



## A Preliminary Study of Factors that Limited Secondary School Choral Involvement of Collegiate Choral Singers

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to explore reasons why adults who are active in choral groups may not have been involved in secondary school choral programs. Patterns of enrollment problems were compared by participation level, gender, voice part, and whether or not the singer was a music major. Possible problems included were scheduling, personality conflicts with peers and director, quality of the musical experience, and perceived qualifications and abilities. Participants in this study (N=90) were members of two collegiate choral ensembles in a mid-western state university. Data were obtained by a researcher-designed questionnaire dealing with demographics, musical backgrounds, initial interest in singing, and possible reasons for non-participation in choral ensembles.*

*Most students had participated in high school choir (82%), though 17% of those participants were not always enrolled. Patterns of enrollment problems were generally the same for those who participated in secondary school choir and those who either did not participate or dropped out of the program at some point. Scheduling conflicts were rated highest for both groups, and lack of parental support was rated lowest.*

*Over two-thirds of those who did not sing in a high school choral group responded that they were always interested in singing. Men were much more likely than women to have never even considered enrolling in choir, and basses reported less early interest in singing than the other voice*

*parts. Women rated personality problems with the director higher than did men, as well as conflicts with other musical activities and academic subjects.*

One of great challenges to secondary school choral programs is the adequate enrollment of interested students, with the goal of near equal distribution of vocal parts for the best vocal sound (Castelli, 1986). As chorus must compete with myriad course offerings and social activities for students' time and energies, motivation for enrollment has been studied extensively (Mudrick, 1997; Neill, 1998). School experiences have been linked to adult behaviors in many areas of life, including participation in the arts (Holmquist, 1995), and a majority of adults who sing in collegiate choirs and adult community choruses sang in high school choir (Buchanan, 1998; Spell, 1989). Although Frakes (1984) found that students involved in choral music at the high school level were more likely to participate as adults, many persons did not begin active choral participation until after high school (Bell, 2000).

Because current adult choral involvement may indicate a potential for earlier enrollment, this study seeks to explore possible patterns of initial interest and subsequent hindrances to participation in choral singing. Such exploration might prove beneficial to secondary school music educators in recruitment and retention endeavors.

Thomas (1992) suggested that musical motivation was not simply a matter of musical factors, but may well be affected by environment and circumstance. However, researchers who have identified intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation for participation in music activities have found intrinsic reasons more compelling than extrinsic ones (Buchanan, 1998; Neill, 1998, Spell, 1989; Wilson, 1959). Enjoyment of performance, need for musical involvement, and desire to improve one's skills were rated as stronger motivators than social reasons for enrollment.

According to Neill (1998), motivation to enroll in music classes is a necessary first step to begin participation, but continued and increasing involvement is dependent upon the quality of musical experience. Mudrick (1997) found that students in successful programs were generally self-motivated by feeling competent and well prepared. He suggested that successful programs were elitist, encouraging more highly skilled singers to stay involved and reach higher performance standards. Myers (1992) asserted that adults of all ages are interested in music, but that musical experiences that are passive and lack intellectual challenge will not be satisfying.

Research findings on attrition and non-involvement seem to point more to non-musical reasons than musical ones. Rogers (1989), in a study of student attrition in instrumental ensembles, found no significant differences in musical achievement between participants and dropouts. However, he cited conflicts with time, activities, and the ensemble director as primary reasons for non-participation (Rogers, 1989). According to Koutz (1987), other reasons for not continuing a high school musical involvement included conflicts with other interests, time requirements, not seeing music as important to adulthood, friends not being involved in music, and scheduling conflicts.

Stamer (1995) and Gates (1989) suggested that significant differences existed in involvement attitudes and behaviors for males and females. Castelli's (1986) comparison of elementary and secondary vocal programs noted a decline in male participation by the high school level. Male non-participants rated vocal insecurity and lack of vocational relevance as the main reasons for non-enrollment, while music educators attributed peer pressure and sex role endorsement as the strongest deterrents to secondary school choral enrollment.

Studies involving community choruses have profiled adult choral participants as well-educated individuals who have long histories of musical involvement, including years of training in keyboard, instrumental music, and voice lessons.

Women outnumber men two to one in most groups that are not highly selective in audition procedures. Bell's (2000) study reported 72% involvement in high school chorus, and Vincent (1997) found that 38% of those who participated did so for less than four years. According to Tipps (1992), the percentage of males who chose non-participation in high school (27%) was significantly higher than that of females (15%), and females tended to participate for longer periods of time than males. Males reported more involvement in high school instrumental ensembles than females.

Adult choral singing has been classified by sociologists as a form of serious leisure activity. Stebbins (1992) defined serious leisure as a systematic pursuit of a non-vocational activity that involves the process of acquiring and expressing special skills and knowledge. Because many leisure activities involve costs of time, energy and emotion, Homans (1974) suggested the following hypothesis: "The greater the profit [excess of reward over cost] a person receives as a result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action" (p 31). Those involved in serious leisure activities often accept the high costs of knowledge and skill acquisition, time commitment, and persistence. Stebbins classified serious leisure participants as either highly dedicated devotees, moderately dedicated participants, or casual dabblers.

