



August 28, 2023

## **Response to the Proposed Closures of the PhD Programs in Music: Why should we aim to become a second-rate MIT when the world so desperately needs a first-rate Brandeis?**

On Thursday, culminating a laborious and costly PhD review process whose findings were ultimately disregarded, Brandeis Provost Carol Fierke announced that the administration planned to shore up the university's R1 status by...eliminating two of its oldest, most famous, and highest-performing PhD programs. On the eve of Leonard Bernstein's 105<sup>th</sup> birthday, amid a splashy ad campaign starring none other than Bernstein himself, the Provost heralded the demise of both PhD programs in the very department that legendary musician helped to establish. Provost Fierke's letter describing the imminent closures of Musicology and Music Composition and Theory made no reference to the outcomes-based criteria by which the PhD review team had claimed that programs would be evaluated. Rather, in meetings last week, Provost Fierke indicated that the PhD review process had found both of Music's doctoral programs to be excellent – but that they would be cut anyway as part of a “strategic decision” to “lean into the sciences.”

How killing off two “excellent” doctoral programs will help solidify Brandeis' R1 status is a proposition perhaps only an administrator can understand. To justify its actions, however, the administration insinuated without evidence – [in comments appearing in \*The Boston Globe\*](#), no less – that Music's undergraduate program is not up to the standard of those at elite liberal arts colleges, and it suggested that cutting our doctoral programs would somehow ameliorate the situation. These statements are as staggeringly untrue as they are staggeringly impolitic; we sincerely hope the administration has girded its loins for a barrage of angry calls from the parents of music majors, demanding their tuition dollars back. How bizarre for us to have to remind the Brandeis administration that undergraduate and graduate programs do not exist in a zero-sum relationship, and that the administration's own “Framework for the Future” identifies “vertical connectivity” between undergrads, doctoral students, and faculty members as the bedrock “Academic Value Proposition” of a Brandeis education. **By the Framework's logic, eliminating a department's doctoral programs would *worsen* the academic experience for undergraduates, to the point of making it un-Brandeisian.** Beyond this: Music's last two tenure-line hires came to Brandeis directly from faculty positions at Amherst and Swarthmore. They are far better positioned than any administrator to know just how well the Brandeis undergraduate music program stacks up.



No: the administration's proposed cuts have nothing to do with the performance of any music department program, undergraduate or graduate. To establish conclusively the excellence of our doctoral programs – as well as the futility of the PhD review process – we attach an appendix below with data produced by the PhD review, demonstrating that **Music ranks at or very near the top of all Brandeis PhD-granting departments by many metrics.** Our academic job placement rate (71%) and low attrition rate (8%) place us first in the entire university; we're third in matriculation rate and fourth in graduation rate. Our renown extends far beyond the Brandeis campus, as [a recent article in \*Nature\*](#) ranked Music's graduate programs ninth in the nation. Moreover, we have achieved this success despite teaching more undergraduates per tenure-line faculty member than any other PhD-granting department outside of the sciences. The PhD review thus proved that Music offers an extraordinary, perhaps unparalleled, bang for the university's buck. Clearly, we are being cut not because of numbers, but because of values. **Whatever the centrality of music and the arts to Jewish culture, Jewish values, and Jewish tradition, the Brandeis administration does not believe that the creative arts are worthy of study at the graduate level.**

**We contend that – amid a 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration and an expensive “national branding” campaign – the Brandeis administration has chosen a course of action that betrays the university's very identity.** One of the most famous founding principles of our university was a commitment to the liberal arts, as exemplified by the founders' decision to place the arts at the core of the curriculum. Brandeis' founding President, Abram Sachar, wrote proudly in *A Host at Last*: “we were one of the few colleges to include [the creative arts] in its requirements. In most established universities, the arts were still struggling to attain respectability as an academic discipline.” By cutting the PhD programs in Musicology and Composition – the last two terminal degree programs remaining in the Division of Creative Arts – Brandeis will announce to the world the abrogation of its hallowed values. Shorn entirely of their graduate programs, the arts will no longer be equal partners to the sciences, social sciences, and humanities (who, let's face it, are next on the chopping block once there are no more arts to cut). From here on, the arts will be mere accessories at a university that once provided a home to so many great Jewish artists, who helped to establish Brandeis as a world-class place for the advanced study of the creative arts.

