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Finding Retention in Community Music Ensemble Participants

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Finding Retention in Community Music Ensemble Participants

Joshua E. Long

Abstract
We may not know the importance of music in our community until it disappears. Research indicates symphonic performances have a low audience attendance (Kennicott, 2013). Similar challenges occur in the community when adult ensembles also lack participants. It might be a connection between K-12, collegiate, and community music education. Awareness of community music ensembles may also contribute to the overall participation. Reasons ensemble participants might be involved include that they are lifelong learners (Mantie, 2012), want social support (Carucci, 2012), have musician identity (Daback, 2008), and for musicality reasons (Kruse, 2009). Ensemble satisfaction perhaps leads to the overall level of participation. The purpose of this study was to examine why an adult participant might choose to continue or discontinue their engagement in a community music ensemble. A questionnaire was administered to current and former community ensemble participants from several U.S. states. This descriptive quantitative research addressed what attributes of community music ensemble engagement contribute to participant retention, focusing on ensemble awareness and satisfaction. Results indicated 62.1% of participants in this study indicated no music teacher communicated about community music ensembles. Most participants are involved because of performing, repertoire, and service. Time, money, and obligations was a large deterrent for why participants might not be involved with community music ensembles.

A refreshing breeze blows over your brow under a shaded, solid, concrete structure amplifying the loud sounds of the patriotic season. The tri-color buntings and flags start to dance in time as the lawn chair audience taps its feet to well-known tunes. The smell of charcoal cookouts and hint of sulfur from a recent test of fireworks, cloud your senses as you sit in a starch stiff uniform. Nothing matters except for the smiles and blissful mood you encounter from the loud, hard claps of appreciation. Feeling unified with colleagues, standing in front of local citizens, you feel a sigh of satisfaction and belonging. For just those few seconds everybody present has grown closer after experiencing the beneficial entertainment of music. What would happen if this concert atmosphere did not exist anymore?

As a society we may expect live music to be a pillar, always present in our community, yet research indicates live band and orchestra concerts are poorly attended. Professional orchestras for example, are going through painful changes due to low audience attendance (Kennicott, 2013). Similar challenges occur when ensembles also lack participants. Kolb (2010) suggested one reason may be current communities do not consider classical music to be “worthy of their attention” (p. 58).

A connection between K-12, collegiate, and community music education perhaps may not exist (Jones, 2006). It would seem music instruction in the K-12 schools ought to encourage graduates to continue growing musically by becoming community ensemble participants (Tucker, 2006). The goal for all students to continue should be “preparing students for transition and successful participation in...music experiences” (Jellison, 2000, p. 138). Recently, Kuntz (2011) found that most high school students are not aware of community music ensembles, which could also contribute to a decline in music ensemble engagement. Further, it has been found teacher education institutions do not talk about the local music life (Veblen, 2002). A better carryover of music education beyond school may be needed (Mantie, 2012) and more time spent on outreach programs (Kolb, 2001) to educate potential performing participants.

Community music consists of “opportunities for participation and education through a wide range of mediums, music[s], and musical experience” (Veblen, 2002, p. 730). Community musicians “can be found facilitating local music activities in arts centers, schools, prisons, health settings, places of worship, music festivals, on the streets, and in a wide range of other community contexts” (Higgins 2012, p. 174). Community music ensembles include choirs, bands, drum corps, brass bands, choruses, orchestras, folk/ethnic groups, and small jazz combos, which are staffed by professional and amateur participants. These ensembles are service groups providing entertainment at concerts, parades, and other ceremonial events (Veblen, 2002).
Participants are often of any performing age; usually around 16 years old and older. Most community ensemble participants have formal training whether they played an instrument in high school, studied privately, or possibly are novices just learning a new instrument (Coffman, 1997). This individual can play with various ensembles or perform only with one group. Reasons participants might be involved in these ensembles include they are lifelong learners (Mantie, 2012), music-makers (Taylor, 2012), want social support (Carucci, 2012), have musician identity (Dabbank, 2008), and for musicality reasons (Kruse, 2009). Warfield (2010) and Cohen (2009) found inmate programs offering music ensembles, report participants have gained commitment, confidence, and teamwork. With so many resulting positive attributes, involvement in community music should be encouraged.

The purpose of this study was to examine why a participant might choose to continue or discontinue their engagement in a community music ensemble. The research addressed the following main question: What attributes of community music ensemble engagement contribute to participant retention? The following sub-questions were posed: What role does the awareness of community music ensemble opportunities play in a participant’s likelihood to take part in an ensemble? What factors lead to or deter from satisfaction of community music ensemble participation?

