



SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
THEATRE & DANCE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

EXCEL 2022

Excellence in Entrepreneurship, Career Empowerment & Leadership



The EXCEL Lab

Our Mission

The Department of Entrepreneurship & Leadership and its embedded EXCEL Lab are committed to providing the resources each SMTD student needs to launch and sustain a life in the arts. We expand the professional development bandwidth of students' degree programs and support a myriad of individualized needs, from navigating the job search to project management and more. EXCEL is committed to helping students turn their ideas into action. Our aim is to broaden the spotlight on success so that every member of our community can be seen for who they are and emerge from Michigan poised to claim their leadership potential while carving out new models for personal and professional success.

Who We Are

Jonathan Kuuskoski, Director
Gabrielle Piazza, Assistant Director
Dr. Melissa Coppola, Program Manager
Caitlin Taylor, Coordinator*

Student Staff:

Schuyler Donahoe, Kayla Fiore*, Gala Flagello,
BethAnne Kunert*, Mattie Levy, KJ Ludwig,
Andrew Otchere, Lesley Sung, Kaitlyn Tom*,
and Samantha Williams*

Entrepreneurship & Leadership Faculty:

Mark Clague, Antonio C. Cuyler (p. 17), Aaron
Dworkin, and Jonathan Kuuskoski

Instructors:

Marc Arthur, Sara Billmann, Courtney Burkett,
Sarah Clare Corporandy, Matthew Dear, Afa
Dworkin, Ken Fischer, Christie Finn, Thomas
Hampson, Andrew Kuster, Kari Landry, Jay
LeBoeuf, Michael Michelin, Omari Rush, Anna
Sampson, Ari Solotoff, Carrie Throm, Samantha
White*, Sarah Winkler, and Eric Woodhams*

**Former staff or faculty who contributed to EXCEL offerings between 2020–22*

Where to Find Us

Room 1279 (In the Student Commons Area)
Earl V. Moore Building
Appointments available by request

umexcelsmtd.com (The EXCEL Log)
facebook.com/SMTDEXCEL

We acknowledge that the University of Michigan resides on the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg – The Three Fire Confederacy of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations, as well as the Wyandot Nation. In particular, the university resides on land gifted by the three Nations and the Wyandot Nation, along with many other Indigenous Nations, in the 1817 Treaty of Fort Meigs. We acknowledge the language of “gift” in the original treaty entails mutual relationships between treaty parties, respect, and obligation on the part of the settlers. We advocate for Indigenous struggles against ongoing settler-colonization and strive for a decolonized future.

Creating new directions

“EXCEL’s work has evolved since 2020 directly in response to the numerous crises facing the arts. Our work has fundamentally shifted to better address the needs of our students and position our resources to advance systemic change around the practices of arts leadership, management, and entrepreneurship.”

Jonathan Kuuskoski, Chair, Department of Entrepreneurship & Leadership; Director, EXCEL Lab

Our evolution has been guided by these three strategic priorities:

- #1:** Fostering community in online environments by elevating a diverse array of student stories and new programming formats that will better serve an increasingly virtual world.
- #2:** Elevating anti-racist agendas throughout SMTD, and developing best practices to situate social and racial justice at the heart of our training programs.
- #3:** Deepening our offerings by intentionally sequencing courses, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities to enrich the potential for budding arts leaders to catalyze change.

Over the next several pages, we highlight SMTD students who have realized impactful projects and ventures at the intersection of these strategic priorities, leveraging EXCEL’s various funding programs, which include:

EXCEL Prize: \$10,000 awarded annually to a student or student team with a standout arts venture, in recognition of extraordinary excellence in performing arts entrepreneurship, leadership, and social impact.

EXCEL Enterprise Fund: Microgrants of up to \$1,500 that support dozens of individual or team projects annually that demonstrate significant professional development and community impact potential.

EXCEL Impact Award: A special prize of \$2,500 to \$8,000 that recognizes students with ventures that demonstrate significant achievements around social impact.

Performing Arts EXCEerator Fellowship: A venture incubator supporting 4-5 student teams and their early stage arts ventures with up to \$5,000 in startup funding alongside semester-long mentorship from industry experts.

