

High School Music and College Success: A Case Study from Whitworth

by Richard Strauch

Whitworth University

Sad story, part one: At the end of rehearsal one day, your star clarinetist, violist or tenor asks to speak with you.

“I am going to have to drop out of the ensemble next semester. I’ve been talking with my parents and counselor, and I really need to focus on my academics and add some other things to my high school resume so that I can get into my first-choice college.”

What can you say to that? Sadly, the conventional wisdom suggests that, as important as we say music and the arts are in education, involvement in them really has very little importance when it comes to getting into and succeeding in college. However, my own 16 years of teaching in higher education suggest otherwise. In fact, admissions and academic data from my institution, Whitworth University, paint a much different picture. When shared with students, parents and high school guidance counselors, it is information that certainly gives pause.

Because Whitworth is highly selective (less than 50% of applicants are accepted) and highly ranked (top 10 of *U. S. News* “Best Master’s-level Colleges and Universities in the West”), it is the sort of institution that attracts high-achievers who are concerned with presenting the most attractive college application possible. Therefore, it presents a strong framework in which to examine the impact of high school music participation on the admissions process. As an institution that values the arts, it is also worth considering how continued involvement in music in college can enhance the student’s collegiate academic experience.

By the numbers: band students and the average college freshman
Last fall, I asked Gary Whisenand, Whitworth’s Director of Institutional Research, to gather some information regarding that year’s freshman class.

From Whitworth’s website:

Total freshman applications: 5,060

Acceptance rate: 49 percent

Enrollment: 537 students

Average SAT score for math, critical reading and writing sections: 1811

Average high school GPA: 3.7 (rounded up)

Of that freshman class of 537 students, 103 (or 19.2%) had played in band through high school. Comparing these band students to the freshman class at large, here is what Whisenand found:

HIGH SCHOOL GPA:

All freshmen: 3.6708

Band freshmen: 3.7077

SAT (Verbal)

All freshmen: 595.34

Band freshmen: 611.07

SAT (Math)

All freshmen: 600.09

Band freshmen: 615.71

(It is worth noting that “All freshmen” is 100% of the freshman class – including the band students. If band students were compared only to the group of non-band freshmen, the difference in scores would obviously be even greater.)

Music and college admissions

I sat down with Fred Pfursich, who is Whitworth’s Dean of Enrollment Services and oversees admissions. I shared this information with him and asked for his thoughts. Fred made four interesting observations:

1) Band on the transcript *does* make a difference.

First, all other things being equal, consistent involvement in band – as well as other extra-curricular activities – is an advantage. The student who has been active in other things besides just academics definitely has a leg-up.

2) Music students are academically above average.

Second, he said that in the admissions office, they do notice that students who have band (or other music groups) on their transcripts tend also to stand out academically. The information about GPAs and SATs that I showed him simply confirmed what they have been seeing all along.

3) Band and the optional SAT

Third, at Whitworth, SAT or ACT scores are optional for admission – we don’t want to cut out students who do great work but, perhaps, just don’t do as well on standardized tests. When a student doesn’t submit test scores, admissions counselors must consider other things in the application that will provide evidence that the student will succeed academically in college, and one of the biggies is involvement in music, because... well, see above.

4) Quantity vs. quality

The fourth observation may come as a bit of a surprise. The conventional wisdom suggests that when a student applies to college, a long resume of a wide variety of extracurricular activities – maybe a year or two of band, a bunch of clubs, some community projects, athletics – is important to catch the eye of the admissions officer, and the more *stuff* on that list, the better.

Well, here is the surprise. At Whitworth, when a student sends in that long resume of *stuff*, it actually can set off a red warning light. The big question for admissions is whether this student

is a “dabbler,” and lacks the focus and commitment needed to be successful in college. When, on the other hand, a student mentions only a handful of things, like having been in band all four years, that show a record of consistent commitment, admissions looks much more favorably on that applicant.

The bottom line is that if students think they have to drop out of band because they are “just too busy” with clubs, projects and a million other things they think they need to do to get into college, they ought to reconsider. As I have said to many students, an average trombone player who has been in band all four years often has much more going for him in the college acceptance and scholarship game than a star quarterback.

Music and college success

Okay, you have kept your student in the ensemble through high school and he or she made it into college. Sad story, part two: after eight years of band, orchestra or choir, this student decides to hang it up because he or she has heard that college is so difficult there will simply not be time to continue in music.

Here is some information “from the inside” that you can share with your college-bound students. While this is based on the nature of my institution and may not hold true across the board, chances are it is true for the majority of colleges and universities.

MYTH #1: If I play in college band, I will have a hard time keeping my grades up.

At the end of the 2007-08 academic year, Whisenand compared the average college GPAs of the members of Whitworth’s large auditioned music ensembles with the overall average GPA of Whitworth students. (These are the ensembles that require the greatest time commitment.)

Here is what he reported:

Overall Whitworth average GPA:	3.38
Wind Symphony	3.65 (+0.27)
Women’s Choir	3.56 (+0.18)
Symphony Orchestra	3.55 (+0.17)
Whitworth Choir	3.52 (+0.14)
Jazz Ensemble I	3.46 (+0.08)

In every case, students in ensembles maintained higher college GPAs, on average, than their peers who were not involved in ensembles. It is worth noting that all ensembles comprise a healthy mix of music majors and non-majors. There could be any number of reasons why the average GPAs of music ensemble members significantly exceed that of their peers. Possibly, these are the students who have developed a kind of personal discipline that is equally applicable to both their academics and their musical accomplishment. Still, this appears to refute the myth that involvement in music – on a high level of performance – and academic success in college is an either/or proposition.

MYTH #2: I don’t know if I’ll have time (or room in my load) to do music.

The time commitment involved in many college ensembles is often considerably less than high school music ensembles, depending on the group. At Whitworth, the top ensembles all rehearse three times a week (the choir meets all five days), for a total of 4.5 hours, plus weekly or bi-weekly sectionals. Also, many institutions, including Whitworth, grant a one-credit overload waiver for music ensembles.

MYTH #3: If I want to be involved in music in college, I need to be a music major or minor.

While most of the students involved in the top auditioned ensembles at Whitworth are music majors or minors, many are neither, but want to continue to be involved in music and to be challenged to play or sing as well as they can. At any given time, up to 50% of the members of the wind symphony are **not** music majors. (This is probably more the norm at institutions like mine than in large music schools where the top ensembles are comprised primarily of music majors, but not always.) Furthermore, many institutions offer other ensembles that require less of a commitment for the student who simply wants to play for fun and enjoyment. For example, our second band meets once a week and can be joined without an entrance audition.

Because each institution is different, students should be encouraged to contact college ensemble directors to find out about opportunities and requirements before jumping to any conclusion. My guess is though, most collegiate ensemble directors are exactly like me: we will do our very best to find a way for a student who wants to keep playing or singing to have that opportunity. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that students who continue their involvement in music in college, whether music majors or not, academically out-perform their peers.

Colleges and universities are communities, and like any community, a college comprises a diverse group of students and faculty with a wide variety of interests and skills. Admissions officers at competitive institutions base their decisions not only on a candidate's academic achievement and likelihood for academic success in college, but also on the unique blends of backgrounds and talents that will enhance the community. One of the most important reasons that musically accomplished students are so highly valued at institutions like Whitworth is for the richness they bring to the campus and the surrounding community. Whitworth's president, Bill Robinson, once said that music, theatre and athletics are the university's "front door" to Spokane and the region. The effort and encouragement that music teachers – and parents – put into helping students become the best musicians that they can be in high school will be priceless to them in college and beyond.

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