with Lisa Rogers, December 30, 2019.
2. “Past Conferences,” National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, accessed November 18, 2019, <https://percussionpedagogy.org/past-conferences>.
3. Dr. Cort McClaren, email message to Lisa Rogers, December 31, 2019.
4. “Past Conferences,” National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://percussionpedagogy.org/past-conferences>.
5. Lance Drege, email message to Lisa Rogers, December 30, 2019.
6. “Publications,” National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://percussionpedagogy.org/publications>.
7. “NCPP Handouts,” National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://percussionpedagogy.org/ncpp-2017-handouts>.
8. “NCPP Percussion Equipment and Facilities National Standards established by the National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, Percussive Arts Society, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.pas.org/resources/education/pedagogy>.

**Lisa Rogers** and **Lance Drege** have served on the National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy (NCPP) Board of Advisors since its inception in 2000. Additionally, they served as NCPP Co-Executive Directors for approximately three years. Rogers is Professor of Percussion Studies at Texas Tech University (Lubbock, Texas), NCPP Executive Director, and a Past President of PAS. Drege served as Professor of Percussion Studies at the University of Oklahoma. **PN**

## "Inspire"

- Performance prowess.

## "Cycle of trust"

- Defines the way we take instruction

## "Intrinsic"

- Play for ourselves.

## "Intellectual resiliency"

- Mental toughness mindset.

## "Grateful/Appreciation"

- What we do is a privilege and we are only in college a short time. Be humble and take advantage.

## "Time"

- How are we using our time? Rehearsal time? Time together? Practice Time? Time Management? Be on time!

## "Tip of the sword"

- Percussion section/drumline is always leading everything. First to learn, first to refine, first to drill set, first to rehearsal, etc.

## TIPS FOR USING/CREATING YOUR BRAND

Find/create a logo that represents your percussion studio.

For us, it is the big red U (university logo) on the 32-inch marching bass drum head. The drumline and percussion studio each have their own head. While there is much crossover, there are certain brand words that are specific to those ensembles and not all members are in both groups.

Hang it somewhere where it can be seen, referenced, and added to in rehearsals or lessons.

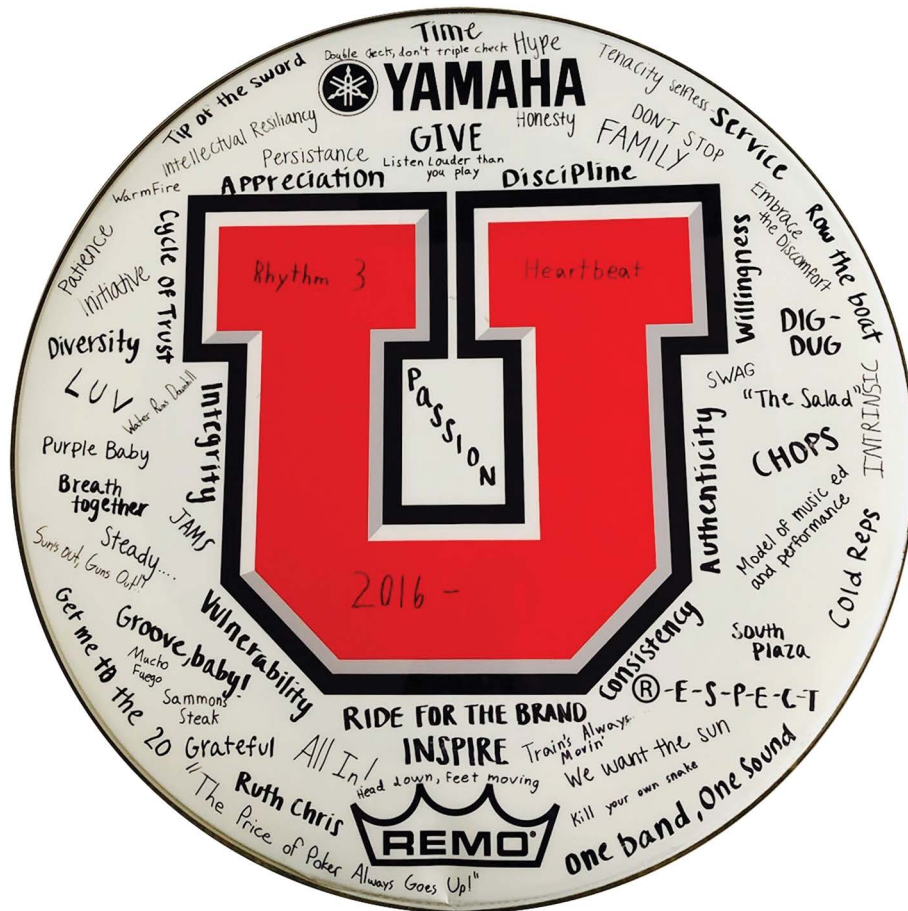
Keep it simple: user-friendly; ensures ease of use in conversation, rehearsal or lesson.

