

UNIVERSITY HONORS CAPSTONE PROJECT

# Halftime is our Time

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The Importance of High School Marching Band Programs

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## **Introduction:**

Music is a big part of many people's lives. Certain songs remind us of specific people or important events in our lives. Many people also turn to play an instrument to help them express their inner feelings (Justus, 2001). In the U.S. about 54% of households have at least one member who plays a musical instrument ("Guitar Players in the United States," 2006). For me, my involvement in music has been mostly through marching band and pep band programs at both my high school and college.

I have found my experiences in both marching band and pep band to be very beneficial for many reasons, but many people do not see these benefits. Many researchers argue that marching band programs deter from the goals of music education, and band programs are often the first to receive budget cuts because of their high expenses. Small schools and new marching band programs often struggle to recruit members, and so their programs fail to develop. But there are many benefits to having a marching band program as an option in a high school music education program.

To argue the benefits of marching band programs, instructor experience at Denfeld High School's Marching Band program was combined with personal marching band experiences and a literature review focused on the pros and cons of music education and marching band. This project covered the viewpoints of multiple aspects of marching band programs: band member, student leader, instructor, band director, and outside community member. The positives of being involved in a marching band program throughout high school makes the program worth the expenses.

### **History of Marching Band:**

Long before marching bands were used to cheer on sports teams, and put on elaborate half-time shows, they were used for a more practical purpose. Militaries found that their troops moved best when they marching in rows, were equally spaced, and everyone marched at the same pace. In the revolutionary war, the United States Military used fifes and drums. During the Civil War, drum and bugle corps were used, and in WWI and WWII, full military bands were formed (“A Brief Marching Band History”).

As military tactics evolved, so did the purpose of the military bands. After the Civil War, when bands were no longer needed for the movement of troops, they shifted to more of an entertainment role. Starting in WWI and continuing to the present, bands travel through combat zones to put on concerts to increase morale of the troops. Along with this, these bands perform at special ceremonies, parades and recruiting drives (“Army Music”).

The University of Illinois was the first University to bring marching band to their football games. The Marching Illini took the field in 1907, starting the trend that is seen at high schools and colleges throughout the U.S. Taking some of the basics from military marching bands, high school and college marching band evolved into its own branch of marching band. While many of these marching bands differ from military bands because of their focus on making various formations on the field, many military traditions and terminology still survive today. Band members in many groups are called to attention prior to beginning a performance, the lines in a formation are referred to as “ranks” and “files”, and members are often directed to “cover down” to ensure that everyone is in line together (“Marching Band”).

The changes seen today between marching band programs in schools and military bands have come from the popularity of modern drum and bugle corps. They have influenced the

transition to roll steps in many band programs, the use of a colorguard twirling flags, rifles and sabers, and a pit ensemble for a wider range of percussion instruments (“Marching Band”). The initial surge in popularity was due to the popularity of drum and bugle corps in the 70’s (Rochefeller, 1982). More recently, marching bands have been influenced by Drum Corps International (DCI), which has given the evolution into highly choreographed visual shows (Rauscher, 2009). All three of these groups have helped make marching band programs in schools what it is today, has helped keep the popularity of these programs alive, and has helped develop the beneficial aspect of this program that I am arguing is a valuable addition to high school music education programs.

### **Methods:**

Throughout my high school and college experience, I believe that marching band has played a big part in my life. It has given me multiple leadership opportunities, helped me realize what it takes to be a good leader, taught me valuable qualities that I bring into my academic career and will use in my future career, and has helped me meet and learn about people from many different walks of life. I would highly recommend being involved in marching band to anyone, regardless of their instrument playing ability.

Sadly, not all students will get the opportunity to be involved in a marching band program. Because of budget cuts, loss of interest and little support from the community or the school district, some schools do not have the option to have a marching band program. I decided to focus this project on why schools should have a marching band program, and why students should be involved in these programs.

To approach this project, I looked at the problem and the positive aspects of marching band programs from four different aspects. First, I took my own experiences being involved in marching band over the last 7 years. I have been a member and held multiple leadership positions in both my high school and college band programs. Second, I volunteered at Denfeld High School in Duluth, Minnesota, as a drumline instructor throughout their season to get experience from a different perspective. Denfeld has a small marching band program that gets little time to perform on the field. I also wanted to look at some of the reasons behind what makes some programs successful, while others struggle. To help with this, I interviewed various high school band directors throughout Minnesota to get their opinions on the various topics I was researching, and learn what they believe makes their programs successful. Lastly, I looked through various academic journals related to the pros and cons of marching band to further support my claims that these programs are beneficial to all students that are involved in them.

