

## In this issue...

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## Get Smart: Cocurricular Activities and Academics

By Dr. Bryan Shelly

"If it's not on the test, it's not important." How often have we endured some version of this statement? Over the past 30 years Americans have become increasingly obsessed with standardized tests that claim to measure student progress on "basic" subjects like math and English. Too often the pressures to meet mandated performance goals have caused schools to sacrifice any activity that did not directly teach to the test. Scholarly evidence shows that this strategy is misguided, at least with regards to cocurricular activities. The three studies highlighted in this article are among the most rigorous of at least 25 studies on the link between cocurricular participation and academic performance. Almost every one of the 25 finds that such participation boosts a student's grades, standardized test scores, chances of going to college, and numerous other measures of academic achievement.

### Activity Participation Has Positive Impact

Marsh and Kleitman (2002) analyzed a Department of Education survey measuring the social behavior of 12,084 students when they were in eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades and two years after graduation. With such a large data set, social scientists can use statistical techniques to control for other factors and examine the independent effect of the critical variable on an outcome. In this case, Marsh and Kleitman (and the other researchers described in this article) used statistics to test whether participation in cocurricular activities influences academic outcomes even when the effects of a student's ability, school, personal and family characteristics, and numerous other factors are controlled. In results presented in the *Harvard Educational Review*, they find that joining more cocurricular activities and spending more time participating in them is associated with higher grades, more difficult courses selected, more

time spent on homework, more colleges applied to, a higher likelihood of starting and finishing college, and a higher final degree earned, even when other factors are controlled. Each additional hour per week spent on cocurricular activities leads to a .045 increase in GPA, 13 more minutes spent on homework per night, and .155 more university applications. These effects are greater than those of structured out-of-school activities like youth groups and community service organizations and influence a significantly larger range of academic outcomes.

In a similar study, Eccles and Barber (1999) tracked more than 1,800 Michigan students for 10 years and found that involvement in performing groups like drama club, academic organizations like debate club, and school involvement activities like pep club and student council all have a positive effect on a student's GPA and likelihood that he or she will attend college full-time.

Guest and Schneider (2003) analyze data from the University of Chicago's Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Development, which surveyed 6,453 students in sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades over five years. Even with controls in place, participants in all types of cocurricular activities had significantly higher GPAs and more ambitious college plans. Interestingly, participation in non-athletic activities is associated with higher grades in all schools, but participation in sports is associated with higher grades only in schools serving low-income students. This author strongly doubts that students in more affluent schools do not receive academic benefits from interscholastic sports, and other studies argue that sports do have a positive effect on grades, test scores, and the like (for example, see Broh 2002). Even in the No Child Left Behind era, society rightly values the lessons sports teach, but non-athletic cocurricular activities are far more likely to be labeled as unnecessary and able to be sacrificed in pursuit of the all-mighty Adequate Yearly Progress.

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Guest and Schneider's results suggest that such cutbacks are harmful. Participation in student council, musical and arts programs, language clubs, and similar activities is at least as important as sports participation.

The only finding from these three studies that will trouble cocurricular supporters is the authors' conclusion that too few students are participating. Marsh and Kleitman warn that the average tenth grader spends less than one hour a week participating in cocurricular activities, an amount of time that is too short to yield benefits. Sixty-nine percent of Eccles and Barber's subjects were involved in some form of organized activity, but many of them were members in name only and did not participate enough to reap all of the positive effects of involvement. They also report that adolescents spend only 60 percent of their waking hours in school, at work, or doing chores and homework, meaning that some form of leisure activity will fill up the remaining 40 percent. As future issues of *The Advocate* will report, without exception scholarship finds that young people are far more likely to engage in risky and anti-social behavior when they are not engaged in structured activity. The challenge for anyone who

recognizes the importance of cocurricular activities is to use the extensive available research to spark a national campaign to increase opportunities for meaningful cocurricular participation. This article would not appear in this forum if this author did not believe that the Alliance has the potential to lead this movement.

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### Further Reading

- Broh, Beckett A. 2002. "Linking Extracurricular Programming to Academic Achievement: Who Benefits and Why?" *Sociology of Education* 75 (1):69-95.
- Guest, Andrew, and Barbara Schneider. 2003. "Adolescents' Extracurricular Participation in Context: The Mediating Effects of Schools, Communities, and Identity." *Sociology of Education* 76 (2):89-109.
- Marsh, Herbert W., and Sabina Kleitman. 2002. "Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear." *Harvard Educational Review* 72 (4):464-511.

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