Economically speaking, this decision is utterly nonsensical. Combined, Brandeis' two world-famous doctoral programs in Music cost around \$300k per year, which is 0.07% of the university's \$420M annual operating budget – or 0.2% of the \$145M our new science building is projected to cost. **Worse, the administration's actions put Brandeis squarely at odds with intellectual currents in the broader world.** The administration's move to “lean into the sciences” by cutting the arts smacks of the techno-utopianism of fifteen years ago, before Silicon Valley realized the need to grapple with the moral and historical issues in which artists and humanists are expert, before



# Brandeis

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Department of Music

ChatGPT and generative AI pushed questions about the nature of human creation to the front page of every newspaper. It is so clear what a liberal arts university like Brandeis has to offer such an environment: a place in which scientists, social scientists, humanists, and artists can speak to each other at the highest levels. **Why should we aim to become a second-rate MIT when the world so desperately needs a first-rate Brandeis? Let us not seek to offer a “Framework for the Future” that is already a vision of the past.**

There are so many ways in which we can “lean into” a more synergistic, more Brandeisian future. The Provost has charged the doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences with forging creative connections across units. Why should Music – with its intimate links to mathematics, history, literature, anthropology, and virtually every other discipline one can name – not be part of these collaborations? Our doctoral students already take seminars all over campus and earn Master’s degrees in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program; our faculty have taught in (and even chaired) departments of Comparative Literature and Russian Studies at other institutions. **By nurturing true collaboration across departments and divisions, rather than simply sacrificing the arts and humanities on the altar of STEM like so many other institutions, Brandeis has a chance to position itself at the cutting edge of the world’s most critical conversations. We have a chance to *truly* be “different from all other universities” – to live up to the words of our advertisements and fully embrace our Jewish values.**

We urge the Brandeis University administration to find the courage to reverse this hasty, short-sighted, and self-defeating decision.

The Brandeis Department of Music



## Appendix

Here we present data in support of three claims:

- Brandeis' PhD programs in Music are excellent,
- We have achieved this success despite having a smaller faculty than our peer departments at Brandeis, and
- Our undergraduate enrollment statistics support the hiring of more tenure-line faculty.

The tables below were compiled from data provided by Academic Analytics, as well as University enrollment statistics available internally through Workday.

*NB: The data below were compiled before the departure of Professor Karen Desmond. As of Fall 2023, Music has only 6 tenure-line faculty members.*

*Because the following charts contain sensitive data, we have removed the names of all Brandeis departments other than Music in the version of this memo intended for a broad audience. Brandeis PhD departments in the humanities and social sciences are named A-F; those in the sciences are named 1-8.*

### **CLAIM 1: Brandeis' PhD programs in Music are excellent.**

With formidable graduate placements (we placed 71% of our 2011-20 PhDs in academic jobs), top-10 national rankings ([as reported in a recent \*Nature\* article](#)), low attrition rates (hovering below 10%, compared with the University's 30%), and great success in candidate recruitment (our average departmental matriculation rate is 63% since 2015), the Music Department has achieved frankly astonishing success despite our small faculty size. In fact, the PhD review demonstrated that **outside of the sciences, Music is the top-performing PhD-granting department by attrition, graduation, matriculation, *and* academic placement rate.**



	Attrition rate (2011-2017)	Graduation rate (2011-2017)	Matriculation (2015-22)	Academic placements
MUS	8%	71%	63%	71.40%
[DEPT B]	28%	44%	51%	70.30%
[DEPT A]	28%	44%	59%	46%
[DEPT F]	28%	39%	45%	50%
[DEPT D]	29%	55%	40%	65.10%
[DEPT C]	33%	42%	54%	46%
[DEPT E]	36%	50%	54%	70.80%

**Table 1.** Comparison of Brandeis non-science PhD-granting departments by attrition, graduation, matriculation, and academic placement rates

But – as captured by these metrics – the Music Department’s excellence compares favorably not only with other programs in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. We stack up extremely well against Brandeis PhD programs in the sciences, too. (See Table 2.) **Our departmental attrition rate is the lowest in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences by some margin, and we also lead all PhD-granting departments at Brandeis in the percentage of graduates placed in academic jobs.** In all of GSAS, Music ranks **fourth in PhD graduation rate** (behind only Departments 1, 2, and 6), and **third in matriculation rate since 2015** (slightly behind Departments 2 and 8).