### **The Problems with Marching Band:**

Much of the research found had negative things to say about marching band programs, explaining why they were not necessary for good music education programs. Other problems faced include lack of interest in music programs and budget cuts heavily affecting marching band programs. This section addresses these various problems and explains how some schools deal with these struggles. As will be explained later, the positives of marching band greatly outweigh these negatives, making involvement in this program beneficial to students who choose these programs.

One of the main arguments against marching band programs is that it does not further the teaching goals of music education. Many different schools state the following goals: empower

students to experience music as an area for expression, develop an educational understanding of music through lessons, practicing and performances, learn discipline through practice, and build a foundation for participation in and enjoyment of music (“Music Education Goal”). Many critics complain that marching band focuses on easy music, complicated drill, and puts too much emphasis on competition instead of education.

Another common criticism is that more successful marching band programs often have a major focus on competition. High school bands will often have only one show that they spend the entire season working on. This will be performed at all school events that season, along with at all the competitions they are involved with. This takes focus away from learning and practicing a variety of music and shifts the focus toward repetition of the same music and drill over and over again to better the group’s chances at placing higher in the next competition.

Along with this, it takes a lot of time and money to put together a show that is ready for competition. Equipment, travel costs, staff costs, and extra rehearsal time all have to be paid for out of the school’s budget (Rochefeller, 1982). Plus, both the students and staff are required to spend large amounts of time outside of school rehearsing. When speaking with Mrs. Erin Holmes, Director of the marching band at Farmington High School, she stated, “I know what it takes to have a competitive program and I am not willing to give up that much of my family time. We are already busy three to four nights a week, most of the summer, etc. So what we do is a happy balance in my life and also for the students.” Holmes, like many people, believes that students should be involved in a variety of activities during their high school career. If the marching band program is too focused on competing, students might have to choose between marching band and other extracurricular activities.

While a focus on competition can be a negative aspect of a marching band program, many students are not given this opportunity. Because of the high costs of instrument purchase and repair, music is often one of the first courses to receive budget cuts. In fact, music often takes the biggest and most frequent cuts (Petress). This often begins with elementary schools being hit the hardest. As budget cuts continue, this will move up to middle schools and then to high schools. Eventually, only students who can afford private lessons will be able to learn how to play an instrument (Catterall). To combat this, some schools require students to pay fees to be involved in various music groups. For example, the Grand Rapids marching band required students to pay a \$350 fee last year to be involved in the band (Gunderson). Again, this is limiting who can be involved in these groups if a student's parents are unable to pay for the involvement fee.

Another reason that music programs are often subject to budget cuts is because of No Child Left Behind. This act shifts federal funding away from music and other arts to focus on reading, math and science classes (Kratus, 2007). Schools need to do well in these areas of testing if they want to continue to receive federal funding, so when budget cuts needs to be made, art programs, including music are the first to go. This way science, reading, and math can continue to be funded, as they are considered the most important courses by the U.S. government.

### **Positive Aspects of Marching Band Programs:**

While many people argue that for the reasons explained above, marching band programs are not necessary to a high school music program, I disagree. Marching band has been a very beneficial experience to me throughout my time in high school and college. Along with my

personal experiences, I found many different research papers explaining various ways in which the benefits of marching band programs greatly outweigh the problems that have been explained.

One of the first problems discussed in this paper was the argument that marching band does not further the goals of music education. I disagree with this statement, as I believe that marching band brings unique qualities to music education that students cannot learn from just concert band. Marching band requires students to develop flexibility (Garrison, 1986). For example, while out on the field, students must constantly be aware of their surroundings to ensure that they remain in formation with their classmates. If one student is not in the correct spot, the rest of the band must correct where they are going to keep the correct formation. Along with this, students are still required to pay attention to tone quality, playing the correct rhythms, balance, etc. (Garrison, 1986). Performing outdoors, on a football field is very different than playing in an auditorium or concert hall. Students must adapt their playing to ensure the audience gets the quality of music that is expected of the band. By developing the skills throughout marching band, it will help enhance students' abilities in other music performance areas (Holmes).

Another common complaint about marching band programs is that fact that many high schools seemed to be focused on competition. When interviewing various band directors in Minnesota, many of them had a lot of positive things to say about competing. The first point many people made was the fact that unlike sports, there is no bench. The students must all come together and work hard to produce a quality performance (Gardner, Dec 2014). The attitudes of the bands at competition was another things mentioned by multiple people. Mr. Dale Gunderson, the marching band Director at Grand Rapids high school called competitions, "A celebration of hard work for a common goal." He explained that students and parents recognize how hard each



back works to prepare for a competition, because of this, everyone is very supportive of other groups (Ray, 2014).

