

Popularity of Arts and Athletics

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It was a four-hour bus ride to McCook for the game. When we got there, we were greeted with an imposing stadium. A huge inflatable tunnel-helmet marked the entrance for the home team, with fog machines placed at the base. A professional-looking barbecue pit was already working on something that smelled of mesquite spices and hickory smoke (I imagined ribs and brisket). During warm-ups, a state-of-the-art sound system flooded the stadium with crystal-clear rock goodness. When the game started, a cannon would fire whenever they scored (which was far too often), startling the crowd. It became very apparent that their school devoted a great deal of interest and resources to their football program. The facility was great, the turnout was enormous, and they played like nothing we'd faced or would face all season.

We headed into the locker room for halftime as their marching band took the field. An Aurora band member (Anonymous 1, personal communication, December 3, 2007) recounted the show:

When I saw the really nice field, the huge number of fans, and the giant inflatable helmet, I knew that this school was really into football. After seeing this, I was excited to see their band at half time. I guess I figured that if the school had enough money to provide fireworks for every home game, they would have a pretty good band. It was really disappointing to see how their band really looked. Their uniforms were old and didn't fit, they were small in numbers, and their field show was... well... bad. This was an instance in which athletics seemed to completely take top priority over music.

Although the Aurora High School administration is not so polarized, this attitude

is reflected in our own school as well. I have played football every year possible here at Aurora Public Schools, have participated in wrestling and track in the past, and continue to lift weights in the weight room. Also, I joined the band while in elementary school, and have participated in numerous small groups and honor bands. I have always felt a difference in how the two are viewed and treated. Athletics receive more press, more fan turnout, and more resources than other activities. Those involved in athletics are generally more "popular" than those who are not. I believe that the prevalent attitude in Aurora Public Schools is that athletic organizations are intrinsically more beneficial than artistic activities, and that they hold a more important position in the life of the student and the community.

I, on the other hand, do not believe that any activity is better than another. Each one of us is different in that we have different goals, different interests, and different abilities. These differences are largely beyond our control, dependent on our genetics, our upbringing, and the individuality that each mind possesses. Not all are born with the body of a linebacker, or the voice of a tenor, or the lips of a flutist. Each of us is suited to different activities, and when those abilities meet our interests, great things happen. The mindset that arts are a secondary fallback for those who cannot succeed at sports is arrogant and insensitive, yet, I believe, very common.

First, I must define what exactly I mean by "arts" and "athletics." I use the term "arts" in a broad sense, incorporating a diverse range of activities. Musical arts include choir, band, and many various smaller band groups, including marching band, pep band, jazz band, pit orchestra, and numerous small groups and soloists that perform for competition. Visual arts are conducted in art classes through many medium, both 2 and 3-

D, on canvas and in sculpture. Theatrical performance arts include show choir groups such as Rhapsody and WNG, acting performances such as one act, forensics, or speech and school musicals, and other related performances. Written arts are generally creative writings, including poetry, essays, short stories and similar writings, written for expressive purposes. While many of these activities exist at Aurora, the two most well-known arts programs are choir and band.

The term "athletics" is fairly easy to define. Athletics are competitive institutions in which the physical skill and ability of the participant are implemented through physical exertion within the confines of rules to impose your will on a competitor and to accomplish the objective of the competition. Athletics includes all physical sports and competitions. When defining sports, however, the line becomes somewhat less clear. All sports meet all the traits of athletics, but in sports, the objective of the competition is to score points, and the player or team with the most points wins. Some sports, such as bowling and golf, are considered by some to be "leisure activities," due to the relaxed atmospheres they are played in, and the lack of pure physical power it takes to play them. However, under the definition stated above, these activities are sports. On the other hand, track and field events and cross country, while they definitely qualify as athletics, are not true sports, as there are no points in the individual competitions themselves.