Tal Kamin

EXCEL
Impact Award
Winner

photo: Emma Zordan

We Are Queens

Artist and entrepreneur **Tal Kamin** (she/her), BFA '22 Dance, BA '22 Economics (center in photo), is committed to empowering herself and others to celebrate life. In 2019, Tal founded We Are Queens, a 501(c)3 focused on empowering college-aged dancers on 20+ campuses towards sustainable trajectories through community-building, leadership training, and professional development.

“EXCEL empowered me to fill in the gaps in my entrepreneurial journey. Leading a nonprofit is a challenging task as a college student. But instead of focusing on my hesitations and concerns, EXCEL supported me to really learn, understand, and charge forward. Through one-on-one coaching sessions and funding opportunities, I was able to better articulate our organization's plans and programming. Furthermore, as a direct result of my coaching with Prof. Kuuskoski, we were able to establish our board of directors and legal bylaws to ensure legitimacy in our continued development and impact. The encouragement and resources provided by EXCEL were immeasurable in their impact on my personal growth and that of We Are Queens.”

Imani Ma'at

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow



Flip the Switch 529

Flip the Switch 529, a grassroots organization co-founded by **Imani Ma'at** (she/her), MFA '22 Dance, Cleo Anderson, and Treasure Anderson, envisions a world where artists, healers, and individuals from all walks of life can nurture connections through cultural exchange and ritual, while raising the collective consciousness of the global community. Flip the Switch 529 cultivates intergenerational creative spaces to perform, share stories, and engage traditions known to the African, Indigenous, and futuristic communities.

“Overall, I felt like we grew from the EXCEerator incubator experience. We have expanded and now our vision is being picked up by galleries in Detroit that we are partnering with for the future. We have also been featured in university magazines and at various conferences such as the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance. Since our experience with EXCEL, I can say that our FTS 529 curriculum, festivals, programs, and outreach have expanded tremendously.”

Since 2016, the Performing Arts EXCEerator Fellowship program has helped launch or grow **30** SMTD student-led ventures by providing extensive mentorship with industry leaders and more than **\$150,000** in startup funding.

Alissa Freeman

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

photo: Chien-an Yuan

The 5PM Series & ||:HerClassical:||

With a unique profile in education, performance, and entrepreneurship, **Alissa Freeman** (she/her), DMA '22 Piano Performance & Pedagogy, is a passionate musician who is always working on a new project. Since 2020 she has been executive director of the 5PM Series, a digital concert series that raised over \$10,000 to support more than 100 artists during COVID-19. She recently started a new venture called ||:HerClassical:||, which promotes pedagogical compositions of 18th-century women through new editions and other resources.

“Securing project funding was huge—it helped me realize so many ideas, and even though some of these haven’t been things I’ve continued, I’ve really started to understand what skills you need to succeed in this industry. With the EXCEerator, I was so grateful for the personalized mentorship by arts administration experts and the way this expanded our network.”

*Since 2015, EXCEL has provided more than **\$600,000** in funding support for hundreds of student projects, ventures, and internships.*

Timmy Thompson

EXCEL
Enterprise Fund
Recipient

photo: Still from *Undeclared* Ep. 2

Undeclared (web series)

A senior in the Department of Musical Theatre, **Timmy Thompson** (he/him), BFA '23 Musical Theatre, was born and raised in New Jersey. At the University of Michigan, he developed a love for filmmaking during sophomore year. He also enjoys producing, playwriting, editing, and much more. *Undeclared*, a five-part web series, follows two naive college roommates in a narrative that satirizes the joys and absurdities of growing up and dealing with mental health, socialization, dreams, and sexual spaces.

“I would say the highlight of my time with EXCEL came in the form of an EXCEL Enterprise Fund grant and independent study with Prof. Jonathan Kuuskoski. With these resources, I pursued a personal dream of mine—creating a web series. I got to experience writing, producing, editing, and acting on camera with my best friends. Because of EXCEL, I have gained the experience and knowledge necessary to be able to write grants, handle budgets, and organize teams of people and their creative needs.”

