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The feeling that you are where you belong: a qualitative analysis of college music groups and student success

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THE FEELING THAT YOU ARE WHERE YOU BELONG:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE MUSIC GROUPS AND STUDENT SUCCESS

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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Introduction

“We believe in the power of music to uplift, to inspire, and to help make the world a better place.” These words, from the mission statement of an all-men’s choir at a mid-sized Midwestern university, accurately reflect the attitude that many people have toward music. Music ensembles, both vocal and instrumental, often have a very profound impact on their members, emotionally, socially, and even academically. For college students in particular, these organizations can provide a social structure and support group that helps with the transition from high school to college and helps students deal with homesickness and the unfamiliarity of a new environment.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has provided significant research into student involvement and the positive contribution it has to a student’s success in college. However, little qualitative research has been performed to support this data and share individual stories about student’s involvement and why it has contributed to their success. The purpose of this study was to examine how participation in college music groups contributes to a student’s socialization within the college environment, identity with the university, and transition from high school to college. The results of this study fill the gap and provide qualitative data about the value of student music groups and their contribution to the success of their members.

The central research question for this study was, “How does participation in student music groups contribute to a student’s transition from high school to college and connection to their university?” The study focused on student socialization, transition from high school to college, social support, and friendships. Other central themes that came up throughout the study included important skills gained from participation in the organization, homesickness, and friendships with other members of the ensemble.

As a four-year member of one of these ensembles, I also had some personal motivations for choosing this particular topic. As an incoming freshman, my participation in an ensemble had a very significant impact on my transition to college; easing my homesickness and helping me form strong connections and friendships with the other members. Many of my friends from this ensemble have shared similar experiences, and have credited the ensemble with their feelings of connection to the university. I wanted to dig a little deeper and see if others who were involved in music ensembles shared my personal feelings about their experiences, and find some way to communicate the importance of these groups to incoming students, current members, and the faculty who administer these groups.

In addition to my passion for music and my involvement with one of the studied ensembles, the topic of student involvement and engagement also ties in very well with my chosen field of student, Postsecondary Student Affairs. Through the process of conducting this research, I have begun to explore student affairs literature and familiarize myself with some of the common theories used in the discipline. This study has increased my understanding of the importance of student involvement, and has made me even more passionate about helping students succeed by making sure that they are getting involved and forming connections on campus.

Literature Review

In preparation for the study, research was done into the pre-existing literature regarding the benefits of student involvement, participation in student music organizations, social support, socialization, and identification. These categories were chosen for their applicability to the research question and their prevalence in similar studies. Social support, socialization, and identification are important concepts in Communication Studies research that strongly influence

a person's transition into a new group or organization. Successful transitions, especially from high school to college, rely heavily on these three concepts. Another important factor in these transitions is student involvement, a topic which has been studied extensively through the National Survey of Student Engagement, as well as through many other higher education studies. The benefits of involvement, specifically in a music organization, have been studied at the middle school and high school level, but not in the framework of a college campus. However, many of those findings potentially apply to the college environment.

Benefits of student involvement

Participation in student organizations outside of classes helps students develop skills that they might not be getting in the classroom. Employers are looking for more than just a degree and technical skills; they want employees with soft skills: the ability to work well in teams, written and spoken communication skills, comfort with technology, the ability to adapt to change, and experience working with people of different countries and cultures (Associated Press, 2013). Participation in extracurricular activities and other outside involvement can help students to develop these soft skills. Students who are involved in organizations and seek leadership roles have been known to express an increased appreciation for diversity, improved listening skills, and a greater sense of connection between their learning and personal development (Peck, 2011).

In addition to the development of the soft skills employers are looking for, co-curricular involvement can benefit students in other ways after they leave their college campus. A study by Hu and Wolniak (2010) indicated that social engagement was positively related to the starting salaries of college graduates. Kuh (2003) supports this claim as well, stating that students who are engaged on their campuses are able to gain the necessary skills to live a satisfying and

successful life after graduation. Extracurricular involvement also offers students the opportunity to connect with faculty members and administrators, who often serve as advisers for student organizations. Many students see these faculty advisers as role models. These faculty members who collaborate with students in extracurricular organizations can have an influence on students' lives outside the classroom, serving as mentors for career plans and forming personal relationships with students (Gonyea and Kuh, 2009).

