

*What are three challenges you see for the choral profession in Illinois and what ideas do you have about how IL-ACDA might rise to meet these challenges?*

There seems to be a decline in the number of individuals who are seeking to become choir directors, but more alarming is the number who begin in the profession and then choose another path. ACDA can meet this challenge by continuing to offer reduced or free memberships to new directors, and perhaps provide mentoring to new choral directors as they navigate the beginning of their careers. ILMEA does already provide this for new teachers, but ACDA could support that by offering choral-specific online focus groups, led by our district representatives, other regional volunteers, and / or members of the board.

Clearly, the past few years have highlighted the need for choral directors across the state to ensure that every participant in our choirs has an experience that will help them feel a sense of belonging and importance. This includes singers of color, of the LGBTQ+ community, and all other economically and educationally diverse backgrounds. Strides have been made to include a diverse panel of conductors and music chosen not only for our festivals, but also in our local school programs. I believe Illinois ACDA will continue to improve in this area by establishing a strong rapport of trust and communication with the DIC Committee, responding by creating and improving events where needed to ensure every member feels included as an important part of the organization.

Related to my second response above, something that has been a concern to me is the need for Illinois ACDA to recognize the vast diversity in the type of choral programs across the state. The past success of the "Join Voices Chicago" program is exciting, and I hope initiatives like this continue to be held in the city, and increase in participation. However, I would also like to see ACDA make an investment of time and effort with our downstate members. I've often heard that ACDA activities don't relate well to members from rural areas who have overwhelming K-12 jobs, with a lack of resources and opportunities for their singers. I grew up in that kind of community, and we had a wonderful choir program. There are programs all over our state doing so much with so little. I would like to see ACDA respond by offering regional events so members can spend less time on the road and focus on the needs of their area. For example, an area colleague, Lara Reem, and I responded to the 4-5 hours of travel time to the Treble Festival in the suburbs by forming the Central Illinois Treble Festival, and it has been a really wonderful experience! I would envision these programs or events being organized by district representatives or other ACDA members, with board support, both monetarily and organizationally as needed. These events could provide more awareness of the benefits of being an ACDA member, which could increase our membership, as well as attendance at state conferences and other events, and would allow us to offer programming that better meets the needs of our downstate directors.

*Describe your relationship to and experience in supporting access, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within choral music. (no more than 500 words)*

From the outset of my career, I have always had a desire to learn about and teach choral music from different cultures and backgrounds outside of traditional Western European and American music. To be sure, Western music is important to learn as part of a well-rounded choral music education, but I want my students to understand and experience the world outside of their own. This stems from my own love of traveling and experiencing cultures outside of my small farm town upbringing, a high school teacher who encouraged us to “think outside of the corn and bean fields of Central Illinois,” and a world music class I took as a part of my undergrad education at the University of Illinois. Those life experiences have opened my eyes to so many different sounds, timbres, and performance styles that have enriched my understanding of the world, and have given me a passion to share it with my students.

Since then, I have incorporated non-western music into the curriculum in all of my choirs.. It is especially exciting when I am able to find music of a specific country or cultural heritage of a student in my class, and have them teach us the language and customs for performance. My favorite example of this was when I programmed *Maringa Krismes*, a traditional Christmas song from Sierra Leone in Western Africa. Samuela, my student from Sierra Leone, beamed with excitement when we began working on it, and told our class how she sings this song every year to her brother and sister who still live over there. Sharing her experience was a beautiful gift not only to me, but also to all of the students who performed the song, as well as the audience who enjoyed the performance.

The past few years have shed a light on the need for choral conductors to ensure that programming includes music and composers from a diverse range of backgrounds, especially minority groups in the United States. I have ensured to search for composers of all backgrounds and creeds so my students can find that they are singing music by composers who look like them or experience life as they do. One practice I started doing in the past few years is to introduce pieces by including a slide presentation that includes a picture of the composer, as well as the lyricist, when possible. This helps the students to see who wrote their music, and can also include background information of how the song came to be, or any information on the composer’s life and career. I suspect I have always looked for diversity like this in programming over my career, but the past few years have given me a renewed resolve to continue to search for quality music by a diverse range of composers and styles of music to meet the needs of my diverse population of singers, and to help them feel like they belong in our choir family.

*Please tell us about your leadership experience outside of conducting an ensemble. What skills did you use in your leadership role(s)?*

Leadership is something that comes naturally to me. I have always been the person who is willing to step up and take on leadership positions as they become available and as time permits. I obtained my first Masters Degree in Educational Leadership, as I was hoping to become the Director of Music for my school district. However, the position was discontinued due to budget cuts, but I have been able to spend most of my career serving as music department chair at my school. In that position, I lead three full-time and two part-time teachers, oversee three budgets, maintain our large inventory of instruments and other teaching materials, collaborate with the other building department chairs in our district, and work with district administrators and music staff on standards-based curriculum development and needs of our department.

Outside of school, I have volunteered extensively with ACDA, serving on the board as District 3 representative for several years. Other ACDA leadership activities include hosting the summer board meeting, organizing three volunteer choirs for the Summer ReTreat event, and I will be co-chairing the High School Honor Chorus at our upcoming Fall Conference in October 2023. I also have been a long-time volunteer for the Illinois Music Education Association, serving as the District 3 Senior Chorus chair for roughly 15 years, and serving as District 3 President from 2006-2009. Other leadership positions I've held over my career include serving on the Illinois High School Association Music Advisory Committee, hosting IHSA Solo-Ensemble Contest every other year at my school, presenting at the Illinois Music Education Conference, and speaking to college ICMEA and ACDA chapters. I have mentored over 30 student teachers from a variety of Illinois universities, which gives me joy to help get them on their way as music teachers. I have also served as clinician and adjudicator at a variety of events throughout the state.

Serving in all of these positions has helped me develop the skills of listening to the needs of an organization or group of people and making a plan to get the job done as efficiently and effectively as possible. My experience in planning district festivals and working with festival clinicians has set me up to not only be able to plan events, but also know how to serve our clinicians and conductors well. Of course, this cannot be done alone. I also try to engage those who I am leading into joining me to help run events and give feedback and ideas into the project or event we are organizing. I also do my best to communicate details to all stakeholders. I plan to utilize these skills as ACDA President - to engage all of our members in thoughtful reflection on what is great about ACDA, and where we can improve, and make a plan of action to see those needs being met.

*Tell us about your connections to ACDA and/or to the larger choral ecosystem. How will these connections inform your leadership in ACDA?*

I have been a member of ACDA for nearly 30 years, beginning as an undergrad at the University of Illinois in the late 1990s. I have attended as many conventions, retreats, and events as possible. While I have never been able to attend a national convention (mostly due to family and school commitments), I thankfully have been able to attend the Midwestern Region Conference a few times, and plan to continue this, with the goal of attending the national convention as soon as possible! Even though I live and teach in less-populated Central Illinois, I feel I am well-known throughout the state. My choir program at Normal Community High School has a positive reputation as a quality choral program, with invitations to perform at our state MEA conference, as well as with numerous collegiate choral programs. I am an outgoing person who tries to meet people, make connections all throughout the state, and look for opportunities to serve others wherever I can.

All of these connections from ACDA and other music organizations and events will help me as a leader as stated in the last question; I will bring together our membership to help identify where we want to go as an organization, making sure that all voices are heard, and will help foster growth and excitement into ACDA as we look to the future.