Samantha Rose Williams

American Patriots

Samantha Rose Williams (she/her), SM '22 Voice, Graduate Certificates '22 Arts Entrepreneurship and World Performance Studies, is an arts activist who is committed to sharing marginalized experiences with diverse audiences and creating space for critical discussion about art, culture, and social change. She was awarded EXCEL funding and additional U-M grants, culminating in her graduate degree recital *American Patriots*.

“EXCEL was the most influential and impactful part of my four years at U-M and is responsible for so much of my professional growth. EXCEL has been a place that nurtured me as an artist, a visionary, and a 20-something-year-old trying to figure out what to do with my life.”

EXCEL
Enterprise Fund
Recipient

As of fall 2022, more than **340** student-led projects, which have collectively involved thousands of SMTD students, have been funded through the EXCEL Enterprise Fund.

William Thain

Ensemble Urbain

Canadian violinist **William Thain** (he/him), MM '22 Violin, Graduate Certificate '22, Arts Entrepreneurship and Leadership, studied with Danielle Belen at U-M. He was a recipient of the 2022 Performing Arts EXCEerator Fellowship as a co-founder of the Montréal-based Ensemble Urbain, a conductorless ensemble specializing in performing works by underrepresented composers.

“Through the EXCEL lab, I was able to attend guest lectures and workshops and receive funding for development projects with my Montréal-based string ensemble, Ensemble Urbain. The EXCEerator fellowship program helped Ensemble Urbain to organize our first two live concerts since the beginning of the pandemic and have set us forward in our organizational growth by at least a year.”

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

Kaitlyn Tom

EXCEL
Enterprise Fund
Recipient

photo: Devin Raymond

HOME (film) & EXCEL Dean's Liaison

Kaitlyn Tom (she/her), BTA '22, is currently living in Los Angeles and working at United Talent Agency. During her time at Michigan she was a MUSKET executive producer and also independently produced a number of film and theatre projects. One of those projects was her independent film project *HOME*, which she produced with a peer during the height of the pandemic as a way to feature and uplift voices of color. As a Dean's Liaison (a selective program of paid internships), she was able to conduct research about her department, serving as a necessary bridge between a major selected by relatively few students and EXCEL.

"EXCEL played an integral role in my experience as a student in SMTD as well as my professional development beyond college. Being a Dean's Liaison was a wonderful opportunity to get to work closely with the department. I've been able to learn skills such as collaboration, communication, and organization that have all helped me in my career. In addition, during my time at Michigan I received funding from EXCEL multiple times for independently produced projects that allowed me to define my voice as a creative, an opportunity I would not have had without EXCEL."

Joshua DeVries

EXCEL Prize
Winner 2021



photo: Colin McCall

Just a Theory Press

Joshua DeVries (he/him), BM '18 Cello and Music Theory, MM '23 Cello, PhD '23 Music Theory, is a musician and entrepreneur who founded Just a Theory Press. Publishing new music and books, Just a Theory Press also provides preparation services to some of the top ensembles and composers in the country.

"EXCEL has provided funding to support my endeavors since my very first year at Michigan. From the Enterprise Grant to the EXCEL Prize, EXCEL helped us buy our original printing equipment, scale up our production capabilities, support higher-end clients, and invest in building a sustainable, economically beneficial business model for myself, our employees, and the artists we work with."

*Through the EXCEL Prize and Impact Awards, EXCEL has awarded more than **\$80,000** to support more than a dozen outstanding student ventures that exemplify the highest potential for arts leadership and entrepreneurship. **85%** of those ventures are still in operation today.*

Jonathan Cheng

Hong Kong Youth Music Festival

Jonathan Cheng, MM '23 Harpsichord, is studying under the tutelage of Professor Joseph Gascho and also serves as the managing director of the New Hong Kong Philharmonia (NHKP), a nonprofit he founded in 2018. He oversees projects including Hong Kong Youth Music Festival (HKYMF), Hong Kong Youth Catania Music Competition, and the Composers' Retreat. The NHKP uses music as a medium to create an impact beyond purely music-making and nurtures musicians into compassionate, capable, and responsible leaders for society.