The idea that structured activities are beneficial to students is also supported by data from the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse that indicates that college students who are actively engaged on their campuses, especially in service learning opportunities, are less likely to engage in risky behaviors related to alcohol and drugs (Low, 2011). Studies have also found that participation in extracurricular activities helps students build self-confidence and belief in their abilities (Dagaz, 2012). Students who participate in extracurricular activities have been found to demonstrate greater levels of engagement, an increased openness to wider learning, improved listening and communication, and better relationships with faculty and staff (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2011).

Social Support

Miller (2012) defines social support as “a means of protecting individuals from the major and minor stresses of life” (p 212). Social support helps individuals cope with job-related stress, burnout, and personal stressors. Most researchers separate social support into three main functions: emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support. The first two of these, emotional and instrumental support, relate particularly well to this study. Emotional support reassures an individual that they are loved and cared for; it boosts their self-esteem, indicates unconditional regard, or provides a shoulder to cry on (Miller, 2012). Informational

support occurs when a peer group provides an individual with facts and advice to help them cope. This could decrease job-related stressors and provide suggestions for dealing with or avoiding burnout (Miller, 2012).

Researchers define social support as the availability of people that love, value, and care about us, and on whom we can rely (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983). It has been widely acknowledged that social support, a confidence that help is available if we need it, plays a role in reducing stress and increasing psychological well-being. Adolescents receive social benefits, including a reduction in anxiety or a solution to a perceived problem, from their family, friends, teachers, or neighbors. However, when a student leaves home to begin their college education, their social support system is unavailable to help them through some of those difficult times. It is important for students to find a social support system in their new environment to ensure their success in college.

Zhou, Zhu, Zhang, and Cai (2013) showed that for students who indicated signs of perfectionism, a higher level of perceived social support led to lower levels of depression. Perfectionism, a trait in which people set themselves to unreachable standards, is usually a strong indicator of depression, particularly in college students (Bergman, Nyland & Burns, 2007). Generally, students who score high on perfectionism also experience greater depression and anxiety than others. However, this study found that even in perfectionists, a strong perception of social support led to much lower findings of depression among college students (Zhou, Zhu, Zhang, & Cai, 2013).

In both high school and college, extracurricular activities can help students make friends and establish this social support. This extracurricular involvement provides social recognition from peers and strong emotional connections between members, which often results in family-

like relationships (Flores-González, 2002). The relationships between students and adult sponsors, such as coaches, directors, or faculty, are also beneficial to students. These sponsors often communicate high expectations to the students and push them to achieve more academically (Valenzuela, 1999).

Socialization and identification

The concept of identification refers to an individual's perception of belonging to a group. In many cases, a group member will begin to identify himself or herself in terms of the group to which he or she belongs (Miller, 2012). When identification occurs, the values and goals of the group become the values and goals of the individual member. Related to identification is the concept of socialization. The process of socialization occurs when an individual joins a new group or organization. According to Miller (2012), socialization is an "ongoing behavioral and cognitive process by which individuals join, become integrated into, and exit organizations" (p 122). Typical components of the socialization process include learning the requirements of a member of the organization, get to know the other members of the organization on a deeper level, and eventually feel comfortable enough within the organization to assert their opinions and make changes (Miller, 2012).

Organizational communication scholars often divide the process of socialization into three different phases: anticipatory socialization, encounter, and metamorphosis. For the purposes of this study, the second and third phases are the most relevant. The encounter phase refers to the point of entry when a new member first encounters the organization. This experience is often full of change, contrast, and surprise, and can often be very stressful. The metamorphosis stage occurs when the new member makes the transition from outsider to insider and fully feels as though they are a part of the organization (Miller, 2012).

