

CARLOS R. ABRIL AND KEN ELPUS

Who Enrolls in High School Music? A New National Profile

Is the population of students who choose to take music fairly representative of the student population?

Students find music study meaningful because of the unique ways in which it meets some of their perceived social and emotional needs. As a beneficial, unique, and essential way of human being and knowing, it follows that the study of music should be made available in schools and accessible to all students, and that the population of students who choose to take music should be fairly representative of the population of all students.

And yet, access to and availability of school music programs differs greatly from community to community. According

to the Department of Education, the vast majority of public secondary schools in the United States offers some sort of curricular music education: 91% of secondary schools in the 2008–2009 school year. Schools with larger concentrations of poverty, however, were less likely to offer music instruction (81% in the lowest SES versus 96% in the highest SES schools), and these same schools offered fewer music courses than their higher SES counterparts.

PROBLEMS OF ACCESS AND EQUITY

Understanding who is represented and underrepresented in the most commonly offered music courses in U.S. secondary schools (large ensembles) would help pinpoint problems of access and equity in music education. Making music education accessible to all children — regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and linguistic background — has been an ongoing challenge for policy makers, administrators, and educators. The purpose of this study was to construct a complete demographic profile of high school music

ensemble students using nationally representative data for the U.S. graduating high school class of 2013.

We address the following research questions:

1 What proportion of U.S. high school students enrolled in their school's band, choir, and/or orchestra? What proportion of U.S. high school students enrolled in non-ensemble music courses?

2 What are the demographic characteristics of high school music ensemble students?

3 What is relation between student demographic characteristics and the likelihood of music ensemble enrollment?

OVERALL ENROLLMENT RATES AND STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Overall, 24% of the graduating class of 2013 enrolled in one or more music ensembles during any year of high school. Music ensemble courses were more heavily populated than were non-ensemble music courses: Only 3% of students enrolled in



at least one high school guitar class, 3% enrolled in at least one piano class, and less than 1% of students enrolled in at least one music technology course.

Choir was the most popular music ensemble, with 13% of students enrolling in a choir class at some point during high school. Band enrollment rates closely follow, with 11% of students enrolling in at least one band course at some point during high school. Orchestra trailed far behind the other two ensembles, with only 2% of students nationally enrolling in at least one orchestra class during high school.

DISCUSSION

Results of the current study indicate that 24% of high school class of 2013 enrolled in at least one ensembles course in their high school years. While this figure may seem to reflect a slight increase from the 21% participation rate previously reported for the class of 2004, note that the current study reflects ensemble enrollment in any of the four years of high school, whereas the prior study reflected self-reported participation only in the senior year of high school.

What is clear from the current study is that choir (13%) and band (11%) continue to be the most popular music courses in high school. This makes sense, as they are also the most prevalent form of music courses offered

in secondary schools across the United States. Orchestra, while often grouped together with the other ensembles, lags far behind the other ensembles in terms of uptake; orchestra students make up only a small portion (2%) of students, less than guitar (3%) and keyboard (3%) courses.

Would participation rates increase significantly were there new, less traditional music courses taught by motivated and qualified music teachers and supported by the school community? Would adding another ensemble course – a popular music ensemble or world music ensemble for example – increase overall school music participation, or would these newer ensembles merely duplicate the

patterns of participation?

Jazz band, for example, tends to serve a subset of students from that concert band program. As such, jazz bands do not increase music enrollment so much as duplicate enrollment of students who are interested and play a standard jazz instrument. If the present status of jazz bands is any indicator, popular music ensembles and world music ensembles might not increase individual participation significantly. To attract a new population of students to the study of music may require more significant efforts to offer courses focused on completely different manifestations of the musical experience, such as song writing or composition.