**Literature Review**

**Community Ensemble Awareness**

After interviews with students about their musical participation and plans, Kuntz (2011) gained important insight into students’ musical lives and futures. These students discussed personal experiences, ranging from cultural groups and community youth events, to particular time spent with friends listening to music. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate students’ activities and see if this would lead to lifelong music engagement. After three discussion focus groups at a rural, suburban, and an urban school, Kuntz (2011) found most students knew about honors ensembles and other select groups from family members involved in music. The students’ love of music alone did not lead them to a path of participation in any community ensemble as most were not aware of these types of organizations which could be a lifelong opportunity.

To find how music education might facilitate meaningful connections between school and community participation in music making, participants from nine randomly selected ensembles were surveyed. Mantie (2012) found that 73% of the adult community band musicians felt the school music experience successfully prepared them for engagement in this ensemble. Mantie discovered 66% of the ensemble members reported taking private lessons in their past, 78% said they had sung in choir, 34% played in chamber groups, and 30% reported using accompaniment technologies. It was also revealed that 71% of the participants indicated they needed eyeglasses, which prevented 35% from playing their instrument at some point. Declining vision issues could possibly indicate a reason why community participants might not be currently engaged in ensemble activities.

**Ensemble Satisfaction**

The role of identity in community adult ensembles seem to engage participants in satisfying experiences. Members of 63 different New Horizons Bands throughout the U.S. participated in a web-based questionnaire and random phone interviews in a study examining social support, which began as ensemble relationships. New Horizons Music programs provide music making ensembles for mostly retired adults who may have no musical experience. Carucci (2012) found 35.7% participants were active in New Horizons for instrumental education, 41.1% for emotional support, and 38.1% for companionship. These findings suggest music making ensembles might increase social bonds across participants’ lifespans. Similar satisfaction emerged in another study of the New Horizons Band where results showed participants’ identities were shaped by social interactions in the ensemble. In a qualitative study of five focus groups, Dabbank (2008) found participation in community ensembles provided an identity for musicians. The ensemble was important for these individuals as they explained an identity loss which started occurring around retirement stage.

Kruse (2009) learned, through interviews with two different community ensembles, members’ satisfaction “depended on the level of musical difficulty, the teaching styles of instructors, the ownership and sense of belonging to the large community, and a strong awareness of reciprocity within that community” (p. 222). In addition to social factors, Kruse identified musical issues may contribute to community ensemble participation.

It appears from the above studies, community music ensemble research has been focused on awareness and satisfaction. For the purpose of this study, the goal of community ensembles is to have a maximum number of participants so they can share music with the community. It would be difficult to have many participants when awareness of ensembles is absent. Also the lack of engaged participants might demonstrate the dissatisfaction of those involved. The most difficult task of music education in community music, is knowing participants’ objectives and ensuring they are satisfied with their experience. Since participants come and go, how do community music ensembles retain prime participation and gain new musicians?
Method
For this study, three samples of participants, young adults to retirement age, in various musical groups were surveyed. Ability of participating adults varied from high school level to professional. These musicians were distinguished as Frequent Participants (musicians who are present more than 6 months a year), Low Active Participants (musicians who are active less than 6 months a year), and Past Participants (musicians who do not perform anymore). A pilot study of the questionnaire was completed by a small group of community music ensemble participants January 2014, providing feedback for appropriate implementation to a larger sample. The approximate 15-minute, 25 question online and paper questionnaire, was completed February to March 2014. This descriptive quantitative survey tool focused on demographic participation, awareness of community ensembles, and community music ensemble satisfaction.

Participants of eight ensembles, were selected mainly through the researcher’s association. Since these participants were so enthused to complete the questionnaire, many asked to forward the survey to other community music ensembles. This “Snowball Sampling” (Oliver, 2006), resulted in a total of 16 participating groups of choirs, bands, small ensembles, orchestras, and drum corps. Two-hundred-sixty-one ensemble participants from Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania complete the survey. Below are the community music ensembles who participated:

- Orchestras
  - Montgomery County Community College (PA)
    Chamber Orchestra, Nittany Valley Symphony (PA)

- Drum Corps.
  - Belvedere Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps. (PA),
    Emmaus Sentinels Alumni Corps. (PA)

- Small Ensembles
  - Bloomingdale Cornet Band (NJ), Liberty Band
    (PA), Slate Belt Band (PA)

- Community Bands
  - Adult Musicians Band Camp at Allegheny College
    (PA), Hackettstown Community Band (NJ),
    Hawthorne Fire Department Band (NJ), Princeton
    Brass Band (NJ), Trinity Centennial Band (PA)

- Choirs
  - Essence of Joy II (PA), Foxdale Retirement
    Community Choir (PA), Seacoast Community
    Chorus (MA), State College Choral Society (PA)

Results

Demographic Participation
Of the 261 participants completing the questionnaire, most were of the age group of 45 – 74 (18.8% 45 – 54, 21.8% 55 – 64, and 22.6% 65 – 74) (see Figure 1, Appendix A). Since most to contribute were older musicians, survey results are intriguing. Many participants indicated they were active in community ensembles: 72.6% active in band, 65.6% in choir, 63.2% in a small ensemble, 48.8% in an orchestra, 37.3% in a jazz combo, 37.1% in drum corps., and 23% in folk/ethnic groups. This data would suggest most active participants are involved with more than two ensembles at a time.

