



EDUCATION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The case for supporting
cocurricular activities

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The Herff Jones Achievement Series

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“Fridays are the days when everybody realizes things aren’t the same.”

That’s how Grove City High School senior Mike Mayers described school following the South-Western City School Board of Ohio’s tough decision to eliminate sports because of costs.¹ Mike happens to be a quarterback, but the change affects cheerleaders, band members, student journalists and others involved in the Friday night games. The plan also eliminated drama productions and student council.

Teachers, administrators and parents in Grove City and across the nation are working together to find solutions to shrinking budgets. And it’s a worthwhile pursuit: far from being inconsequential, school-affiliated cocurricular activities are proven to increase academic achievement, positive behavior and more. In fact, at a cost of just one to three percent of a school’s budget, cocurricular activities offer the best value when it comes to boosting achievement.²

We’ve provided an overview of the benefits that may be helpful in educating school budget decision makers, parents and the larger community about the critical role these activities play in creating a climate of achievement.



THE HIDDEN FORCE BEHIND ACHIEVEMENT

Learning that doesn't feel like learning

Although they're often outside of the core curriculum, cocurricular activities like student government, community service, performing arts, athletics, music and publications offer unique developmental experiences. Students have their own motivations: fun, social connections and personal interests, to name a few. Schools know that these activities supplement instruction while also nurturing teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership, responsibility, good health and time management.

But can they really make students learn more or study harder?

MEASURABLE ACHIEVEMENT GAINS

Research shows a clear link between cocurricular activities and increases in academic achievement (See table p.4). And the effects come into play regardless of the type of activity. The athlete

has better grades across many subjects. The newspaper writer performs better not only in English, but also in math and science.

Take a look at a sampling of recent research on cocurriculars and academic achievement:

- Multiple studies show a strong connection to academic performance and college aspirations. In just one of many examples, a study released by the Colorado High School Activities Association showed that students who participate in some kind of activity have "significantly higher" grade point averages (GPA) than students who do not.³
- According to The College Board, the nonprofit association that administers Advanced Placement® courses and SAT® exams, students participating in band, choir, musical productions, or other music activities score about 11% higher on the SAT® than

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non-music students. Music participants garnered nearly 60 more points in the verbal category and 45 in math.⁴

- Multiple studies show that students involved in athletics have better attendance, GPA and graduation rates than non-participating students. For example, a survey of Minnesota high schools showed that student athletes had an average GPA of 2.84, compared with the non-athlete GPA of 2.68.⁵ Athletes are also more likely to engage in civic activities (like volunteering and voting) and positive health behaviors as adults.⁶
- A study of sixth graders found that those who participated in organized after school sports or clubs had grades 10% higher in English, math and social studies.⁷
- The National Governors Association for Best Practices found that students who participated in the arts nine hours or more each week were more likely to be recognized for academic achievement and good attendance.⁸

PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SENIORS REPORTING SCHOOL SUCCESS BY PARTICIPATION AND NON-PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

INDICATORS	PARTICIPANTS	NON-PARTICIPANTS
No unexcused absences	50.4	36.2
Never skipped classes	50.7	42.3
Have GPA of 3.0 or above	30.6	10.8
Highest quartile on a composite math and reading assessment	29.8	14.2
Expect to earn a bachelor's degree or higher	68.2	48.2

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. 1995. www.nces.ed.gov/Pubs95



ENGAGEMENT AND AFFILIATION

Why the strong correlation between cocurriculars and overall achievement?

It's possible that students who choose to participate in cocurriculars are predisposed to certain subjects; they're naturally hard working and ambitious. But research suggests that regardless of a student's personal qualities, cocurriculars create a sense of engagement and allegiance with the school.

There are the cognitive connections—cocurriculars have been shown to develop reasoning abilities measured by tests like the SAT®.⁹ But they may also be filling the need for personal identity and allegiance sought after by so many young people. In the 2005 book *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development*, experts across multiple disciplines noted that cocurriculars created the opportunity to “embed one's identity” into positive contexts and affiliate more with academic-focused peers.¹⁰ Other studies

have also proven the link between students disassociated with cocurriculars and significantly higher dropout rates.

COCURRICULARS VERSUS PART-TIME WORK

If some of the qualities of cocurriculars include handling more responsibility, managing time and working hard, it might follow that part-time work offers similar benefits. However, research has shown that GPA and time spent on homework drops as a student works more than ten hours per week.¹¹

In contrast, the unique qualities of school-affiliated cocurricular activities have the opposite effect: the more extensive a student's participation (number of hours, number of activities), the more time is devoted to homework; ultimately, engagement and academics are strengthened.

CONNECTIONS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

The power of self-esteem

Cocurricular activities can also help schools manage at-risk students. “At risk” is a broad term usually associated with violent environments and complex social-psychological issues that endanger the student’s grades, personal development and even his or her health. Cocurriculars seem to foster the self-esteem, stability and positive relationships that protect against self-destructive behaviors.