Tieu and Pancer (2009) found that participation in outside activities is linked with a positive adjustment to university life for first-year college students. Successful adjustment is particularly high if the student feels as though the activity is important, and if the activity allows the student to feel a sense of connection to other individuals (Tieu and Pancer, 2009). Dagaz (2012) found that extracurricular activities create a space for friendship to develop. These friendships help students develop a sense of connection, giving them a social and personal identity that can influence student behavior. Additionally, student organizations can help a student come to view themselves as important or competent, which has a positive impact on self-esteem. This acceptance and sense of value comes not only from the student themselves, but also from peers who value each other's contributions (Dagaz, 2012).

Another study by Mahoney and Stattin found that structured activities are the most beneficial to students and are strongly related to fewer instances of antisocial behavior in students (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). The study defined structured activities as ones with regular scheduled participation, guided by a set of rules, led by an authority figure, with an emphasis on the development of one or more skills. In structured activities, students are given feedback on their performance, and are placed under higher demands as they become more competent in the specified skill (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Further studies show that supportive campuses provide the best opportunities for students to succeed. Gonyea and Kuh (2009) define a supportive campus as one with high-quality relationships between students and faculty members, administrative personnel, and other students. These relationships help students thrive socially, and will increase a student's sense of belonging on campus and in the classroom. This sense of belonging influences academic self-

efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and perceptions of the value of their education (Freeman et al, 2007).

Participation in music organizations

Dagaz (2012) found that participation in a high school marching band offered stability and a strong support network to students, also giving them an enhanced sense of acceptance and self-confidence. The support network forms early, during the group's pre-season band camp in the summer. Dagaz found that band camp created an important bond between the members and helped ensure dedication to the program for the duration of the season.

Marching band can be particularly beneficial to students who have faced social difficulties in the past. According to Dagaz, these students openly acknowledged that participating in the band taught them how to make friends (2012). Members of the marching band are aware that the success of the group as a whole depends on the reliability and dedication of the individual. This sense of inter-dependence often affects the behavior of members by encouraging them to conform to the expectations of the peer group, which include regular attendance, adequate sleep, and academic responsibility (Dagaz, 2012). Participation in music-oriented organizations has also been found to influence students' sense of belonging (Scripp & Meyaard, 1991), increase academic performance (Black, 1997), and lead to an increased self-esteem and desire to learn (Costa-Giomi, 2004).

The inter-connectedness of the marching band also has positive interpersonal effects for members. Due to the nature of the performance, the role of each individual is viewed as vital, which brings the students to trust and count on one another (Dagaz, 2012). Members of the marching band were also found to have a high level of acceptance of individual differences. Members described the group as a place where everyone is accepted, regardless of social

differences (Dagaz, 2012). This atmosphere of inclusion provides members with a feeling of safety to express themselves without fear of rejection (Dagaz, 2012).

In one study, students perceived that their involvement in a music ensemble had a positive impact in their lives in a social, musical, and personal sense (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2011). Overall, music-making contributed to perceived good health, quality of life, and mental well-being for participants. Students who participated in music organizations in college reported social benefits from being active contributors to a group outcome, which helped them in developing a strong sense of belonging. They felt that the organization helped them gain popularity and allowed them to make friends with like-minded people, enhance their social skills, and develop a strong sense of self-esteem (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2011).

One study also found that a strong marching band program can be a useful recruitment and retention tool for universities. Marching band has a long-recognized value of developing school spirit among members and among the community, which can lead to pride in the institution (Madsen, Plack, & Dunnigan, 2007). Among members, marching bands provide a social outlet for students and enhance the extracurricular life of the student body. The band is also a useful tool for public relations, and can influence groups of alumni and the public to support the university (Madsen, Plack & Dunnigan, 2007). The study by Madsen, Plack & Dunnigan indicated that the reputation of a university's marching band helps recruit students to the university (2007).

Methodology

The study specifically analyzed members of a college marching band and an all-men's choral ensemble at a medium-sized Midwestern university. Ten interviews were conducted with current members of these two organizations. To recruit participants for the interview process, an

email was sent to each organization's listserv, explaining the nature of the research and inviting them to participate in an interview. My email address and contact information were provided, and interested members were able to contact me privately to set up an interview time. This ensured that participation in the study was kept private. The recruitment email was sent out to members of the marching band on October 31, 2013, and to the choral ensemble on December 10, 2013.