A recent survey of Aurora High School seniors (November 13, 2007) indicated that a larger number of high schoolers are involved in athletics than are involved in artistic organizations. Eighty-one students at Aurora High School participated in the survey. Out of those 81, 43 percent were involved only in athletics, twenty percent were involved only in arts, 23 percent participated in both, and fourteen percent participated in

neither. Eleven out of nineteen students who were involved in arts and athletics stated that they viewed their athletics as their primary focus, with their arts as a secondary interest. While 66 percent were involved in athletics, only 43 percent were in arts. This means that, statistically, the average student at Aurora High School is involved in at least one athletic organization, and either is not involved in any kind of artistic activity, or is, but places a relatively small amount of importance on it.

In the 2007 Homecoming King and Queen election, a very accurate indicator of popularity, there were four candidates for each position. Of the eight candidates, six were involved in athletics; only two were involved in arts. The two that were elected as Homecoming King and Queen were both varsity athletes, but neither were involved in any kind of art.

In my own personal experience, some people, when speaking the word "band," sound as if they are spitting, or that they have a bad taste in their mouth. Others mockingly ask, "How's *band* going for ya?" No such disrespect is given when I am asked about football. As stated by a former band member (Anonymous 2, personal communication, December 10, 2007), regarding one reason why he discontinued band, "There was the way my fellow football players would laugh when I said I had some specific band-related event to attend." Senior Michaela Ziola (personal communication, December 12, 2007) stated, "I think a lot of the disrespect comes from the student body." Senior Anna Cepek (personal communication, December 13, 2007) similarly stated, "I think that the band doesn't get the respect it deserves. In high school there's always going to be the 'cool' and the 'uncool' thing to do, and unfortunately band is one of those seemingly natural [sic] 'uncool' things..." This is another example that illustrates the

attitude of many Aurora high school students.

I have always felt this situation was the case, and my research as well as my experience has shown me sufficiently that it is so. The question that presents itself is, why? What causes this frame of mind, and the difference in participation? If the answer is that less students at Aurora are truly gifted in arts, then the present situation would be appropriate. However, this may not be the case. According to Mr. Dan Sodomka, Director of the Aurora High School Band (personal communication, December 5, 2007), Aurora actually turns out musicians with more talent than other schools with more students.

Not to be conceited or anything else, but I think Aurora turns out more than other schools. Examples could be this; over the last six years I've been here, we've had representatives in the All-State Band and Orchestra every year. We've had two three-year All-State Band members, and there's potential to have that go on even next year. We've had a couple that made it two years in a row. Schools like Grand Island Senior High, which has about 100 more [sic] than us, didn't have anybody make the All-State Band. Now, I don't know if that's because they don't stress it as much as we do, but that speaks volumes to me... a school like Grand Island Senior High can have nobody make it, but yet Aurora, twenty miles down the road, where we don't have students that have the opportunity for private lessons and that kind of thing, we're still getting people into these select honor bands. And that's a true testament to the people we're putting out.

Funding cannot be the answer, either. Unlike McCook, Aurora's administration does not stifle band by cutting the funding and giving it to football. As said by senior Andy Hohweiler (personal communication, November 13, 2007), "Most schools have to

choose if they want to be the best at one thing (McCook) or be average at many things (Aurora). They just don't have the money or people to be the best at everything" (personal communication, November 13, 2007). According to the Aurora Public Schools Budget (Aurora Public Schools, 2007), less than five percent of Aurora Public Schools' \$12,426,000 budget is given to activities. This comes to less than \$621,305 for both arts and athletics. Band is not lacking in funding. The brand-new band room is furnished with a flat-screen plasma TV and a surround-sound audio system. In the past few years, the band program has greatly benefited from the addition of a trailer, which is used to haul large instruments and other hardware that does not fit on the busses when on the road.

One very obvious and very common answer to this question is time conflicts. When asked why he discontinued band, senior Evin Lackore (personal communication, December 9, 2007) places some blame on schedule conflicts.

