



ShenCoLAB

FESTIVAL OF ARTS, IDEAS AND EXPLORATION

ShenCoLAB: A Radical Investment in Student-Driven & Collaborative Work

ShenCoLAB is a first-of-its-kind-in-the-USA initiative, one which radically reimagines the relationship between expertise and student-driven work. Over one week-long period each year, all classes are closed across all 27 undergraduate and graduate music, theatre and dance degree areas at Shenandoah Conservatory. Schedules and facilities are turned over to students, culminating with a Saturday festival of student-driven and collaborative performances and presentations.

In post-event surveys, students have each year given rave reviews, with participants frequently identifying ShenCoLAB as one of the most important learning experiences of their educations. In this presentation, Michael Stepniak and Carolyn Coulson explain the background of the initiative (and its connections to UK models), how the Shenandoah Conservatory faculty came to embrace the idea of "losing" a week of classes, key factors that appear to account for ShenCoLAB's success, and ongoing challenges and complexities related to this special initiative.





Michael Stepniak serves as Dean and Professor of Music at Shenandoah Conservatory. He oversees over 200 faculty and staff and close to 700 students enrolled in 27 degree programs across music, theatre, and dance, as well as a 1,200-student arts academy. He also oversees 58 budgets, multiple donor societies and a comprehensive fundraising portfolio, and a performance season that hosts over 40,000 patrons each year. As an educator, Stepniak is engaged in national conversations about arts and training. He has served on the board of directors of ICFAD and has advised and has consulted with leaders from a range of institutions including the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Rice University. His recent book on the future of classical music performance training in higher education (*Beyond the Conservatory Model*, Routledge Press/College Music Society, September 2019) has quickly garnered critical acclaim. As a soloist and chamber musician, Stepniak has performed in major concert halls and venues across the globe to critical acclaim. Stepniak completed his award-winning studies in violin at New England Conservatory; musicology at Northwestern University; viola at Peabody Conservatory; and doctoral studies in the interdisciplinary fields of aesthetics, leadership, and arts education at Harvard University.



Carolyn Coulson is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Shenandoah Conservatory, the Director of the Acting Program, and the Conservatory's Assistant Dean for Student Learning. She has performed, taught, and directed across the United States, England and Canada. Coulson trained at Santa Clara University and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in Medieval Studies from the University of Connecticut, and is an internationally known specialist in staging Medieval Drama. She is the Vice President of the international Medieval and Renaissance Drama Society, has published articles in *The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist*, *My Wandering Uterus*, and *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages*, and is featured on several original-pronunciation recordings of medieval drama. In addition to early drama, she also directs and acts in modern plays and musicals. For Shenandoah Conservatory, she was a leader on the site-visits to Royal Welsh College of Music's REPCo and Trinity Laban's CoLab, which were instrumental to the formation of Shenandoah's ShenCoLAB.