Ten participants were interviewed for this project: four choir members and six members of the marching band. Four participants were in their first year of participation in the organization, three were in their third year of participation, and three were in their fourth and final year of participation. Six participants were Caucasian, two were African-American, one was Hispanic, and one was Indian-American. Nine of the ten participants were male, with only one female. Five participants had served in leadership roles in their respective organization. A chart with the pseudonyms and demographic information of the participants is provided below.

| Pseudonym of participant | Demographic | Years in ensemble | Type of ensemble |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Joshua | Indian-American male | First year | Marching band |
| William | African-American male | First year | Marching band |
| Randy | Caucasian male | First year | Marching band |
| Mark | Caucasian male | Fourth year | Marching band |
| Ellie | Caucasian female | First year | Marching band |
| Caleb | Hispanic male | Fourth year | Choral ensemble |
| Evan | Caucasian male | Third year | Choral ensemble |

| | | | |
|-------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Nate | Caucasian male | Third year | Marching band |
| Jared | African-American male | Third year | Choral ensemble |
| Aaron | Caucasian male | Fourth Year | Marching band |

The college marching band used for the study has approximately 280 members from a variety of academic programs across campus. The marching band season begins in August with band camp, a week of 14-hour rehearsals the week before classes begin for the college students. Only drumline and color guard members are required to audition for participation in the organization. During the actual semester, the band rehearses three times a week for two hours at a time. All rehearsals are mandatory. The band performs at one away game, every home game, and several other performances throughout the season. In the absence of football playoffs, the season ends at the last football game at the end of November. Students are not paid for their participation in the organization, but they do receive one credit for each semester of participation in the band.

The band is led by a full-time director, assistant director, color guard coordinator, and drumline coordinator. In addition to the full-time staff, the head director also chooses a leadership team of fifty students to lead the band. Leadership positions include staff managers, drum majors, music and marching section leaders, equipment managers, music librarians, and a recruitment team. Students who apply for these leadership positions must interview with the professional staff and, in the case of drum majors, audition for their positions each year. A student must have at least one year of experience with the band before auditioning for a leadership role.

Music majors at the selected university are required to participate in the marching band for at least two years. However, many music majors choose to continue their participation in the band beyond the two required years. On average, the music majors generally make up less than twenty-five percent of the band, according to the director. The band actively recruits new members throughout the year by visiting area high schools, sitting at a booth during university visit days and freshman orientation, and hosting game day visits where high school seniors have the opportunity to play with the band in the stands during football games.

The selected choral ensemble has been an important part of their university's tradition for over fifty years. A non-audition group, the all-male ensemble generally has over one hundred members. The ensemble performs in several concerts throughout the course of the academic year. Their most popular performance is their annual Christmas Variety Show, with three sold-out performances each year. In addition to their on-campus performances, the choir also does tours throughout their home state, and every two years they travel internationally to perform in various churches and concert halls throughout Europe. Although the group runs throughout the full academic year, membership changes from semester to semester, with some members unable to participate for half the year due to schedule changes. Rehearsals are held twice a week for two hours at a time.

The director of the ensemble encourages student leadership by sharing some of his responsibilities with the choir council, a group of 10-15 students who assist their director with the selection of music to be performed, concert programming, and other leadership decisions. Members of the council have all been in the ensemble for at least one year, and participate in the group year-round. From the members of the group, a smaller, more select group of singers is chosen to be part of the Camerata, a group of 15-20 men who perform separately during selected

numbers during concerts. A majority of members begin singing with the ensemble as freshmen and continue on until their junior or senior year of college.

