

Think-Tank Summit Preview “Pillar 1: Belonging”

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.

—Oscar Wilde

Though widely known and undeniably inspiring, this quote’s deeper significance can be easy to overlook.. Of course, we need to be ourselves. We need to feel comfortable in our skin; we need to embody our work as musicians. But how do we celebrate this concept in the music school? Do our systems of auditions and assessment metrics acknowledge or honor the individual differences of our students and those we aim to serve? What are we really messaging to our students? Unfortunately, we often message that in order to succeed, students need to mold their musicianship and frequently diminish their own sense of self just to fit in. To belong...

As the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion are under direct attack by many in our general population and as these attacks manifest in deeply troubling actions at both the state and federal levels, I’m finding it an especially important time to critically examine and grow beyond the familiar language and frameworks that have served us in the past. I am thinking about the concept of *belonging*.

Cultivating a sense of *belonging* encapsulates everything we are trying to accomplish in DEIA while expanding the definition and our mission. We belong to our communities, to our city, our families, our country, our schools, to ourselves.

The concept of belonging is both expansive and elusive. It is exceedingly difficult to describe in a soundbite. We cannot measure belonging metrics in the same way we can measure diversity numbers or track inclusivity programs. Belonging is an internal sense that is felt and originates from our sense of body ownership. My fingers or arms belong to me, and this internal concept expands to include how we sense our "belonging" among groups of people and organizations. Belonging is rooted in the language of feelings and emotions. In the same way that the feeling of safety is more than the absence of danger, we know belonging when we feel it. Cultivating a sense of belonging, safety, and radical acceptance in our music schools is paramount if we are to prepare and inspire the next generation of engaged and healthy artists. Why? Because creativity, artistry, and musical excellence originate in our feelings of belonging, safety, and artistic embodiment.

As such, “belonging” is the first pillar of the 2026 CMS Think-Tank Summit focusing on the future of music schools. Each of our four pillars is led by a member of the programming committee who is dedicated to cultivating the program at the Summit and to framing the conversation to bring us all forward to action. The Belonging Pillar of the Summit is led by Shawn Copeland, CEO of mBODYed and a former clarinet professor. Shawn describes the importance of studying belonging for musicians this way:

“We are all misfits and outcasts. Then we find ourselves in our first music/theatre/art classroom, and we find our tribe. Finally, people who think like we do and aren’t my family, neighbors, cousins, etc. We find our safety, we find a place that we belong. Soon after, we discover that there are rules to this tribe. There are certain beliefs and behaviors about the body that are requirements of membership in the tribe; it ceases to be about belonging and becomes “fitting in.” To ensure our safety, we adopt these requirements, practice them, and embody them. We have no choice; it is hardwired. These requirements become our body maps.”

As Oscar Wilde so wittingly describes in his timeless quote above, belonging is more than simply fitting in; it is about celebrating each individual's special and unique differences. Belonging is about acknowledging the beautiful differences in all of us, in empowering the artist to develop their own distinctive voices. Artists are not widgets that we pump out of our programs. We are not robots. While we have clear methods of demonstrating competence in technique and understanding of the repertoire, ultimately, the artists we all think of as our heroes have developed and nurtured their own unique and identifiable voices. We do *some* of this in our schools, but it is not messaged to our students until after they have demonstrated mastery-level technique. Why not message this to our young artists the entire way?

What does this look like in practice?

I have no idea. I have some theories, but we must figure it out together. Come to the Summit in January and join in the conversation!

If you have ideas you would like to share, I encourage you to submit a proposal for one of our three presentation opportunities at the Summit: An “Ideas to Action” talk, an “Innovation Presentation” to talk about something you are trying at your school or sharing something that has worked, or a 5-minute “Sound Bite” to shop a bold vision/idea.

In the vibrant music world, fostering a sense of belonging is essential for nurturing creativity and collaboration among students. Music schools are not just places to learn instruments, repertoire, and music theory; they are communities where individuals come together in all our unique weirdness to celebrate our passion for music. By cultivating communities of belonging, we can help students feel valued and connected, and urge them to begin the life process of discovering themselves and their own artistic voices.

BC

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'B', 'k', and 'C' in a stylized, cursive font.

Brian Kai Chin
President, College Music Society