

Students CAN Take Music throughout High School and Still Go to College

by Bruce Caldwell

from *Voice*, October 2001, pp 18-19

How many times have you heard...“I can’t take choir this year because my counselor thinks I should take an extra science course so MIT will consider me,” “I need to skip my junior year in orchestra so I can work in another year of foreign language. After all, I may want to travel some day.” “My parents think I should take important classes to get into college, so I’m going to drop band since I’ll never use music for a career anyway.”

You often hear comments like these from students who really want to continue music throughout their high school careers, yet they believe they can’t get into the university of their choice or pursue other career goals if they take four years of music? It’s a shame that counselors and parents aren’t aware that the value of students’ music participation is a heavy positive influence on acceptance into even the “most exclusive” schools.

Let’s get practical

Virtually every institution of higher education in the country—especially including those whose reputations are among the most intellectual (Stanford, Duke, Yale, MIT, Johns Hopkins, to name a few)—has a thriving performing music program within its curriculum. Most have vocal and instrumental opportunities for majors and non-majors to choose from. Where do they think their music students will gain their skills? Throughout their school years, of course.

Only too often today, the “competitive” nature of college entrance has students and their families worried to extremes that every class taken that isn’t “intellectual” (and I use that term loosely) might keep their student out of college. Yet repeatedly we hear that colleges and universities are looking for students with well-balanced “rounded” educations. Colleges recognize the value of learning music. When they see students who have successfully created a rigorous curriculum that includes music all the way through (perhaps in lieu of some of the “extra academic” courses), they take into consideration the success and the expanded learnings that music students have. In fact, music majors have a higher admission rate to medical school than students from any other undergraduate major.

You must take the lead to educate

The need that music educators have today is two-fold. First, students, parents and even counselors must be educated as to the value of music and the acceptance of music in university entrance requirements and curriculum. Second, music educators must become proactive in working with their students on an individual basis, showing them early in their high school careers how music can be scheduled all the way. Remember, a student who drops out for a semester (“I’ll be back in January, Mr. Jones.”) rarely returns.

To help students, you must educate yourself about your school district’s graduation requirements as well as college and university entrance requirements. You **MUST** understand how they work. You then need to “build” a potential schedule that will allow a student to take music every year and still meet those requirements. It may get discouraging at times, but in almost every case, it **CAN** be done. Students who really want to take music for four years can do that and still qualify for any college/university in the country.

How do I help?

First, make a list of all the classes (credits) required by the district for graduation. Then make a list of the classes required for university entrance. In Washington it’s fairly easy because the four-year colleges and universities have adopted standard entrance requirement courses that will let students be admitted to any private or public school in the state. Align those two lists and come up with the requirements by subject that will fulfill both lists. Note that some of those courses might be music. Any of those courses plus the “electives” left after completing the lists are places where the students can take music.

Typical requirements

Following is a 2001 sample of a typical school district's graduation requirements, the Washington college and university entrance requirements and consensus courses, etc.

SUBJECT	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS	COLLEGE ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS	TOTAL CREDITS NEEDED
English	3	4	4
Social Studies	3.5	3	3.5
Math	2	3	3
Science	2	2	2
Foreign Language	0	2	2
Physical Education	2	0	2
Occupational Education	2	0	2
The Arts	1	0	1
TOTAL	15.5	14	19.5

Making a plan to work with

Next, draw up a grid showing the four years of a student's high school career across the top and the number of time slots (periods, blocks or whatever) down the side. In that grid, place MUSIC (or your speciality—band, orchestra or choir) across the first row all the way. Somehow, putting that first helps subtly send the message that if music is important to the student, it SHOULD come first and not be left to “fill in the blanks” at the end.

Then carefully insert any of your school's required courses that have a year involved (grade 9 only, for example) into their proper places on the right of the grid. Continue by listing other requirements in boxes. Try to make sequential sense of these. For example, don't split French I and French II into the freshman and senior years.

If you student wants to take other electives (including advanced courses), suggest that he/she wait and let those options fill in available blanks at the end. Remind him/her that his/her interests may change over high school, and it's easier to move those elective than to drop music and try to return. Besides, most of those “high powered” classes are designed for juniors and seniors, and commitments to them should not be made by freshmen and sophomores. What you want to do is give your students flexibility in later scheduling by planning. Plans can be changed, but the students who end up having to take everything in their junior or senior years are usually students who have not planned ahead.

To help the student plan his/her schedule for high school, I will use a typical four-year, six-period day schedule. Of course, you will need to adapt this to whatever schedule your school uses.

Here is a model you can use for a six-period class:

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. MUSIC	1. MUSIC	1. MUSIC	1. MUSIC
2.	2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.	5.
6.	6.	6.	6.

Making it work

As I said before, I suggest that your music course be inserted into the schedule FIRST. The rest of the student's four years can then "fill in the blanks" and he/she will still probably have room to take added electives.

Based on the coursework required above, let's complete a sample schedule for college-bound students.

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. MUSIC ("Arts")	1. MUSIC	1. MUSIC	1. MUSIC
2. English	2. English	2. English	2. English
3. Social Studies	3. Social Studies	3. Social Studies	3. Soc Stud/ELECTIVE
4. Math	4. Math	4. Math	4. Science
5. PE	5. PE	5. Occupational Ed	5. Occupational Ed
6. Science	6. Foreign Language	6. Foreign Language	6. ELECTIVE

As you can see, this leaves the student with 1.5 electives beyond music while fulfilling all the school's graduation and university entrance requirements. The electives are scheduled here for the senior year so that if a third year of foreign language or added math, science, etc., were desired, it could be easily added with knowledge. Educate yourself to any other options, such as waivers, cross-crediting, substitution and other local options that might help your student.

Students who follow a curriculum like this one (with good grades, of course) will not have trouble being accepted into colleges and universities of choice. They will be successful in all they attempt!

Remember—you're the counselor

The important factor that you, the music educator, must know is that YOU are responsible to help your students schedule music into their curriculum. Educate yourself first, then educate your students, their families and your school's counselors. If you teach middle school music and are truly concerned about your students, begin this process with them. Help them one-on-one build their schedules to include music in high school.

Students CAN take music throughout high school and still go to college. It's just up to you to make sure they understand HOW they can. Roll up your sleeves and become a second counselor to each of your students. Do it now, before they make other choices.