	Attrition rate (2011-2017)	Graduation rate (2011-2017)	Matriculation (2015-22)	Academic placements (2011-2020)
<b>MUS</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>71.4%</b>
[DEPT 1]	15%	76%	41%	36%
[DEPT 2]	16%	<b>81%</b>	<b>65%</b>	48%
[DEPT 3]	16%	71%	35%	28%
[DEPT 4]	18%	67%	41%	23%
[DEPT 5]	20%	70%	47%	32%



[DEPT 6]	24%	76%	39%	36%
[DEPT 7]	35%	63%	28%	30%
[DEPT 8]	35%	48%	65%	12%

**Table 2.** Comparison of Brandeis PhD-granting departments in Music and the sciences by attrition, graduation, matriculation, and academic placement rates

**CLAIM 2: We have achieved our success despite having a smaller faculty than our peer departments at Brandeis.**

The number of tenure-line Brandeis Music faculty was reduced in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, and we have fluctuated between 5 and 7.5 lines for nearly fifteen years. Our faculty – particularly our tenure-line faculty – remains smaller than those of our colleague PhD-granting departments in the Brandeis Divisions of Humanities and Social Sciences. Below are the numbers of tenure-line and OTS faculty in these departments as of AY 2022-23.

Dept	Tenure-line	Ten&OTS
[DEPT D]	14.5	17.4
[DEPT F]	13.8	19.8
[DEPT C]	13.3	14.3
[DEPT E]	11.5	11.7
[DEPT A]	11.3	12.8
[DEPT B]	8.3	9.2
<b>MUS</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11.7</b>

**Table 3.** Numbers of tenure-line faculty and total faculty FTE in non-science PhD granting departments (according to GSAS/OIR data), AY 2022-23

Provost Fierke and Dean Wendy Cadge have both stated that they do not believe that Music will be able to sustain the excellence of its PhD programs given its very small faculty size. And yet: the program outcomes compiled in the PhD review – which conclusively demonstrate Music’s excellence – cover the period 2011-2022, during all of which we operated on a skeleton crew of 5 – 7.5 tenure lines. **Any notion that Music will not be able to sustain the excellence of its PhD programs with low faculty numbers is utterly unfounded. We have spent over a dozen years doing exactly that.**



### CLAIM 3: Our undergraduate enrollment statistics support the hiring of more tenure-line faculty

In her draft recommendation to the Provost in November 2022, Dean Wendy Cadge supported the closure of one of Music's PhD programs with the following rationale:

the [Music] faculty is not large enough to support two distinct PhD programs and there is not enough demand in the form of undergraduate enrollments to hire and support the number of faculty required to sustain excellence in both of these PhD programs.

Yet, as we have shown, Music *has* sustained its excellence with a tiny faculty for well over a decade. Further, we assert that Music's undergraduate enrollments **do** support the hiring of a larger tenure-line faculty.

Table 4 below lists the average undergraduate enrollment per semester of all non-science PhD-granting departments at Brandeis between Fall 2016 and Fall 2022. Table 5 shows the ratio of undergraduate enrollments to FTE with respect to a) tenure-line faculty and b) tenure-line and OTS faculty among non-science, PhD-granting departments at Brandeis in Fall 2022. **The data show that Music has the second-largest average undergraduate enrollment of all its peer non-science PhD-granting departments at Brandeis. Yet Music has the smallest tenure-line faculty.**

[DEPT A]	498
<b>MUS</b>	<b>476</b>
[DEPT B]	464
[DEPT C]	432
[DEPT D]	464
[DEPT E]	428
[DEPT F]	192

**Table 4.** Average undergraduate enrollment per semester of all non-science PhD granting departments (Fall 2016-Fall 2022)



	F22 undergrad enroll/tenure-line	F22 undergrad enroll/ten&OTS
MUS	72	43
[DEPT B]	49	44
[DEPT A]	45	40
[DEPT D]	37	31
[DEPT E]	36	35
[DEPT C]	31	28
[DEPT F]	12	8

**Table 5.** Ratio of undergraduate enrollments to FTE with respect to a) tenure-line faculty and b) tenure-line & OTS among non-science, PhD-granting departments at Brandeis in Fall 2022

Among our sister departments, then, Music is indeed an outlier – but not in the way the administration imagines. **Music enrolls *more* undergraduates per tenure-line faculty member than any other non-science PhD-granting department at Brandeis.** The notion that low undergraduate demand for our courses cannot justify the hiring of more tenure-line Music faculty is, quite plainly, bonkers.

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Composition and Musicology are two of the oldest, most famous, and highest-performing PhD programs not only at Brandeis, but within their respective fields more broadly. The recent outpouring of support from the international artistic and scholarly communities, along with the outrage circulating among Brandeis’ extensive network of alumni, plainly demonstrate the scale of this proposed loss. We exhort the administration to abandon its plans to close two of Brandeis’ most outstanding assets.