A series of interviews was chosen as the best method of obtaining data, since the study aimed at sharing the significance of individual experiences in these ensembles. Paget (1983) outlines the unique way that interviews allow the researcher to learn about a topic, saying, “Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns in the interview. It collects in stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations.” The interviews in this study fall into the category of respondent interviews, which Lazarsfeld (1944) described as aiming to determine what influenced a person to form a certain opinion, and to understand a person’s motivations to act. The study falls into this category because the interviews aimed to understand why the participants chose to become a member of this organization, why they believe the organization to be beneficial to students, and why they have continued to participate in the organization.

The interviews consisted of about twenty-five questions, and were generally about thirty minutes in length. Questions focused on the participant’s role in the organization, why he or she chose to become a member, the process of socialization to the organization, the system of social support the participant may have gained through participation, and the impact that participation has had on his or her college experience. A complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A, attached to this document. Interviews for marching band members were completed before finals week of the fall semester. Participants from the choral ensemble were interviewed during finals week of the fall semester and the first two weeks of the spring semester. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed immediately after the completion of the interview. All transcriptions were finished by January 25, 2014.

After the process of transcription was completed, I began analyzing the data, identifying common themes and patterns. I first used a system of open coding, which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe as the “initial, unrestricted coding of data” (250), that builds categories for analysis. I read through the interview transcriptions and wrote down important words and themes that popped up throughout the participant’s responses. The open coding resulted in about ten common words and themes, most of which related in some way to my research question and literature review.

Next, I began the process of data reduction by narrowing down those results to four key themes that I found to be the most important and relevant to my research questions. I chose these themes based on the frequency with which they appeared in the data, their close relation to my research question, and their applicability to the findings in the review of literature. After choosing these four themes, I went back through the transcriptions once more, highlighting evidence from the interviews that best supported these themes.

Results and discussion

First-year students find comfort in music organizations because they are similar to groups that the student participated in during high school.

All of the participants interviewed had had previous experience in a music ensemble. The students in the marching band had been playing their instruments since the fifth or sixth grade. Members of the choir group had sung for years in their home churches and high school choirs. According to several of the participants, many incoming college students specifically seek out music organizations in the hope that a familiar environment will help them make friends. One interview participant, Ellie, said, “I was super heavily involved in music in high school, so I

decided to keep doing it in college. I figured it would be the same type of people that I knew I got along with well.”

Once freshman year begins, spending time in a familiar environment makes students feel more at home on campus. Caleb said, “Coming up here as a freshman, being taken away from your high school, your family, your community, and being transplanted elsewhere... It’s hard. Being in music was a connection to that daily routine that I had established at home. It helped me make a connection between home and this new part of my life.” This sense of comfort and familiarity helps students adjust to their new surroundings and gives them confidence to make friends and become a part of the campus community.

That sense of comfort and familiarity has a significant connection back to Dagaz’s (2012) findings that participation in high school marching bands offers both stability and a strong network of support to students. Although Dagaz’s study focused specifically on high school marching bands, that sense of stability, support, comfort, and familiarity clearly carries into the college music ensemble environment, both in the case of the college marching band and the choral ensemble.

Dagaz (2012) also mentioned the enhanced sense of acceptance and self-confidence that members of the ensemble gained through their participation. For the participants in this study, their familiarity with the type of people in the organization contributed to their self-confidence. Because they felt comfortable with the personality types present in the ensemble, they were more confident and more likely to approach people and make friends. This heightened self-confidence contributed to their general success in the ensemble and with their successful transition to college.

Participating in music organizations helps students form a connection to the university.

All of the participants interviewed indicated that they felt a strong connection to the campus community, and that that connection stemmed from their participation in the marching band or choir. Members of the marching band attend every home game and at least one away game per year. They perform at halftime and entertain the crowd in the stands during the game, all while cheering on the football team. Being in the band gets many students who would normally avoid athletic events in the stands cheering on the team during games. Ellie said, “I wouldn’t go to any sporting events if it weren’t for marching band. I feel like it makes me way more excited about the teams. I went to all of the homecoming events with the band, and I go to every game. I definitely feel like I’m a part of the spirit of the community.”