"With the support of the EXCEL program and its resources, we have been able to reach new heights with the HKYMF. We expanded our faculty and started working with new instructors. Such opportunities would not be possible without the aid of EXCEL, which allowed us to venture more into the unexplored. I now see more clearly that challenging oneself and breaking through past limitations is crucial in bringing improvements. This shift in mindset is one of the biggest impacts on my professional growth."

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

Gwendolyn Matias-Ryan

SA'OAXACA

Gwendolyn Matias-Ryan, SM '19 Viola, is a Mexican American violist and the creator and artistic director of SA'OAXACA, the Oaxaca Strings International Music Festival. SA'OAXACA is the first tuition-free chamber music festival exclusively for string instrumentalists (violin, viola, and cello) in Oaxaca, founded by her Amatista Quartet from U-M in partnership with the Fine Arts School (Escuela de Bellas Artes de la Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, UABJO) and the Fonoteca Juan León Mariscal of Centro Cultural San Pablo.

"The constant support of the EXCEL Lab helped us continue with our festival during the pandemic. The suggestions given to us during those hard times were especially helpful, and the support to our SA'OAXACA faculty was an aspect that helped keep the momentum of the festival going. I have applied much of what I learned from those sessions over the years."

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

Grey Rose Grant

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

photo: Danielle Gonzalez

Fifth Wall Performing Arts

Grey Rose Grant (she/they), BM '16 & MA '22, Composition (*left-center in photo*), is a composer, performer, and librettist whose work frequently involves a transdisciplinary, collaborative effort between herself and other artists. She co-founded Fifth Wall Performing Arts, an artist-led experimental performing arts organization that values the whole artist—artists as creators who do not fit into one discipline, as individuals with unique life experiences, as people who want to be heard. Fifth Wall's specialty is art that is self-actualized, intimate, sincere, and self-aware, and the organization commissions new works and reimagines existing works to those ends. Fifth Wall actively works against systems of oppression by engaging artists from marginalized identities.

"The EXCEerator program was an incredibly valuable experience. We were able to meet new mentors working within the industry that have helped guide our organization into its current direction. We've been awarded several micro-grants, including an EXCEL Impact Award, which has allowed us to produce our annual Black Hearts, Black Voices album, our annual Fluxus Fest, and our current works in progress: The Precipice and Glitter Orgy."

Jack Doyle

EXCEL Prize
Winner 2022



Northern Town Parodies

Jack Doyle (he/him), BFA '22, Theatre Design & Production, specializes in scenic design and stage management and is passionate about the art of storytelling, in all of its various forms. He is the co-founder, along with Nina Groll, of Northern Town Parodies, a comedy theatre company focused on creating commentary on pop culture and media.

"Through the EXCEL Prize, Northern Town Parodies was able to take our fully original show on a tour to Chicago. The funding allowed us to support our actors'/crew's housing in the city and enhance the production value of our shows, all while focusing on a sustainable future for the company. We have had doors opened to professional recording, live performance, and networking opportunities by taking our show to a place where comedy theatre really thrives. The funding also allowed us to focus on long-term investments for the company, such as lighting and sound equipment."

EXCEL supports students in each and every SMTD department, and reaches well over 550 students every year across funding, coaching, events, and courses.

Leonard Bopp

Performing
Arts EXCEerator
Fellow

photo: Marc Hall

BlackBox Ensemble

Leonard Bopp (he/him), MM '22, Orchestral Conducting, is a New York-based conductor, trumpet player, and interdisciplinary collaborative artist. Fiercely devoted to contemporary performance practice, he is the founder and artistic director of the BlackBox Ensemble, a NYC-based new music collective devoted to exploring the experimental boundaries of the music of our time and its capacity to catalyze social justice causes.

"The EXCEL funding that BlackBox Ensemble received allowed us to pursue ambitious projects we would not have been able to produce otherwise, including an open-air performance and filmed concert during COVID, multiple recording projects, and our 2021-2022 season of performances. EXCEL also provided invaluable coaching from mentors in the EXCEerator program, which gave us insights into all aspects of building and managing an ensemble, from marketing to programming to finances, and helped us chart a path towards sustainable growth. The EXCEL Lab is among the top reasons I am so glad to have studied at Michigan."