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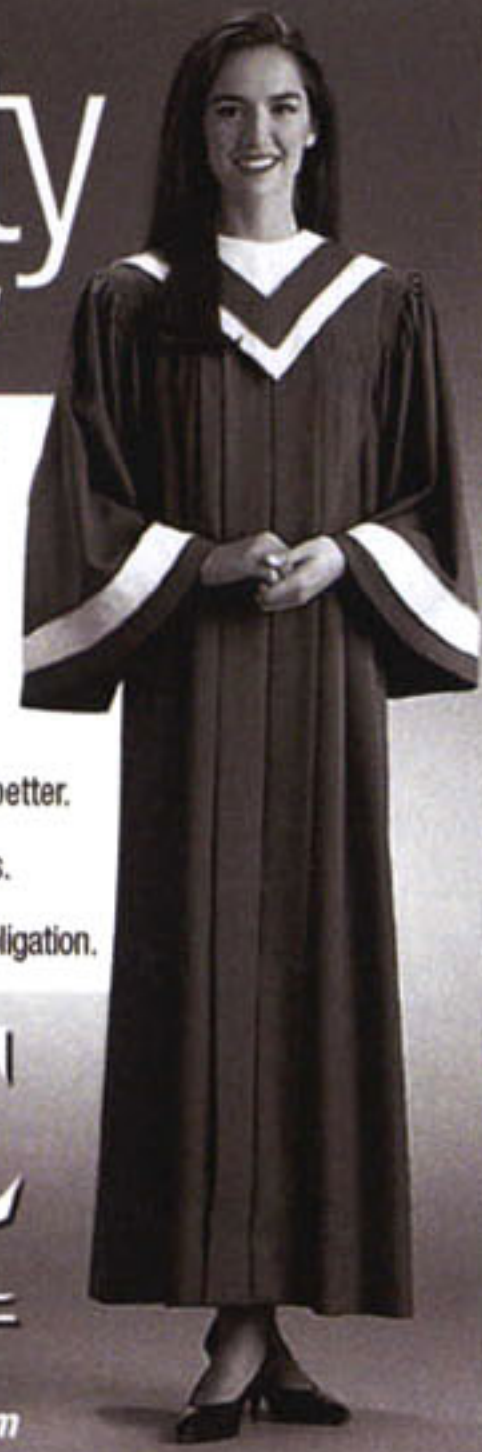
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Females were overrepresented in music ensembles overall, with the birth-assigned sex imbalance most pronounced in choir and orchestra. The overrepresentation of female students in choir is not particularly surprising, and the 70/30 split here is strikingly consistent to a prior study examining choral music enrollment across 10 nationally representative cohorts spanning three decades. Given that we found no significant imbalance between males and females in band for this cohort, the imbalance among choir and orchestra students drives the association between sex and overall music ensemble enrollment for the Class of 2013.

Race/ethnicity are significantly associated with overall music ensemble enrollments. Enrollment in choral music was not associated with student race/ethnicity, reflecting the reality for the Class of 2013 that choral music students were not significantly different from the population of all students in terms of their racial and ethnic composition. Choral music students were also statistically similar to the population of all students in terms of their native language.

This new evidence suggests that students may not be systematically excluded from elective music courses because of their status as English Language Learners, a speculation made in prior research. One might intuit that those whose native language is not English might be less likely to sing in a choir because of the language reading expectations inherent in choirs, but this does not seem to be the case here.

Why might choirs be most reflective of the general population on an ethnic/racial and linguistic level? Musically, it may be that choirs are the most malleable of traditional school ensembles. Choir students can perform music of a wide array of cultures and styles, and even learn to use their voices in ways that are most appropriate for a given song type. This versatility of being able to develop and use the voice to make music in varied ways might be attractive to students of from varying cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, choirs may require less time commitment than band,

which possibly makes them more attractive to students who have familial or work commitments after or before school hours.

In contrast, we found significant relationships between instrumental music ensemble enrollments and race/ethnicity. For the Class of 2013, African American students and students of Hispanic or Latino origin were significantly underrepresented in high school band and orchestra programs.

This raises an obvious question: Is the underrepresentation of African American and Latino students in instrumental music a problem of *access*, a problem of *appeal*, or a problem of *familial support*?

A problem of access would be evidenced by a lack of instrumental music programs in

schools serving greater proportions of African American and Latino students. A problem of appeal would be evidenced by the existence of programs in schools serving African American and Latino populations that suffer from low uptake because instrumental music is not an attractive option for African American and Latino students to choose as one of relatively few elective course options. Evidence to suggest a problem of familial support would require research on a population that is somewhat elusive to music education researchers: a diverse sample of students and their families who opt not to pursue an accessible instrumental music education program.

While choirs may be more culturally malleable, given the presence of singing in most of the world's cultures, they



are also overwhelmingly gendered in schools. This is perhaps a curious and puzzling artifact of the feminization of singing in a culture that still manages to celebrate and idolize male and female singers.

That instrumental groups attract students who are, on average, more academically able than their peers is a result that raises further questions for future research. This is an instance, too, where persistence in music enrollment may make a difference. It is possible, for example, that students who persist for

multiple years in choral music are more similar academically to their instrumental peers than are students who only enroll in one year of choir to perhaps fill a needed arts requirement.

Researchers and music educators are well served by research that examines the population of music students, making better comparisons of "music" and "non-music" students by understanding the preexisting population differences that might influence such comparisons. Such research also helps us

be introspective and critically examine the nature of our reach and the degree to which we succeed in making students more musically educated. ■

Access the complete article online at <http://bit.ly/3lsmP4K>, *Journal of Research in Music Education (JRME)*, October 2019. After one year, the article may be accessed by signing in to your NAFME account.



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