One interview participant, Mark, had dreamed of going to a different university since he was a young child. When those plans didn’t work out, he was not overly excited to attend this university until he joined the marching band. “I came to band camp, and I just fell in love with the place. Having been here for four years now, I really feel like I have a strong connection to this school. Being in marching band, you put in extra work for the university, and you’re part of a large representation of the school. It makes you care about the university; it becomes really important to you.” The additional time spent in promoting the university, entertaining fans at sporting events, and cheering on the sports teams makes students feel as though they are connected to the campus community. Students who feel more connected to the university are more likely to be happy on campus and more likely to graduate.

Choir members also feel a strong connection to the university through their participation in the group. Evan said, “This choir is all about the university. We sing the Alma Mater. We’ve learned the Fight Song. We have a whole song dedicated to the university that an alum made transcribed from Latin. There’s just a big love of the university from the choir. If you’re in the

group, chances are you feel that.” The choir has been a part of the campus community for over fifty years, and many of its members feel a special connection to university history as a part of the organization. That tie to university history and an alumni network of members makes current participants feel attached to the university through their participation in the organization.

This connection to the university ties in very strongly to the Communication Studies concept of identification. Not only did the participants feel as though they belonged to the group, but through their involvement with the group, they came to feel as though they belonged at the university. According to Miller (2012), when identification occurs, the values and goals of the group become the values and goals of the individual. When Evan mentioned that the choir was “all about the university,” he was including himself in that generalization, implying that within the context of that performance, he was also “all about the university.” When the goals of the individual match up with the goals of the organization, a connection is made between that individual and all of the other members of the group. For Evan, that moment helped him form a strong connection with all of the other members of the ensemble, as well as the alumni who were present at the concert.

Identification with the university is a crucial part of students feeling as though they are truly at home in their new environment. When a student feels a strong sense of identification with and connection to the university, they will be more likely to stay at the university and complete their education. Students who identify with their institution are also more likely to be happy there, and a sense of contentment can contribute to better grades, better social adjustment, and a higher likelihood of graduation. This idea is backed up by Tieu and Pancer (2009) who mentioned that participation in activities that students find important and/or meaningful is linked with a positive adjustment to university life, particularly for first year individuals. These groups

help students to view themselves as important or competent, and make them feel as though they belong in their friend group, in their ensemble, and at their university.

Participation in music organizations helps new students meet people from a wide variety of areas. The bonds formed in these groups seem stronger to students, almost like a family.

According to the interviewed participants, both the marching band and the choir are made up of students from all different backgrounds and majors. Participating in these groups helps members meet other students whose experiences are different from their own, and teaches them how to work with a more diverse group. Caleb said, “Having that connection to such a variety of guys with such different experiences is important, and I feel that being an older member, I can look back on my experiences and reassure the younger members that they can make it through.”

Many members of these organizations begin to form bonds with other members immediately. For the marching band in particular, the pre-season band camp helps first-year members form strong friendships before the academic year even begins. Ellie said, “By the first day of classes, I had already been through band camp. When I walked to class, I was saying hello to all of these people along the way that I knew from marching band. It made me feel a lot more comfortable, and it made campus seem smaller.” Nate felt the same way about band camp, saying, “You come in as a first-year student, hardly knowing anybody, and then you leave band camp with 280 friends.”

The choir also helps its members form connections right away on campus. When asked about his experience as a freshman in the organization, Jared said, “It’s a way to establish some familiar faces wherever you go. I had people in my Intro to Psychology class first semester who were in choir, so right away I had someone to sit with, and I knew that I could relate to them on some level. Now that I’m an older member, I go out of my way to meet all of the incoming

freshmen and help them feel welcomed.” A network of familiar faces, including older members who can be looked to for advice, is critically important for new freshmen.

The connections between members of these groups are very strong. Several participants interviewed said that their friendships with other members of their music organization were stronger than any other friendships they had formed on campus. Every participant interviewed used the word “family” to describe the relationships between members of the group. Aaron accredited his four years of participation in the marching band to these friendships, saying, “Marching band is where all of my college friendships that have lasted have come from. They’re the people that I met freshman year that I’m still really close to. We’ve stood the test of time.”