Stebbins (1992) suggested that both musical preference for lighter musical styles and widespread inability to read music limited involvement of barbershop singers in community choruses that present choral masterworks. Bell's (2000) study confirmed that, although many community chorus members had been active in church/temple choirs, there was little crossover between barbershop groups and civic choruses. Stebbins' research found great differences in the musical backgrounds of male and female barbershop participants. Women tended to have musical involvements stretching back to childhood, and they reported much more activity in high school chorus, voice lessons, and instrumental study than men. Women also indicated much more confidence in their abilities to read music than did male barbershoppers.

Collegiate programs have benefited from strong high school programs, according to Poulter (1997), who also found that students' perceptions of their level of preparation for more challenging music was a significant factor in collegiate enrollment. Buchanan (1998) found that musical factors tended to be much stronger motivators for enrollment for collegiate singers than social influences. Even though many students reported negative experiences, particularly ineffective

directors in high school choir, they still chose to continue at the collegiate level. Buchanan's finding that 87% of college singers had performed in high school choir was consistent with the 84% figure found by Tipps (1995). Tipps' research showed that female collegiate singers tended to respond more to printed recruiting information than did males, who were significantly more likely to have been influenced by a personal contact than females. None of these investigations explored the backgrounds of students who did not participate in or dropped out of high school choral programs.

Given existing research suggesting that social as well as musical reasons exist for non-participation in choral ensembles, there seems to be a need to investigate participation histories of post-secondary school choral singers. It is the purpose of this research to explore levels of high school choral involvement of college singers and to examine early interest and possible conflicts or costs that may have prevented persons from participating. Differences in response patterns according to gender will be of prime interest, although voice part, major, and participation level will also be considered. Information gathered will be used to pinpoint areas for further investigation in various types of adult choral populations, including barbershop and gospel groups, as well as traditional community choruses.

#### METHOD

A pilot study was conducted to explore possible patterns of interest and reasons for non-participation. Ten university students were interviewed about their choral backgrounds, including their frustrations and dislikes as members of their high school choirs. These responses were then used in designing a survey instrument for the present study.

A 34-item questionnaire was constructed to focus upon demographics, early interest in singing, musical background experiences, and possible hindrances to enrolling or continuing in a high school choral ensemble. These hindrances included scheduling, quality of the musical experience, social aspects, and perceived personal qualifications. Participants were asked to rate all items on a five-point Likert-type scale.

Participants in this study were members of two collegiate choral ensembles in a mid-western state university. Questionnaires were distributed to 124 students, and 90 questionnaires were completed and returned, for a response rate of 73%.

#### RESULTS

Data were processed using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*. Frequencies, percentages, and means were tabulated, and crosstabulations were run to explore possible relationships between the variables of gender, major, voice part, and level of high school choral involvement, including possible reasons for non-involvement.

Of the total respondents ( $N=90$ ) used for this study, 60% were males and 40% females. The large majority were non-music majors (78%), and 51% of all respondents reported involvement in more than one high school choir, while 14% reported continued involvement in one secondary school choir, 8% reported interrupted involvement, 9% reported sporadic involvement, and 18% reported total non-participation.

Most students had some previous instrumental musical experience, with 57% having participated in band ( $M$  3.2 years) and 51% having had one or more years of keyboard lessons ( $M$  2.6 years). Students also reported involvement in voice lessons (30%) and orchestra (17%). Though the large majority of respondents reported that choir was always offered, seven percent reported that it was not. Most of the students (87%) had always been interested in singing, including 68% of those who never sang in high school. Of the respondents who had not sung in high school, there were more college seniors (43%) than freshmen (8%).

Overall patterns of enrollment problems were very similar for those who continuously participated in high school choir and those who did not, though typically higher for those who did not participate or dropped out of the program. Issues of time and schedule conflicts were rated as the greatest reasons for non-involvement, particularly conflicts with other academic classes and social activities. Personality issues were rated as the next highest conflict. Frustration with unmotivated peers and personality problems with the director were noted most.

Overall, musical problems were not rated as major hindrances. However, the musical ineffectiveness of their high school directors was more reason for non-involvement for respondents than style of literature chosen or dissatisfaction with performance level. Lower ratings were given to perceived abilities and qualifications of high school directors as problems, while the lowest ratings were given to lack of parental support. See Table 1 for mean scores.

