



Division of Music

**West Virginia University**

College of Creative Arts

25 September 1995

Washington University  
c/o Jeffrey Kurtzman  
7605 Balson Avenue  
St. Louis, MO 63130-2150

To Whom It May Concern:

Prof. Kurtzman has recently inquired about the issue of physical contact within the academic environment. Certainly, this is a sensitive and much discussed issue and one of particular concern to all of us in the arts.

Throughout our entire College of Creative Arts at West Virginia University, physical contact is common, but also carefully respected. I cannot speak for how students interact among themselves, but among faculty and administrators and in relation to our students we have very carefully defined policies for physical contact. These guidelines state that there should be no unwarranted contact among colleagues, and also that each individual has both the right and the responsibility to voice his or her opinion regarding unwanted physical contact. For example, faculty members are careful to keep office doors open during meetings with individual students as appropriate to the nature of the meeting.

However, these guidelines do not mean that there is no physical contact. Hugs, hearty pats on arms and backs, etc. among faculty and administration are common. Indeed, physical contact is an important and significant way of communicating a variety of feelings, from joy to sadness. Particularly in the arts, hugs are frequently given, among faculty/administrators and between faculty/administration and students after performances, important examinations, etc. Often individuals ask permission: "May I give you a hug" or "Do you need a hug right now?" More often, among colleagues who know one another well, there are unspoken conditions about when it is appropriate to hug and when it is not.

In our college I believe that showing little or no affection, empathy, etc., through physical contact would be just as offensive as showing too much. Many colleagues and students alike would be hurt if they were not congratulated in a manner that both I and they clearly approve of. A hug or hearty hand-shake would be sorely missed. Especially in our disciplines in which performance represents such a heightening of energies and emotions, to not show physical affection is an insult to many individuals. Even at the various scholarly meetings which I attend, hugs are commonly given as ways of greeting and congratulating one another.

Certainly a range of meanings can be delivered by bodily contact. I live by very staunch feminist principles which are very supportive of the right of women against unwarranted sexual advances. However, I also believe that each of us --- women and men --- also need to act maturely and responsibly regarding physical contact, to give that contact only when appropriate, but also to accept that contact appropriate to the intentions under which it was given. I believe that our college at West Virginia University understands this well. I trust that overall we Americans are not becoming a culture which does not communicate through physical contact. Certainly at least our French and Italian colleagues would find this bizarre behavior.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Coeyman".

Barbara Coeyman  
Associate Professor  
Vice-President, Society for Seventeenth Music