Make it memorable—ensures students will use it.

From within. Guide the students to begin with and then let them take over.

Have fun with it! Humor is good and ensures positivity, memorability, ownership, and use of the brand ultimately leading to the development of a successful culture.

Use it *constantly!*



## THE ONE THING APPLIED TO OTHER ASPECTS WITHIN THE PERCUSSION STUDIO

This concept can be applied to many different aspects of administering a program beyond the specific topic of building a successful culture. Below, I offer a few thoughts on aspects that are important to me, and challenge you to come up with other areas of application for your program.

### Rehearsals

Our rehearsal mantra is "Get me to the 20." No matter how much rehearsal time we have, we always want more. We rehearse once per week for one and a half hours in the fall semester, and once per week for three hours in the spring semester. I keep rehearsals within these parameters because I want a culture of professional preparation and ownership of the students' role in the ensemble. Given my philosophy and these defined parameters and expectations, my role is

to increase students' awareness of their individual performance as well as the group as a whole. With a positive and strong culture, students are motivated to perform at a high level and want to be successful within the group and as an ensemble. Tim Gallwey defines learning in his book, *The Inner Game of Golf*, as "an increased awareness of what is."

My "one thing" in rehearsal is to facilitate this awareness. From there, 80% of the improvement of the ensemble will happen naturally within rehearsal and during outside practice. Only 20% will come from actual instruction.

### Curriculum

From electronics and newly developed instruments to diverse musics from around the world, the professional demand of knowledge for percussionists is at an all-time high. Not only are we responsible for performance aspects of this knowledge, but also the education of others. As university percussion

teachers, we are compelled to prepare our students for a modern music industry. However, while there are more demands on knowledge of graduating students, we are not afforded more time for instruction. How do we get to all of it and adequately prepare our students?

The answer is the “one thing.” What is the one thing (actually a series of one things) I can teach that will provide a strong fundamental experience for the students to then take to their individual career aspirations? What are the essential skill sets required of a modern music industry, and how can I address them as efficiently as possible? What are the core pedagogical values of percussion that students can individualize for their own artistic goals? The hardest decisions I have to make as a university percussion teacher are the questions of what not to teach, at least in a direct sense.

### Private Lessons

Similar to the curriculum conundrum, the private lesson delves into more of the human element of teaching. Given the curriculum factors illustrated above, I believe that reaching beyond percussion is paramount. We must facilitate the development of life skills in our students, despite the fact that this might be a cliché talking point in college pedagogy. Specifically, and this is the “one thing” for private studies, how can we maximize students’ human potential? Intellectual resiliency and emotional intelligence are key components to this development. We must be facilitators of learning through experiential processes, creating awareness so that our students can become their own best teachers. The snare drum roll will take care of itself.

### CONCLUSION

Facilitating the development of a successful culture within a percussion program is about empowering your students and, ultimately, the quality of their education and experience as they move on to their future careers, inside or outside of the music industry. It is a selfless act.

It is not about us, the teacher, our studio, or our brand. It is always about the students.

**Michael Sammons** D.M.A. serves as the Percussion Area Head at the University of Utah. Sammons is recognized as a versatile performer in solo, chamber, symphonic, marching percussion, and non-western musical styles. In addition to his work with the Utah Symphony Orchestra, he regularly performs with various touring shows, including the national Broadway tour of *Aladdin*, the Utah Opera, and Ballet West, and has appeared as guest artist with Utah Chamber Artists and the NOVA New Music Chamber Series. His work can be heard on ABC, ESPN, TNT, and local media outlets as well as diverse recording projects for Warner Bros Chappell Music and the Utah Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Sammons previously served as director for the NBA’s Utah Jazz Street Beats Drumline. **PN**

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