Many participants talked about finding their “best friend” in their music organization. Caleb’s story in particular illustrates the importance of these music groups in forming lasting friendships.

In high school, I didn’t have a best friend. I had friends,
But I was a studious guy, so I never went to go hang out at
Other people’s houses. Coming to college, I really wanted to
Get involved with something new and make some really strong
Connections. The choir really helped me with that. I’ve made
My three best friends in the choir. For me, it’s really cool to finally
Have best friends.

Caleb and several other students indicated that their most solid friendships, the people that they feel they can truly count on, are also members of a music organization. Students form deep and lasting friendships in the band and choir, relationships with people that they trust and with whom they feel comfortable. The strength of these friendships and their importance to the participant

was evident in the way that each person spoke about the group. Randy summed it up the best when he said, “That’s the part of the band that I enjoy most: the feeling that you are where you belong.”

Strong friendships and a wide variety of connections to other students give members of these ensembles a strong sense of social support. In particular, these organizations provide emotional and informational support. Caleb’s story about finally finding his group of best friends illustrates the importance of emotional support to our individual happiness and fulfillment. These friendships make us feel loved and cared for, they boost our self-esteem, and they give us a shoulder to cry on (Miller, 2012). For students who are entering a new environment and are far from home for the first time, this emotional support can make or break their experience. For participants who found their closest friends in the ensemble, the experience can be life-changing.

The other participants quoted above showed the importance of informational support as well as emotional support. For these individuals, being a member of their particular music ensemble gave them access to information and resources that helped them succeed, particularly in their first few weeks of college. Informational support includes the facts and advice given by a peer group that can help an individual cope (Miller, 2012). Several participants cited the importance of their music friends in helping them navigate the first few weeks of freshman year. Whether their music friends helped them find classroom buildings, pointed them toward unknown campus resources, or simply provided a friendly face around campus, this informational support eased the stress and pressure that new students often feel during their first week of college.

Social support, both emotional and informational, can be critical in a student’s transition from high school to college, especially in the first few weeks, which are often filled with stress

and uncertainty. For the members of these two student music organizations, the friendships that they formed with other members, both upperclassmen and other first-year students, were essential in easing the difficulty of that transition. These organizations helped students form friendships that are strong and extremely valuable to group members.

Music organizations are different than other student organizations.

When asked what made a music ensemble different from any other student organizations that they were involved in, almost every participant answered, “It’s just different.” Several students identified that the ensembles are more challenging, more goal-oriented, and have a more distinct sense of camaraderie. Others simply credited the music for the big difference in the organization: maintaining a strong connection to music throughout college made a big difference in the lives of the participants, and made the bonds between members even stronger.

Mark said that music organizations have a very distinct sense of community that many other student organizations cannot quite achieve. He said, “It’s a special sense of community, running out onto that field with 280 of your best friends and making music together. It’s an experience that not too many people get to have.” Ellie believes that the main difference lies in the fact that these ensembles have a specific goal in mind, whereas other student organizations are loosely-knit groups of students with similar interests, but they lack an overall purpose. She said, “Marching band is more goal oriented. There are specific things we have to get done, so there’s more connection and purpose there. We can relate to each other more easily because we have a common goal.”

The connection to music was something that all ten participants cited as being critical to their happiness in college and their motivation to return to the ensemble year after year. Involvement in a music ensemble allows members to take a break for a few hours each week and

do something that is completely separate from classes, work, and the many social dramas that come along with college. Caleb said, “The choir isn’t business. It’s not something I have to put effort into. I go into those rehearsals, and for two hours, everything else just goes away. You’re involved with the music, and music – the way it’s designed, the impact it has – you can use it to tell your story. Music can help you figure out who you are, who you want to be.”

It was important for participants to feel as though they were sharing their music, not only with the other members of the ensemble, but with an audience as well. Evan cited the choir’s annual Christmas concert as one of his best experiences in college, largely due to the reaction of the audience. He said, “To feel like you can take two and a half hours of someone’s night and make them feel better about themselves or their situation... That’s a really good feeling.”

