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L. Gregory Jones and Kelly Gilmer: Performance as leadership preparation

Our educational system and broader culture often teach us to be critics rather than performers. And yet performers are better equipped to lead institutions, because they have learned to practice, persevere and adapt.

by [L. Gregory Jones](#)



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They look like a litter of puppies out there on the grass. Exuberant and playful, they roll on the ground, bump into one another and run to and fro in a pack. At least one is off on his own, scratching at the dirt or plucking weeds.

They are the thousands of children who gather each weekend, all over the country, for preschool soccer.

The parents and grandparents who dutifully sign up the under-5 set for this chaotic and sometimes tear-filled rite of passage may do it to encourage their children to exercise, make new friends or simply have fun outside.

But the payoff can be much bigger and can emerge decades later.

One day, these tots will be leaders who need the grit to persevere through failure, adapt to changing

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circumstances and rally a group of people around a shared goal. Their experience performing on the soccer field is teaching them all these lessons, and more.

Many successful leaders in business and government have a background in performing, whether that's in athletics, music, theater or another realm.

Christine Lagarde was a member of the French national synchronized swimming team before she became the managing director of the International Monetary Fund in July 2011. Ronald Heifetz, the best-selling author and co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is a cellist. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz had a football scholarship to Northern Michigan University.

We need performers to lead our Christian institutions.

Yet our educational system, institutions and broader culture privilege critics. We are taught how to focus on the negative and tell others what to do, but we are not sufficiently equipped to learn how to take risks as performers. We receive information from learned instructors but rarely have the freedom we need to imagine and create ourselves.

Consider the typical practice we teach in higher education, including in theological schools: we regularly ask students to write papers that critique books and essays. In essence, we prepare students to think of themselves as critics rather than performers.

Those disciplines that focus on preparing people to become performers, such as theater or entrepreneurship -- or, in theological education, preaching and spiritual direction -- have had a harder time gaining credibility as worthy of study, and their practitioners as worthy of receiving tenure in research universities.

Indeed, I was formed the same way as a student and faced a steep learning curve in becoming dean of Duke Divinity School in 1997. No longer could I sit back and offer critiques of other people's performances.

To shift my mindset from that of a critic to that of a performer, I had to recall experiences in youth athletics that taught me how to rebound from mistakes and failures. Experience as a recreation league basketball coach reinforced those lessons from childhood, especially about adapting under pressure and developing resilience.

In "The Power of Habit," Charles Duhigg tells the story of high school dropout Travis Leach, the son of drug addicts, who couldn't hold down a job after he left home at 16. His childhood had been tumultuous, with a series of moves punctuated by his mother's stint in prison and his father's overdoses. He hadn't had a stable, nurturing childhood to learn the life skills he would need to succeed as an adult.

Then Leach got a job at Starbucks, where the employee training program taught him self-discipline and willpower. The young man who once threw chicken nuggets at an irritating customer at a fast-food chain now manages two Starbucks and 40 employees.

The Starbucks program focuses on those skills children often learn at soccer practice, piano lessons or painting class -- how to stay focused and positive in the face of errors or critique and how to develop self-discipline to regulate emotion, follow through with tasks and persevere through challenging circumstances.

Duhigg quotes Dartmouth University researcher Todd Heatherton: "That's why signing kids up for piano lessons or sports is so important. It has nothing to do with creating a good musician or a five-year-old soccer star. When you learn to force yourself to practice for an hour or run fifteen laps, you start building self-regulatory strength. A five-year-old who can follow the ball for ten minutes becomes a sixth grader who can start his homework on time."

The New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) is testament to the power of giving young people the opportunity and autonomy to create and solve problems on their own.

Jonah Lehrer, in "Imagine: How Creativity Works," describes the school as vibrating with "imaginative activity." The public school, which draws students from poor and wealthy neighborhoods alike,

operates on a master-apprentice model, with the students learning by writing, composing, sculpting, painting, acting and designing -- in short, by performing.

The book notes a study by psychologists at Skidmore College, in which elementary school teachers said they liked to have creative children in their classrooms. Yet when asked to rate their students, the same teachers ranked the most creative children as their least favorite students.

Why? Creative children “were harder to teach and they underperformed on standardized tests.” NOCCA turns that sort of evaluation on its head, focusing on nurturing creativity among all its students rather than delivering facts designed to encourage success on tests.

Few of the students at NOCCA will become professional artists, but that’s not the point, says its CEO, Kyle Wedberg. The students learn how to develop themselves and trust their instincts, through practice and perseverance.

“When children are allowed to create, they’re able to develop the sophisticated talents that are required for success in the real world,” Lehrer notes. “Instead of learning how to pass a standardized test, they learn how to cope with complexity and connect ideas, how to bridge disciplines and improve their first drafts.”

Interestingly, a key component of improving their art is giving and receiving criticism. This isn’t criticism for criticism’s sake, but in service to the demanding and exacting work of improving one’s performance.

We don’t need to send all our children to arts schools, nor do we need to send all our employees to softball leagues or improv training. Rather, we can nurture the development of our teams and ourselves by remembering and reflecting on our experiences as performers.

In that school play, what did you learn about rebounding from failure when you forgot your lines? While learning to play the violin, what lessons emerged about the value of practice? On the baseball field, did you figure out that perfection isn’t the path to victory?

In some cases, the lessons may involve things we have learned *not* to replicate. Remember hanging out with a group that pressured you to be a bully in order to gain membership? What might that illuminate about how to navigate social structures and follow your own moral compass?

We can learn to shift our mindsets away from criticism and toward performance, ready to harness our creative powers to bear faithful witness to the kingdom of God.

[Kelly Gilmer](#) contributed to this reflection.