REDUCING RISK

For example, the U.S. Department of Education has found that students who do not participate in any cocurriculars are 49% more likely to use illegal drugs and 37% more likely to become teen parents. Activities can boost self-esteem, which in turn acts as a “deterrent to anti-social behavior,” according to Steve Duncan, a nationally known family life and human development expert and professor at Montana State University.¹²

“Recent research confirms that involvement in school cocurricular activities is more than just child’s play... school cocurricular activities and involvement in community clubs and organizations are important in fostering the strengths that help younger people steer away from undesirable behavior.”¹³

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

However, many groups are at risk merely because of their gender, ethnicity or economic status. Students in these groups, in particular African Americans and Hispanics, score lower on large-scale standardized tests than their peers. These “achievement gaps” lead to longer-term gaps, including the kinds of opportunities secured as adults.¹⁴ In fact, over two-thirds of African-American males who enter college never finish.¹⁵



The Harvard Educational Review has also found that cocurriculars are “one of the few interventions that benefit disadvantaged students.”

But there’s another side to the story which doesn’t make headlines—and it’s directly linked to cocurricular activity. Some report that for African-American male collegians, “an investment in out-of-class time engagement enhanced their overall experiences at predominantly white institutions.”¹⁶ And, according to the College Board, research shows that “participation in cocurricular activities benefits minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students *as much or more than* economically advantaged students” [emphasis added].¹⁷ The Harvard Educational Review has found that cocurriculars are “one of the few interventions that benefit disadvantaged students.”¹⁸

FOSTERING INCLUSION

Cocurriculars are also an effective way of integrating marginalized students: students with physical or learning disabilities; “latchkey” kids who may be vulnerable during after school hours; gay, lesbian and transgender youths; and students in migrant families or who may be learning English as a second language.¹⁹ And while gender gaps vary at different points for both males and females, cocurriculars again seem to mitigate their effects. For example, two new studies by noted economists find that since the passage of Title IX, increased high school girls’ sports participation has led to a 40% rise in employment and a lower risk of obesity as much as 20-25 years later in life.²⁰





THE ADMISSIONS ADVANTAGE

Passionate students stand out from the crowd

College applications are reaching all-time highs, and admittance is more competitive than ever. Secondary schools that offer and maintain a variety of cocurricular activities can help students achieve their college dreams and aspirations. That's because cocurriculars say something about a student that can't be expressed with letter grades.

According to the College Board, "admissions officers know that what potential students do with their time outside of school reveals important personal dimensions that statistics can't show."²¹

SHOW THEM DEPTH, NOT BREADTH

However, it's important for students, guidance counselors and parents to note that "admissions officers are more likely to consider an applicant who is deeply and passionately committed to a

specific activity, rather than one who is superficially involved in multiple activities."²²

"We're looking for a commitment to and a passion for an activity outside of the academic setting," says Nancy Tessier, director of admissions at Smith College. "We're looking for depth rather than breadth."²³

William R. Fitzsimmons, the longtime dean of admissions at Harvard College, has said that his college looks for well-rounded students. But again, immersion in an interest, like that enabled by cocurriculars, is highly regarded.

"Students who have made a commitment to pursue something they love, believe in and value, and do so with singular energy, discipline and plain old hard work ... are among the best potential scholars."²⁴

CASE IN POINT: HIGH SCHOOL JOURNALISM

By taking a closer look at school newspaper and yearbook—activities with a particularly strong impact on grades—we can see how the connection plays out in a particular activity.

DEVELOPING STRONG WRITERS

At all grade levels, aspiring student journalists may work on a school newspaper, form their own publication, or develop content for the school yearbook. These students were studied closely in the 1980s, and it was found that they scored higher than average in multiple subjects. They also performed better than their peers on SAT® and ACT® entrance exams, early college English courses, and generally experienced less anxiety about college research and writing. When tested again in the late 1990s, students with journalism or yearbook experience scored higher on Advanced Placement® English exams than those who prepared with an Advanced Placement® or advanced English course.²⁵

A CONTINUING CONNECTION

Most recently, in 2007, Professor Jack Dvorak at Indiana University found that students who had high school newspaper or yearbook experience had statistically higher grades in 14 of 17 academic categories compared with non-journalism students (3.38 GPA versus 3.28).²⁶ College freshmen who participated in these activities also earned higher grades on first-year English courses than students without prior publications experience. What's more, offering these activities or simply encouraging reading the news in school facilitated civic engagement 10 to 15 years after high school and college.

ONE ACTIVITY, MULTIPLE SKILLS

Cocurriculars can reinforce skills that may be initially encountered in the classroom. In the case of journalism and yearbook activities, students have a fun, personally meaningful context in which to master a number of complex skills: writing meaningfully and quickly, critically analyzing information, thinking coherently about disparate sets of ideas, performing research and interviews, and creatively integrating copy and design. And even with the support of a teacher or adviser, these activities demand collaboration, leadership, attention to detail and deadlines, and plain old hard work.

Newspaper and yearbook, like other cocurriculars, offer the rare opportunity to experience a “real world” application of classroom concepts and principles. In this case, writing style, clarity and meaning are brought to life more completely and relevantly.

According to the Journalism Education Association, newspaper and yearbook “should be viewed as one of the truly important school activities in the preparation of students for college... an integral component of language arts programs.”²⁷

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Herff Jones works closely with customers to create a climate of achievement through graduation products, class rings and jewelry, yearbooks, educational publishing and motivation and recognition tools. The company provides guidance, support and high quality products to elementary schools, high schools, colleges and universities, church organizations, professional and collegiate sports teams and corporations. Founded nearly 100 years ago in Indianapolis, Indiana, Herff Jones is an employee-owned organization focused on building long-term relationships through a nationwide network of trusted, expert sales representatives. Additional information is available at herffjones.com.



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