84.3% indicated being active more than 6 months a year, 8.8% active less than 6 months a year, and 6.9% no longer active in community music ensembles. Since a large number of participants were active in community music ensembles, the no longer active participants were analyzed separately. However, these non-active contributors to the survey had similar data to those active therefore their responses were kept in this analysis. 37.9% indicated their instrument group was brass, 27.2% voice, 23% woodwind, 6.1% string, and 5.7% percussion instruments (see in Figure 2, Appendix A).

Community Ensemble Awareness
Most contributors to the questionnaire were aware of multiple community music ensembles since this survey approached participants involved with one group. 34.9% indicated the awareness of 10+ ensembles, 31% 4 – 6 ensembles, 18.4% 7 – 9 ensembles, and 15.7% 1 – 3 ensembles. 93.8% indicated it was easy to be involved by finding a community music ensemble through word of mouth, media, directors and musicians in a group, and performances. One contributor stated “I was recruited by a neighbor who was an active member.” When asked what the most convenient source to find a community music ensemble, 40.2% indicated peers and 32.2% the internet. While 8.8% indicated teachers, 8.8% concert series, 5.4% newspaper, and 4.6% other sources (see Figure 3, Appendix B).

62.1% indicated no public school music educator communicated about local community music ensembles. This is interesting as music educators facilitate music ensemble involvement. When asked who informed participants about local community music ensembles, 82.76% indicated peers and 83.14% stated present community ensemble participants. Conversely 96.17% of community leaders (mayors, etc.), 81.23% of elementary/middle school music teachers, 83.14% other family members, 73.56% parents, 66.28% high school music teachers, and 63.60% private music teachers did not informed participants about local community music ensembles (see Figure 4, Appendix B).
**Ensemble Satisfaction**

Contributors agree 96.1% of performances, 92.3% of rehearsals, 74.7% tradition of the music group, 72.8% communicating using music, 72.4% of belonging to a group, 72% emotions, 70.9% social reasons, and 65.9% music education, are the satisfying reasons to participate in community music ensembles. “Drum and Bugle Corps gets in your blood, ask anyone involved in it!” This contributor is referring to experiences and attitudes which add to the participation of a community music ensemble. 96.9% indicated a positive memorable experience contributed to continued community music ensemble participation. These were mainly unique performance and repertoire opportunities. Along with teaching and performing solos, almost half indicated church and small groups as other music making experiences.

95.8% agreed music repertoire, 94.6% performing, 93.5% musicianship, 75.5% instruction, 59% family or friends, 57.4% location, and 53.9% timing, make rehearsal and performances worth participating. What might prevent participants from attending rehearsals and performances? 71.6% agree timing, 67.4% location, 49.4% music repertoire might prevent participants while 56.7% performing and 37.2% musicianship disagree (see Figure 5, Appendix C). Participants suggested a variety of instruction such as CDs, literature, master classes, and solos would better facilitate community music ensembles. This would expect more from participants; along with a strong organization enabling education, funding, and appropriate programming, would help retain participants. “Rehearsing for a purpose, not just rehearsing endlessly for the sake of it” (Survey Participant). This coincides with repertoire which was the biggest motivation leading a participant to travel a large distance to a community music ensemble. “I started playing in a group 45 minutes away because they played a good variety of non-generic unique music, I felt challenged” (Survey Participant).

Almost half indicated belonging would be one satisfying element which would influence future participants’ enjoyment in community music ensembles, allowing “bonding with people from many different careers and ages” (Survey Participant). What is one primary reason for participating in a community music ensemble? 37.2% indicated other reasons (such as performing, repertoire, service), 24.5% belonging to a group, and 19.9% social environment (see Figure 6, Appendix C). As far as one deterrent for why one might not participate, 21.5% indicated time, 16.5% health reasons, 16.5% family or personal obligations, 15.3% other deterrent (such as commitment & money), and 13.4% conductor(s) (see Figure 7, Appendix C). Almost half indicated time and commitment to practice and playing seriously, would deter future participants. “It doesn’t matter if the performance is perfect, but good musical growth is vital” (Survey Participant).

