

Spotlight On...

UMass Amherst

New UMass Amherst Director of Wind Studies visible in Massachusetts' schools

James Patrick Miller, the University of Massachusetts Amherst's new director of wind studies, has wasted no time introducing himself to the Commonwealth. On the job since September 1, James has already conducted clinics with area schools. Clinics, according to James, are part of a university's mission of service to the community:

"Service is an important part of what we do at a university and it's becoming increasingly easy to lose touch with the idea... that service is a vitally important part of community building. What is music without community? Many aspects of the academic lifestyle can inhibit the musical process: the paperwork, e-mails, meetings and everything else that can drive us away from art. The creative artistic process is always at the center of everything I do, and is always at the core of my teaching. Ensemble music is all about community and creativity; I hope to share that with schools through service."

Clinics with directors and students are based upon the unique needs of the program in consultation with the director. Observation of the interaction between director and students further informs the direction of the clinic. For James, clinics are a way of reinforcing what students have already learned.

"It's very important for guest artists to work in schools," James said. "Coming into a classroom as a guest and by discussing breathing... phrasing... in a way that's different from their classroom teacher... I'm reinforcing concepts that have already been taught."

As part of a university's mission to service, James feels strongly that directors and schools should not be hindered by lack of financial resources:

"Recruiting, professional development... those are merely resonances from the core purpose of interaction between the university and a public school, which is enriching the musical lives of the students. It needs to happen at no cost or a low cost for the public schools. A fiscal disadvantage should not constitute lack of a musical opportunity for those students."

James has involved his university students in clinics by having them interact with public school students. University applied faculty, such as UMass Amherst's new lecturer of tuba and euphonium, John Bottomley, have also accompanied James to clinics to show students the rewards of hard work and practicing:

"John played in the band, discussed solo versus ensemble performance, and played a solo." James said. "It's one thing to see a conductor. It's something else entirely to have a great professional player there playing his or her instrument, allowing students to hear the years of sweat and tears that they have poured into that instrument. Using John's clinic as an example, most students didn't know that the tuba was capable of that sound!"

Other changes are in store for the UMass Amherst wind studies program as well. Craig Kirchhoff, director of bands at the University of Minnesota, was recently in residence working with University students and area educators regarding artistry and education in the wind band world. February will feature a similar residency with Frank Battisti as well as the 25th Annual High School Honor Band led by director of bands Emeritus at UMass Amherst, Malcolm W. Rowell, Jr. "I'm excited to have Bill (Rowell) back here," James said. "He is a mentor to me, and is an important part of what we are doing at UMass."

UMassWinds, a registered UMass Amherst student organization, has also been formed with the intent of pursuing community service projects outside of the university to have "... students start to understand that there is something more to music and communicating through art than getting paid; something unique about music and art is that community and service are inherently woven into them," according to James. One example of a project might be creating a program of chamber music, bringing it to elementary schools, and connecting it to the importance of reading. James hopes that this organization "...creates a sense of ownership behind what we are trying to collectively accomplish as musicians and citizens."