I have seen this myself at various events. While I have never been involved in a competitive marching band, when visiting various high schools or attending the Youth in Music competition during my time in high school, the high school band members are always very respectful and supportive of each other. As bands march on and off the field, they are wishing each other good luck or are congratulating the group on a good performance. While every band is there to win the competition, once the performance is over, there is no tension between groups, and everyone congratulates each other on a job well done. Along with this, it is helpful for the group to get the judge's opinions on their performance. All season long, the director, marching band staff, and drum majors are the only ones attending rehearsal and trying to fix mistakes in the show. An outsider's opinion can help point out things that should be worked on, that might have been missed in rehearsal (Holmes).

One aspect of marching band that has been frequently debated is if marching band is a good source of physical activity or not. One study claimed that marching band is not a good source of physical activity because it did not get student's heart rates in the target zone for more than a few minutes throughout an hour and a half long rehearsal (Strand, 2005). Another study looked at the number of steps taken on rehearsal days and performance days versus non-marching band days. This study showed that more steps were taken on rehearsal days, and the most steps were taken on days where the band was performing at a football game. These days, the student's step counts exceeded what is recommended for a healthy lifestyle (Cowen, 2006). So, while marching band might not be a replacement for physical education, it is a good addition to a healthy, active lifestyle.

Personally, marching band has been most beneficial to me because of the values I have learned and the people I have met throughout my time involved. The skills a student can learn throughout their time in marching band can be transferred to other areas, and used throughout the rest of their life (Gouzouasis, et. al, 2007). Due to the amount of time put into rehearsals, performances and competitions, band students are extremely busy. Because of this, they have to learn good time management skills to keep up with school, band and other extracurricular activities (Adderley, 2003). And since there is limited time for rehearsals between performances, students must come to rehearsals focused and ready to get work done (Ray, 2014). For example, when I volunteered with Denfeld High School's Marching Band, they only spent their 50 minute class period rehearsing. Using some of this time to grab instruments, get out to the football field, and then put everything away after rehearsal, the students probably only got about 30-35 minutes of actual rehearsal time. Even though the class meets every day, this is still an incredibly short amount of time to get things done. Students must come to class focused, or nothing will get done in this short amount of time.

Individual importance is another important value that marching band teaches. No matter where a band member is in the parade block or formation, if they are off step or out of line, they will stick out and immediately be noticed. Along with this, students must be willing to own up to their mistakes and accept criticisms from leadership, the director, and judges in competitions (Gardner, Dec. 2014). Another interesting point that different research articles pointed out was the fact being involved in music enhances abstract reasoning. This helps students use both sides of their brain, and will actually help students do better in math and science (Petress). This was especially interesting to me because the University of Minnesota Duluth Marching Band has a large percentage of students that are science and engineering majors. It would be interesting to

see how many science and engineering students have a lot of music experience, and if this played a role in helping improve their math and science skills by improving their abstract reasoning.

Marching band programs also provides many opportunities for students to be involved in various levels of leadership. I myself held a leadership position in my high school band, and have had three different leadership positions between marching band and pep band during my time at UMD. This gives student's the chance to work closely with their teacher, and will get experience learning what it takes to be an effective leader and good communicator (Brewer, 2009). I found my leadership experiences to be big learning experiences. It taught me to come out of my shell, helped me develop my communication skills and over the years I have begun to learn what to do to be an effective leader. The leadership positions I've held have been valuable experiences that I will utilize throughout the rest of my schooling and in my future career.

The reason I have stayed involved in marching band over the last 7 years of my life has been because of the people I have met. My closest friends are people I've met through these programs. For high school students, marching band is a way to get people involved. Less serious musicians are likely to be involved in marching band because students find it to be a fun activity, and this will encourage them to get involved in other music ensembles (Garrison, 1986). Marching band also provides students the opportunity to meet students outside their friend circle (Ray, 2014). Again, in my experience, marching band has helped me meet people of different ages and with interests differing from my own. For example, at UMD I have met and made friends with people from every college, expanding my friend group from the other science majors I have classes with. I have enjoyed the opportunity to get to know a wide range of students I am attending school with. Because of the large amount of time put into being involved with a marching band program, these students spend a lot of time together (Adderley, 2003).

Everyone is working hard to put on the best performance possible, and this creates the tight friendships that last even after the marching season is over.

The last point I would like to make in support of marching band programs in high school is that these programs help improve public support of other music education programs. With performances in parades, at community events and during football games, the marching band is often the only area of music education that many parents, school board members, teachers, etc. are exposed too (Garrison, 1986). Since music programs are often the first to receive cuts from a school's budget, if community members enjoy a school's marching band program, they may be more likely to support the rest of the school's music programs (Rogers, 1985).

