

Retention of College Students and Freshman-Year Music Ensemble Participation

Don R. Crowe

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of music ensemble participation during the freshman fall semester on the ongoing retention of college students. Retention of college students is a concern across the nation. The research question for the study was, “Is there a correlation between participation in music ensembles during college students’ freshman fall semester and the retention of students for the sophomore, junior, senior, and (where applicable) fifth years?” The study compares the retention of students who enrolled in such ensembles at a midwestern university over a four-year subsequent period with that of students who did not enroll. Data from Fall 2005 through Fall 2011 were collected and examined. Each freshman in each cohort (class) was assigned to one of two groups: those who enrolled in a music ensemble their first semester and those who did not. Enrollment data for each group for the following four years was analyzed to determine the incidence of retention for the sophomore, junior, senior, and fifth years (as applicable) for each cohort and for class standing across cohorts. The data show that those who enrolled in music ensembles returned for the subsequent three years at a significantly greater rate than those who did not, and that the difference in retention increased in each of these years.

Retention of college students, also referred to in the literature as persistence, has been a subject of research for a number of years. Investigators have sought to identify the characteristics and attitudes of students, faculty, and institutions that affect student persistence, as well as what formal programs, informal experiences, and other factors can help retain students.

Astin’s (1983/1999) Theory of Involvement states that students learn more the more they are involved in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience. He characterized the involved student as someone who “devotes considerable

energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.” (Astin, 518) One of the three predictors of student non-persistence identified by Tinto (1993) was failure to be involved with their institution’s intellectual and social life both formally and informally. In both constructs the focus is on the student’s involvement on two

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planes: the academic and the social. Institutions have developed many disparate programs in an attempt to increase such involvement.

According to Kuk & Banning (2010), “campus student organizations serve as significant social networks for students on college campuses and serve as important links for students to campus life and to the institution.” (p. 354) A number of studies have investigated retention of college students (or persistence), examining factors such as social connections and relationships (Simmons, 2013), participation in student organizations (Simmons, 2013), participation in Greek life (Debard & Sacks, 2012), gospel choir participation (Sablo, 2008), social awareness and skills (Cerezo & McWhirter, 2012), motivation and sense of belonging (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), involvement and effort (Jones, 1988), living/learning programs (Simmons, 2013; Felver, 1983), and others, as well as on retention of students in music programs or ensembles. A recent study also investigated correlations between high school music participation and grade-point average, graduation rate, ACT scores, attendance, and discipline referrals among high school students (Johnson & Eason, 2013). However, no study has investigated the effects of enrollment in music ensembles during the freshman fall semester on college student retention.

Literature Review

Simmons (2013) investigated factors related to persistence reported by two African American men who participated in a program entitled Project Empowerment. He found four themes that the students reported as factors in their persistence: college preparedness, high aspirations and goals, social connections and relationships (which included living/learning communities and leadership experiences), and growth through student organizational commitment (to Project Empowerment). Both participants saw

relationships with peers and faculty as “critical to their persistence and future success.” (p. 69)

Debard and Sacks (2012) compared the GPA, hours earned, and retention to the sophomore year of three groups of freshman students across 17 institutions: those who joined a Greek letter organization in the fall of their freshman year, those who joined in the spring of their freshman year, and those who did not join during their freshman year. Their data indicated that those students who participated in Greek life during their freshman year were retained at a significantly higher rate than those who did not, and that those who joined in their spring semester were retained at the highest rate of the three groups.

Sablo (2008) investigated the effects of gospel choir participation on African American students’ persistence at a predominantly white university. He concluded that such participation increased feelings of social integration and decreased feelings of marginalization, and suggested that gospel choirs should be considered as an additional resource for institutions seeking to increase African Americans’ persistence.