Participation in music ensembles also teaches students important lessons that may be missed in the classroom setting. William mentioned that as a freshman, it can be difficult to readjust to being the youngest member of the group. He said, “Most of us had some sort of leadership position in our high school bands, and coming here, being the rookies again, we really needed to learn how to listen and learn how to learn. Marching band teaches you that in such a good way.” While it is true that these ensembles give many upperclassmen students the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, it is also important to note that listening and learning are important skills that are taught in the organization. In the previously mentioned article by the Associated Press, it was noted that employers are looking for interpersonal communication skills and the ability to work well with a diverse group of people. Music ensembles definitely give students the opportunity to improve these skills.

Limitations and Future Studies

Although I chose to limit the study to ten participants for purposes of feasibility and my own sanity, I believe that the study would have benefited from an increased number of interview participants. I would have liked to see more female participants volunteer to participate in the study, as I think any sort of uniquely female perspective got a little bit lost in the pool of mostly male participants. In addition to more female interviewees, it would have also been beneficial to have a greater number of first-year participants interview for the study, especially since at the time of the interviews, they would have been in their very first semester of college.

Another factor that may have affected the results of the study is my participation in one of the two selected ensembles. During my last two years of participation in the group, I held prominent leadership roles, and knew a large majority of the members of the organization. My passion for the organization was well-known throughout the group, which may have made people with similar viewpoints more likely to volunteer for the study, and people with opposing viewpoints less likely to want to be interviewed. If I were to start this study over, I would have worded the email sent out to the organization in way that prevented anyone from knowing that it was me doing the study. This may have encouraged ensemble members who had less positive things to say about the organization to volunteer for the study, thereby exposing me to some different or opposing viewpoints about the organization.

If I were to pursue further research on this topic, I would consider adding a quantitative element to the research, perhaps administering a survey to the entirety of each ensemble. This would allow me to quantify some of the ideas and concepts that were explored within the qualitative study. In conversations with the director of the marching band, I learned that several of the participants in that ensemble attended this particularly university specifically because they wanted to participate in the ensemble. It would be interesting to quantify how these ensembles

affect recruitment and retention for the university, and perhaps use that information to help these ensembles gain funding from the university.

Another way to continue the study would be to re-interview all of the participants one year or two years from now. For the first-year members, it would be interesting to see if their perception of the organization at the time of the interview changed at all throughout the next several years, and if they continued to be involved with and passionate about the organization as upperclassmen. For the older members, it would be interesting to see if those friendships lasted beyond college, and if their experiences in a college music ensemble impacted their lives beyond their college years.

Whether or not I choose to continue with any further research on this topic, I believe that the results of my study will be applicable to my career in my chosen field. If I ever have the opportunity to serve as an advisor for a student organization, I plan to incorporate some of the elements that made these two groups so successful. Even though that organization won't be a music ensemble, the ideas of strong leadership, tradition, and opportunities to form strong friendships are ideas that can be brought into any student organization to make the group more successful and to help the students find both comfort and passion in their student activities.

Conclusion

Involvement in extracurricular activities and student organizations is extremely helpful for college students, particularly in their first year of study. When looking for groups to get involved in on campus, many students will intentionally seek out music ensembles because they feel as though the environment will be familiar and they will feel comfortable with the other members of the group. This comfort and familiarity gives students the confidence to become

involved in the organization and make friends right away, all while maintaining a connection to music, something about which the majority of the members are passionate.

The friendships formed in music ensembles seem both different and stronger to the members of the ensemble. Those friendships form almost immediately during the academic year, and for many students, continue throughout all of college. Students become closer friends very quickly and spend a significant amount of time together throughout the season or the academic year. Participants indicated that music ensembles form a strong and unique bond between members, different from any other friendships that they have formed throughout college.

Involvement with any student organization is critical to the social adjustment of first-year students in colleges, but for students who have previous experience with music, participation in a student music organization can be particularly beneficial. Participation in these organizations helps students form strong friendships right away as incoming freshmen, gives them the comfort of a familiar environment, helps them maintain a connection to music, and makes them feel as though they are where they belong.

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