One common complaint of high school band programs is that the music is not modern enough. Many marching bands choose to play more modern music that community members will find more entertaining. Along with that, the visual aspect of marching band performances is effective in keeping audiences more engaged than in a concert band setting. As stated above, more support from community members and school administration will help keep music programs from receiving large amount of budget cuts. The more modern, entertaining performances of marching bands may also help keeps students more interested in band programs (North, 2010). Bands with a large number of students involved are also less likely to receive large amount of budget cuts because the large student population involved.

### **What can be done?**

The positive aspects of marching band programs greatly outweigh the common complaints people have of these programs, but because of budget cuts, not every school has the option of offering marching programs to their students. There are multiple things that can be

done by parents, community members, band directors and others to help promote the inclusion of these programs in high school music education.

Parents and community members who wish to support their local marching band programs can volunteer their time to help the band in various ways. For part of this project, I chose to volunteer my time with Denfeld High School's marching band in Duluth, Minnesota. I would attend rehearsal a few times a week to work with the drumline to help prepare them for their homecoming performance. Because they only rehearsed during class time, the band director had me work with the drumline, so she could focus on working with the rest of the band. With even more help, it would be interesting to see what a school with a small marching program, like Denfeld, could accomplish.

An interesting point from my research stated that adults often view teens in a negative light. By volunteering with marching band programs, adults can see the opposite side of this because they will likely be working with such a determined, well-behaved group of high school students (Gardner, Oct 2014). This will also help promote support for marching band programs, and music programs in general, because community members will see what a positive effect these programs have on students. Another form of volunteering that many schools desperately need is fundraising. Due to travelling fees, equipment, instruments, uniforms, and field time for rehearsals, marching programs are very expensive, and schools often don't provide much of a budget for them. Many programs often rely on their band booster groups to help fundraise to cover the costs of these various expenses (Sander).

Something band directors could do to help promote the importance of marching band programs is to work on building more community support for music. Playing at various community events will help raise awareness of the marching band program, and will help

increase support from the community (Harmon, 2011). During my time in the UMD marching band, we performed at the Minnesota State Fair, at UMD's relay for life, during freshman welcome week, and at other various school and community events to get our name out there and show people that UMD does have a marching band program. Because of this, we have increased our community support, and are now often invited to many events throughout the school year. Another way to build community support is for band directors to invite community leaders to school concerts, get media coverage of their events, and have their student's leaders attend school board and city council meetings (Harmon, 2011). Again, by making people aware of the program, they will be more likely to be supportive of it, and defend the program when budget cuts need to be made.

The last thing that needs to be done is more research needs to be done on various aspects of marching band. One article explained that more research on marching band and physical activity needs to be done. Muscle soreness and injuries are commonly reported by band members, yet research argues whether or not marching band can count as a good amount of physical activity. More research needs to be done on this to ensure that students are getting good physical activity, and reduce the amount of injuries seen throughout the season (Rauscher, 2009).

Another interesting point made in some of the research found was that high school programs should shift to a soft corps style of marching. This focuses on a variety of music, and instead of performing one show throughout the season, the band will learn multiple shows (Rochefeller, 1982). This, theoretically, would bring the focus away from winning competitions and perfecting a single show, and back toward having the students play a variety of music. This is the style that the UMD marching band uses, as they learn at least one new song and drill for every home football game, but is this a realistic style for high school bands? Especially bands

that only use class time as rehearsal? Again, more research should be done on this style, and the benefits of it, so it could possibly be incorporated into high school programs in the future.

### **Conclusion:**

While people are often very critical of the importance of marching band programs in high school music education, the benefits greatly outweigh the negative aspects. Marching band is a great way for students to meet people they wouldn't spend time with normally, learn important values and have the opportunity for a variety of leadership positions. Marching band teaches more than just music and marching skills, being involved in an activity like this also teaches valuable life skills.

My involvement in marching band has been one of the most valuable things I've done throughout high school and college. I've learned the importance of time management, punctuality, what makes a good leader, and how to take and apply criticism. These are all skills I have used outside marching band and will continue to use throughout my time as a graduate student and in my career. I would argue that what I've learned in marching band has helped prepare me for the workload I will experience next year in pharmacy school, and has helped me develop qualities that will make me a good candidate for a future career as a pharmacist.

While schools continue to struggle with budget cuts, students, parents and community members need to show their support for these programs. Without this support, schools will cut funding to their music programs, and students will not have the opportunity to be involved in this valuable activity. For student's interested in involvement in their school's music education programs, marching band is an immensely beneficial addition. Community members should

continue to be supportive of their local marching bands to show their school districts that they want these programs to continue to be offered to their students.



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