The primary focus of a study by Cerezo and McWhirter (2012) was to determine the effects of peer support, modeling, and a program “to help students increase consciousness of and respond to the unique cultural and political forces impacting Latinos in college.” (p. 868) One aspect of this program, the Latino Educational Equity Project (LEEP), was “building community,” that is, building a network for mutual support. There was a statistically significant difference in social adjustment to college between those who participated in the program and a control group who did not. The investigators concluded that “the building community component of the LEEP intervention appears to have worked directly toward improving participants’ social adjustment to college.” (p. 875)

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) investigated motivation and “sense of belonging” (or sense of community) as predictors of students’ intention to persist in college and of retention to their second year. They surveyed 960 students during their first year summer (156 respondents). In their model, sense of belonging included peer support, faculty support, and classroom comfort, with perceived isolation as a negative indicator. They found that perceived peer support was a significant predictor of retention. The more highly a student rated perceived peer support, the more likely that student was to return for their second year.

Jones (1988) compared the typologies of 595 college students with their “quality-of-effort.” Her study found significant differences among typologies on six of 14 scales, one of which was “Art, Music, and Theatre.” On that scale, the Artist was significantly different from all other typologies.

Felver (1983) studied the effects on grade-point average, on-campus residency, retention (in the academic area of interest), and graduation of freshman-year participation in a living/learning program as compared with on-campus non-participants and off-campus students. The programs investigated were in Business, Foreign Language, Music, Pre-Law/Political Science/Public Affairs, and Honors. He found significant differences in junior year on-campus residency for each of the five except Foreign Language. Also, Honors participants remained in their academic area and graduated at a significantly higher rate than did the other two Honors groups. He also noted that all five living/learning groups had the largest percentage of junior year on-campus residents, and that all except Music had the highest percentage of graduates and of those who remained in their original academic area of interest.

Johnson & Eason (2013) used both quantitative and qualitative data to compare graduating seniors in a metropolitan school district who had no high school music participation, up to one year of participation, and more than one year of participation on five variables: grade-point average, graduation rate, ACT scores, attendance, and discipline referrals. They used fourth-grade basic skills test scores as a covariate so as to account for any initial differences in the population studied, and found statistically significant differences between all three groups on all measures. That is, those with up to one year of high school music participation scored significantly higher on every measure than those with no participation, and those with more than one year of participation scored significantly higher than those with one year or less. They concluded that “*any* level of music participation is associated with higher engagement and achievement, and that *more* music participation associates with even better outcomes.” (p. 7)

This study investigates the effects of ensemble participation during the freshman fall semester on the ongoing retention of college students. The research question for the project was, “Is there a correlation between participation in music ensembles during college students’ freshman fall semester and the retention of students for the sophomore, junior, senior, and (where applicable) fifth years?” The project compared the retention of students who enrolled in such ensembles at a public, state-affiliated mid-western university over a four-year subsequent period with that of students who did not enroll.

Methods and Analysis of Data

Data on ensemble enrollment of freshmen and enrollment at the institution in subsequent years from Fall 2005 through Fall 2011 were collected

and examined. Each freshman in each cohort (class) was assigned to one of two groups: those who enrolled in a music ensemble their first semester and those who did not. Enrollment data for each group for the following four years was analyzed to determine the incidence of retention at the university for the sophomore, junior, senior, and fifth years (as applicable) for each cohort and for class standing across cohorts.

The results of the analysis of data indicated that freshmen who enrolled in music ensemble courses during their fall semester returned to the university for the subsequent three years at a significantly

higher rate than those who did not. The difference was 10.27% Freshman-to-Sophomore, 10.88% Freshman-to-Junior, 11.00% Freshman-to-Senior, and 3.14% Freshman-to-Fifth Year (see Tables 1 through 4, below). That is, the difference in retention between those who enrolled in ensembles their freshman fall semester and those who did not increased each year until the fifth.

The data were submitted to chi-square analysis, and each year's difference was significant at the 95% level with a probability < .0001 except that for the fifth year ($p = .1685$). A risk estimates analysis was also applied. The results of these analyses appear in Table 5.