EXCEL is an integral member of U-M's perennially top-ranked entrepreneurship ecosystem—currently in the top five schools globally for both undergraduate and graduate entrepreneurship education. (2022 Princeton Review / Entrepreneur magazine)

Gala Flagello

EXCEL
Impact Award
Winner



Dabble for saxophone quartet

Gala Flagello (she/her), MM '19 & DMA '22, Composition, is a composer, educator, and nonprofit director whose music has been described as “both flesh and spirit, intensely psychological without sacrificing concrete musical enjoyment.” She is the festival director and co-founder of the nonprofit contemporary music festival Connecticut Summerfest and continues her involvement in EXCEL as a program assistant.

“Funding from the EXCEL Enterprise Fund was invaluable in creating the high-quality web premiere video of my sax quartet, Dabble, featuring University of Michigan-based Aero Quartet! Since the premiere and subsequent sharing and posting of the video, the piece has received much interest from the saxophone community. EXCEL has been a hub of creative energy, helpful resources, and endless potential for the entirety of my time at SMTD. From grants to support the entrepreneurial life of a freelance composer to mentoring regarding long-term career pursuits, the EXCEL Lab feels like a sort of aspirational professional home.”



Touch of Blue

KJ Ludwig (she/her), BMA '23, Multidisciplinary Studies (*left in second group on the right*), serves as an EXCEL program assistant and creative director for Touch of Blue, a jazz and improvisatory-based vocal ensemble at U-M. Led also by Harry Castle, music director, and Lucy Koukoudian, business manager, the ensemble performs a range of music from standards to graphic scores, and from contemporary jazz-influenced songs to brand-new commissions from living composers. Two principles are at the heart of what they do: first, that they align themselves with jazz musicians and traditions through collaboration and improvisation, and second, that they seek to uplift voices that often become marginalized in the separation of vocal and instrumental jazz.

“Through our experience in the EXCEerator incubator, we were able to develop our mission and have now begun to work towards a collaborative jazz concert that will bring together different departments within SMTD. We hope to give various students the chance to attend, perform, and learn more about jazz and improvisatory works, while also creating the opportunity for vocal jazz studies to become a part of the SMTD curriculum in the future.”

Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler



Launched in 2020, the U-M Anti-Racism Faculty Hiring Initiative (ARHI) has resulted in the hiring, across the Ann Arbor campus, of many new tenure-track faculty members with scholarly expertise in structural racism and racial injustice. EXCEL Lab director Jonathan Kuuskoski was a co-lead on a successful proposal to hire leading arts management academics, including **Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler** (he/him), to the SMTD faculty, with the goal of developing the capacity to research and to teach how the arts can offer robust platforms to address racism and advance justice.

Dr. Cuyler is the author of *Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Cultural Organizations: Insights from the Careers of Executive Opera Managers of Color in the U.S.*, and editor of the recently published *Arts Management, Cultural Policy, & the African Diaspora*. He is also founder of Cuyler Consulting, LLC, a Black-owned arts consultancy that helps cultural organizations maximize their performance and community relevance through access, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Q&A with Dr. Cuyler

What are your top priorities as a scholar and educator?

“My top priority as an educator and scholar is to seek to uncover the truth and to disseminate that truth. This is why in my teaching I aim to balance academic rigor with professional relevance. I also feel compelled to empower my students with the skills to enter the field, but also to transform it.”

Why is a program like EXCEL important for students?

“EXCEL is important because it will ensure that SMTD alumni will not have buyer’s remorse because of a lack of access to entrepreneurial arts education. This is just one of the reasons why I believe SMTD leads in higher ed arts programs: we professionally prepare the whole artist. The education that students receive through the Performing Arts Management and Entrepreneurship minor and certificate will enable them to lead and manage their careers through the entirety of their life spans.”

Scan for the complete
Q&A with Dr. Cuyler





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