It came down to my sophomore [sic] year and I had one class period left to fill. I didn't have weight training and I didn't have band and only one could stay. Since marching band wasn't my favorite and I love football, I needed to take weights, so that's what I did.

Many people, myself included, have found it difficult to balance marching band and football. Sacrifices are made on both sides, and sometimes, neither the coach nor the band director are completely happy. For some students, it is simply too much of a hassle. However, Cepek has managed to balance both all through high school. She has to miss some basketball practice to practice for the pit band, and she misses much of pep band to play in the basketball games:

Sometimes it's tough and I have to miss about half of both practices that conflict and I always feel bad about both of them. It also really sucks though [sic] when practices are conflicting or back to back or else very close time wise [sic] and I don't get to eat supper until 8 or 9. (2007)

Another possible reason is the kind of role model our nation presents in the media.

Sodomka commented:

I will also say it seems in today's society, where we're seeing baseball players make twenty-three million dollars a year, eight hundred thousand dollars per bat, basketball players making millions of dollars for each free-throw they shoot, and for football players that are making all kinds of money... you know, Nebraska just firing a coach that makes three million dollars for being fired, and the President of the United States makes, what, four hundred or five hundred thousand dollars a year... we are, as a society, putting a lot of emphasis on sports and athletic events. (2007)

On the other hand, there are very few role models for kids to follow in the vein of arts, except for rappers and rock stars. This is largely because athletics are widely televised and advertised in a world that is increasingly media-centered. Most arts cannot be watched on TV in your living room. This unbalance gives athletics much more coverage and attention, resulting in the results seen in the survey. One student who discontinued high school band agreed. "I would assume that the majority of people would share my viewpoint [that athletics are inherently more beneficial than arts] on this topic because of the way society tends to focus on athletics before arts. This is probably an accurate indicator of what most people value" (Anonymous 2, 2007).

Another probable explanation for this attitude is the image associated with members of each side. Consider the image associated with choir members; silky silver robes and maroon collars. Band members are often seen wearing uncomfortable white and red wool uniforms. What about athletes? Basketball players wear gym shorts, jerseys, sneakers, and sweat bands. Football players wear shoulder pads, helmets, and cleats. At least as far as guys go, there is a certain masculinity to shoulder pads and a helmet. Choir robes do not have the same effect; perhaps that is part of the reason that the ratio of girls to boys in choir is approximately two to one. A similar unbalance exists in band. To illustrate the concept, imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger in football pads. Now, imagine him in a band uniform. One is harder to do than the other, because one has a sense of masculinity tied to it, while the other has almost the opposite effect. This difference is made more profound in the middle and high school years, when many male teens are trying to adapt to changes they are going through, identify themselves as an individual, and even impress a girl (of course, many girls are attracted to musicians, but few are aware of this; most guys assume that girls fall for bulging biceps rather than a sweet voice).

As time progresses and students mature, though, many come to appreciate arts as they should. This is made evident by a poll on the American Music Conference website. According to the poll, ninety-five percent of Americans feel that music education is essential in the development of the child.

Eighty percent of respondents agreed that making music makes participants smarter. This finding comes on the heels of a decade of scientific research linking active participation in music with improved mental capacity in young children,

students and the elderly. The impact of such news is also seen in the survey's finding that seventy-eight percent of Americans feel learning a musical instrument helps students perform better in other subjects, and that eighty-eight percent believe participation in music helps teach children discipline. Ninety-six percent believe participation in a school band is a good way for children to develop teamwork skills, and seventy-one percent believe that teenagers who play an instrument are less likely to have disciplinary problems (Salvestrini, 2003, para. 1, 3).

This is also supported by the attendance at the latest Christmas band and choir concert. At the concert, the theatre was almost completely filled, but the audience was almost completely composed of adults, the parents and grandparents of students performing on stage. At every basketball game, while there are still many adults in attendance, there is also an entire seating section devoted solely to students who came only to watch; the Dog Pound. It seems as if there is some priority shift as one ages.