Table 1. Freshman to Sophomore Year, 5 cohorts

	Enrolled	Retained	Percentage
Total	11,393	8727	76.60
Ensemble	951	818	86.01
Non-ensemble	10,442	7909	75.74
Difference			10.27%

Table 2. Freshman to Junior Year, 4 cohorts

	Enrolled	Retained	Percentage
Total	9,282	6,318	68.07
Ensemble	809	631	78.00
Non-ensemble	8,473	5,687	67.12
Difference			10.88%

Table 3. Freshman to Senior Year, 3 cohorts

	Enrolled	Retained	Percentage
Total	7,293	4,658	63.87
Ensemble	662	489	73.87
Non-ensemble	6,631	4,169	62.87
Difference			11.00%

Table 4. Freshman to Fifth Year, 2 cohorts

	Enrolled	Retained	Percentage
Total	5,363	2,063	38.47
Ensemble	501	207	41.32
Non-ensemble	4,862	1,856	38.17
Difference			3.15%

Table 5. Chi-Square results

Year	Chi-Square
Freshman to Sophomore	$\chi^2(1, N=11,393) = 51.31, p < .0001$
Freshman to Junior	$\chi^2(1, N=9,282) = 40.21, p < .0001$
Freshman to Senior	$\chi^2(1, N=7293) = 31.54, p < .0001$
Freshman to Fifth	$\chi^2(1, N=5363) = 1.90, p = .1685$

Discussion

The analysis results showed that those who enrolled in music ensembles during the fall of their Freshman year returned for the subsequent three years at a significantly greater rate than those who did not, and that the difference in retention increased in each year with the exception of the fifth year. This indicates a long-term effect.

The drop in retention difference in the fifth year could be due to a number of factors. While overall retention rates dropped steadily each year, with 8.53% of the population studied leaving the institution between their sophomore and junior years and another 4.2% leaving between their junior and senior years, the 25.4% who left after their senior year is comparatively high. The simplest explanation for this large drop in retention is graduation after four years.

There are several points to be made here. First, music ensembles are both academic and social in nature. That is, they are a part of the curriculum and can be used to satisfy (at the institution in question) one of the institutional requirements for graduation for all majors as well as an integral part of the music majors' course of study, while at the same time serving as a peer group that meets regularly, performs, and on occasion travels together. They serve both as learning and as shared experience, and thus help students become involved as Astin (*ibid.*) defines involvement.

Second, that involvement occurs in both formal and informal settings, that is, in regular rehearsals and in public performances both on and off-campus. This, as noted above, is one of the three predictors of persistence identified by Tinto (*ibid.*). The most obvious example of public performance as social event is marching band, but other ensembles provide the same types of experience.

Third, the registered students were predominantly non-music majors. From 2007–2013 (data were not available for 2005 and 2006) the average number of students in first semester freshman theory was 45: using this number, less than 24% of the enrolled freshmen in ensembles in this study were music majors. This indicates that the retention data is valid across majors.

Fourth, these groups bring together students who share an interest in musical study and performance, but who also represent a cross-section of the university in terms of majors and class years. These students have the experience of participation in high school ensembles in common as well, and this shared experience provides more common ground on which to build relationships. The diversity of participants provides ensemble members with a broad view of the university and their place in it, as well as a reservoir of experience to draw on as they navigate their way through their new environment.

Finally, through these ensembles students can bring some continuity to that new environment. The routines and expectations of ensemble participation provide a familiar experience in an unfamiliar environment, as well as opportunities for success and thus more positive outlooks and self-images.

Summary and Suggestions for Further Research

In this study, data analysis indicated that first-semester freshman enrollment in music ensembles had a significantly positive correlation to retention of students for their sophomore, junior, and senior years. Moreover, this correlation strengthened for each subsequent year except the fifth. The results of the study suggest that institutions should encourage students who have an interest in such ensembles to participate in them in their first semester, regardless of their major, as a means of improving retention.

This research is based on data from only one state-affiliated university. A study involving a number of institutions, both public and private, would be a logical next step. An analysis of retention related to ongoing participation in ensembles, and of participation in more than one ensemble, would also be of interest, as would a comparative analysis of grade point average and credit hours earned between freshman ensemble members and non-members.

Finally, this study did not investigate the academic characteristics of incoming freshmen. Given the results reported by Johnson & Eason (ibid.) from their study of correlations between music participation in high school and seniors' grade-point average, graduation rate, ACT scores, attendance, and discipline referrals, a study which analyzes the comparative readiness for college of those who enroll in ensembles during their first semester and those who do not would be valuable.

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