**Discussion**

Interestingly it was the older adult participants (45 – 74) who took the time to express their opinions. After seeing this age group play a large role in community ensembles, where is the younger generation and why are they not involved? Could it be careers, families, and adult lifestyles? Regardless it is disappointing to see limited participation because the younger generations will carry on the tradition. Community ensembles give back to the community, acting as a service indicated by participants of this study. Even though performance and repertoire are important participation factors found, it is important to think about the purpose and dedication music ensembles provide to the community.

As expected time, health reasons, family or personal obligations, and money deter participants from ensembles. Commitment is an important factor to these groups as rehearsals and performances can be time consuming. Since almost all of these groups are volunteer, participants need to be intrigued in some way to continue. Since conductors are an important part of the ensemble package, participants want to be challenged and perform at a variety of venues. It seems there should be a strong organization providing these attributes since almost half indicated the need for playing more serious music. Time and commitment are important factors to many who were surveyed, ensemble participants need to be devoted in order to practice. “I don’t mind sitting in the back row and being a nobody if the players doing solos play well and with good tone” (Survey Participant). Dedication is key to everybody involved as this contributor cares about the perceived ability and longevity of the music experience.

Music teachers need to make an effort to inform students of these programs. Both previous research found in the literature review and 62.1% of participants in this study indicated no music teacher communicated about community music ensembles. This is disappointing as the philosophies of music teachers ought to be to provide instruction so students can become lifelong learners. These groups may be the only ensembles available to students after high school or college. Inform students about concert series and rehearsals, or possibly do a joint performance with a community music ensemble. It is important to make future participants aware of these ensembles as it could be a creative outlet for an adult who may not otherwise be involved in the arts.

**Future Research and Conclusion**

It would be interesting for future research, to ask what ensemble(s) participants were involved with but are currently not active. This study provided information about current ensemble participation but did not focus on why a participant might have left an organization, possibly continuing at another ensemble. It might also be interesting to ask contributors to specify the amount of
time spent with community music ensembles. One question in this study, indicated 47.1% devote less than 25% of leisure time to community music ensembles. In retrospect, leisure time might not be the appropriate way to discuss time commit to these groups.

Only 6.9% of survey participants indicated they were no longer active in community music ensembles. Even though this survey reached participants who are active, it would be very interesting to find the main reasons why a musician may choose not to participate. It is difficult to find a sampling of people who do not contribute as they are not involved with these groups anymore. The next part to this current research will be to interview past and low active participants to find what might increase participation.

Community music ensembles are great for the community as they enrich lives, are good opportunities, and great for socialization. “They are a wonderful opportunity for musicians of all levels of playing, ages and are essential to the social and mental health of our population” (Survey Participant). It takes many elements such as organization, performances, rehearsals, commitment, time, and money. The difficulty is to keep satisfaction and participants active, so the right ingredients can exist in community music ensembles. Awareness of these groups are key to carry on the traditions, as service to the community would be missing. It is important to be an advocate and show your support to these organizations since they offer lifelong learning and opportunities for music making. “It is a lot of work, but after a concert and hearing how well everything went and how well received we were, it is all worth it” (Survey Participant).

References


Appendix A

Figure 1

![Age of Participants](image)

Figure 2

![Participant's Instrument Group](image)
Appendix B

Figure 3

What is the most convenient source to find a community music ensemble?

- Newspaper: 42.2%
- Internet: 32.2%
- Peers: 8.8%
- Teachers: 5.4%
- Concert Series: 4.6%
- Other Source(s): 8.8%

Figure 4

Who informed you about local community music ensembles?

- Yes: 68.38%
- No: 31.62%
- Anthropological/Anthropologist: 63.40%
- Ethnologist: 62.64%
- Anthropologist: 72.50%
- Ethnologist: 72.66%
- Anthropological/Anthropologist: 66.66%
- Ethnologist: 66.66%
- Other Source(s): 46.17%
Appendix C

Figure 5

What might prevent you from attending rehearsals and performances?

Figure 6

What is one primary reason for participating in a community music ensemble?
Figure 7

What is or would be one deterrent for why you might not participate in a community music ensemble?

- Social Environment: 19.5%
- Belonging to a Group: 1.5%
- Conductor(s): 12.4%
- Ensemble Leaders: 16.6%
- Family or Personal Obligations: 16.5%
- Health Problems: 21.5%
- Time: 5.7%
- Age: 18.1%
- Decision Making: 8.1%
- Ensemble Administration: 18.1%
- Leadership: 18.1%
- Other Deterrent (please specify): 15.3%