The next question is whether or not this trend can be reversed. Perceptions, opinions, and image associations are usually learned as a child and become cemented into the brain. As stated by Cepek, "I sometimes tend to think that high school is usually a hopeless cause for changing anything because most people at this stage in life follow the crowd because they just want to be excepted [sic]" (2007). Once a hierarchy of activities is set, it is very difficult to change it. Ziola commented that "...the fine art programs don't quite seem to make it to the top of the list compared to athletics, even when we do earn superiors" (2007). Likewise, Cepek stated, "In high school there's always going to be the 'cool' and the 'uncool' [sic] thing to do, and unfortunately band is one of those

seemingly natural ‘uncool’ [sic] things and I don't think it's ever going to change” (2007).

However, I do think that steps can be made. The first step should be education. Studies show that music education can increase math, reading, history, geography, English, biology, chemistry, social, and teamwork skills, develop discipline, and increase emotional health (Washington Music Educators Association [WMEA], 2007, para. 1-23). Ziola has benefited from her participation in band. “I have gained many traits that will benefit me down the road; perseverance [sic], hard-working, determination, goal oriented [sic], able to work in teams, successful, and happiness [sic]” (2007). The benefits of arts in education also go beyond the individual:

The schools that produced the highest academic achievement in the United States today are spending 20% to 30% of the day on the arts, with special emphasis on music...high school music students have been shown to hold higher grade point averages (GPA) than non-musicians in the same school” (WMEA, 2007, para. 5, 9).

If you suspect that arts do not help you to excel, but that those who have already excelled turn to arts, then consider this finding by the WMEA: “Music training helps under-achievers. Students lagging behind in scholastic performance caught up to their fellow students in reading and surpassed their classmates in math by 22% when given music instruction over seven months” (2007, para.16). Perhaps if students were aware of the benefits of participation in arts, they would feel more inclined to join band, or take a drawing class, or try out for one act.

The student body needs to know that arts aren't necessarily easier than athletics. One former band student believes that athletics are more important and beneficial than

arts. When asked why, the response was, “while both have some value, there are several aspects of athletics that arts cannot compete with... With team sports, the ability to work as a team (especially in intense situations) is one of the most important compents [sic]...”

(Anonymous 2, 2007). Sodomka believes that

...the people that aren't involved with music or any kind of fine art...they're gonna [sic] have more of a negative connotation towards those things because they don't realize the amount of effort that actually goes into it... they have no idea what people who are involved in the arts do to make sure we succeed plus keep on top of their regular class work [sic], their work schedule, their other activities they might belong in... (2007)

Students need to know that a trumpet is not a kazoo, that choir is more than singing to the radio, and that drawing is more than a pen and a napkin. It only looks easy when hours of work and practice have been invested.

The student body should also be informed of upcoming concerts, plays, and art exhibitions. Information could be placed in the daily schedule, or announced over the intercom. Or, a student organization, such as StuCo or NHS, could produce posters to advertise such events. Increased awareness would logically increase attendance at such events.

All of this may just be a losing war, however. Perhaps the best time to change this opinion towards arts is during childhood, while the individual is most impressionable. Parents need to encourage their children to be well-rounded; children need to have a variety of experiences so they can find what suits them best, be it athletics, arts, or whatever else. Perhaps after little Johnny comes in from throwing the pigskin around

with Dad, Mom can sit him down at the table and paint a picture with him.

Really, the attitude that athletics have more merit than arts not only hurts the individual, who might want to sing but is afraid of a judgmental glance from his peers, but the society as a whole, which might be losing talented musicians, actors, and artists who simply never realized their talent. We need to be free to use the gifts we have, and to explore our interests, without having to worry about someone else's idea of "cool." Sometimes, you have to be strong *not* to be a wrestler. Sometimes, it takes more courage to join the band than it does to join the football team.

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