Table 1

*Mean Scores Of Possible Hindrances To High School Choral Participation By The Total Population (N=90) And Non Participants*

Reason	Total	Non-participants	Female non-participants	Male non-participants
Too many performances	1.86	1.69	1.83	1.57
Social activities	2.51	2.56	2.50	2.60
Athletics	2.21	2.08	2.10	2.07
Other music activities	2.14	2.58	2.80	2.42
Other academic subjects	2.38	2.81	3.25	2.43
Unsupportive family	1.40	1.42	1.69	1.15
Unpopular activity	1.66	2.00	2.23	1.79
Unmotivated peers	2.38	2.50	2.38	2.61
Snobbery, personality conflicts	2.00	2.11	2.00	2.21
Director personality	2.00	2.16	2.75	2.08
Musical style, literature	1.69	1.68	1.69	1.67
Bored	1.76	1.68	1.75	1.61
Frustrated	1.58	1.72	1.91	1.92
Performance dissatisfaction	1.90	2.04	2.00	2.07
Ineffective director	1.85	2.16	2.25	2.07
Failed audition	1.49	1.68	1.58	1.77
Stage fright	1.63	1.96	1.91	2.00
Couldn't read music	1.55	1.85	1.83	1.85
Couldn't contribute	1.66	1.96	2.23	1.69
Burnout	1.63	1.68	1.58	1.77

Half of the non-participants reported that parental support was never a problem, but 25% reported that it was a factor that would cause them to consider not being involved in the high

school choral program. Almost half of the non-participants reported that they were not involved because they thought their voice might not be

good enough, could not read music, or had stage fright.

Of the non-participants, males were much more likely not to have considered choral involvement (56%) than females (8%). Though male and female respondents reported no differences in their involvement with social and athletic activities, female non-participants rated conflicts with other musical activities and other academic subjects more highly than male non-participants. Female non-participants rated personality problems with the director greater ( $M$  2.75) than did males ( $M$  2.08). Females were also more likely to report that they felt unable to contribute to the group ( $M$  2.23) than males ( $M$  1.69).

Basses were much more likely never to have signed up for a choral ensemble than sopranos, altos, and tenors. Basses were also much more likely not to have shown an early interest in singing or to have considered high school chorus. There was a higher level of both sporadic participation and non-participation among altos (31%) and basses (30%) than among sopranos (21%) and tenors (24%).

Music majors were more likely not to have participated in high school choir (25%) than non-music majors (15%). A larger percentage of non-music majors reported that they were always interested in singing (90%) than music majors (75%). More music majors remembered a specific time of becoming interested in singing (35%) than non-music majors (23%). Though no differences were found in schedule problems with other music activities, athletics, or too many performances, non-music majors reported more difficulty with scheduling due to social activities and other academic class conflicts.

Though not rated as a great difficulty by any sub-groups, problems with auditions were rated more of a problem for non-music majors ( $M$  1.60) than music majors ( $M$  1.10). Similarly, not being able to read music was perceived as more of a problem for non-music majors ( $M$  1.60) than music majors ( $M$  1.20).

## DISCUSSION

Although overall patterns of potential problems that could limit choir participation were very similar among all subgroups in this study, several differences were apparent. While most of these collegiate singers participated in high school choral ensembles, many were not involved at all, and others dropped out. Non-participants rated some specific scheduling problems (see Table 1) as more likely to limit their involvement than musical or personality issues. Several

respondents who never considered high school choir nonetheless stated that they had always been interested in singing, raising the obvious question of why singing in a choir was never a consideration. The higher percentage of senior collegiate choral members who did not participate in high school choir may suggest that adults gradually experiment with new musical experiences over time.

In light of Castelli's (1986) findings, perhaps the fact that 56% of male non-participants never considered enrolling in high school choir should not be surprising. Further examination of the data indicated that 100% of the respondents who were not always interested in singing were basses, a factor that, as Castelli suggests, might be linked to perceived inability at the time of the voice change. Because basses and altos rated their inability to contribute more strongly than the higher voice types, it is possible that those persons in this study with lower voices might have experienced a greater mental obstacle to joining a choral ensemble.

Non-participants rated musical conflicts higher than did participants, which may indicate that they chose band or orchestra over choir. Frakes (1984) found that most students drop out of school music activities during junior high school, and that there was a larger dropout rate in choral music than in instrumental music. Possible explanations for that finding might include the financial investment required for purchasing an instrument, or young adolescents, particularly boys, experiencing vocal insecurity due to the maturation process. Possible differences between instrumental and choral dropout rates and the reasons that may surround them need to be researched.

Although most students in this study reported that the type of literature sung in high school was not a detriment to their involvement, several non-music majors reported literature and style as issues more than music majors. Stebbins (1992) suggested that many barbershop singers would not have been attracted to the repertoire that many high school, collegiate, and civic choruses perform. Expanding future investigations to include adult groups that perform various types of literature and singing styles, such as barbershop and gospel, might yield insights into diverse tastes and background experiences.

The purpose of the study was to examine possible reasons why adults who exhibit musical interest by their membership in a collegiate chorus did not sing in high school choir. However, because this investigation was a pilot study conducted in one regional university, results of this research should not be generalized to other music ensembles or different geographical contexts.

It is recommended that further research be conducted in order to examine among adults in diverse choral settings their early interests, perceptions, and attitudes with respect to choral singing, including exploration of possible differences associated with gender. Such investigations have the potential to assist directors of non-adult choral ensembles with their recruitment and retention efforts.

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