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Leaders of the Pack: Responsibilities and Experiences of Collegiate Drum Majors

Wesley D. Brewer
Roosevelt University

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Abstract

This study explored the responsibilities and experiences of three collegiate drum majors as student leaders of a marching band at a major university. Marching band continues to be a prevalent and highly visible aspect of music education in the United States. The preparation and utilization of student leaders in music remains common, but little research examining the actual experiences of student leaders in music has been conducted. As we continue to recruit student leaders for these positions, it may be of use to understand, from the student leader perspective, the challenges and perceived responsibilities associated with these positions. The participants in this study identified three distinct responsibilities of a drum major: (a) drum major as director's musical advocate; (b) drum major as director's political advocate; and (c) bridging the gap between students and staff. Additionally, the participants identified two concerns related to their experiences as student leaders in comparison to their band member peers: (a) social negotiations; and (b) defining an identity.

Marching band, and its place in music education, has been the subject of much discussion during the last fifty years (Benkert, 2007; Isch, 1965; Kastens, 1981; Kursar, et al., 1990; Mason, et al., 1985; Miller, 1994; Peitersen, 1956; Rockefeller, 1982; Schmidt, 1961; Stith, 1956). Garrison (1986) contended that the "American public views the marching band as education's most popular and essential music performance organization." He stated that for many "laymen and educational administrators" the marching band is the only form of contact with school music curricula and that, "consequently, many people accept the marching band as the primary, if not the only, factor in assessing the quality and value of entire music departments and programs" (p. 49).

Researchers have studied various aspects of the marching band activity. Rogers (1982, 1985) investigated the differing attitudes of directors, band members, parents and principals toward marching band contests and found that marching bands contributed positively to self-discipline, pride, and school public relations for those involved. More recently, Townsend (2004) conducted research examining recruitment and retention in college marching bands, noting the importance of social interaction among members, as well as the director's leadership abilities as key elements of successful recruiting and retention. Rickels (2009) examined nonperformance variables in high school marching band festivals, such as "funding levels, pedagogical decisions about the structure of the band program, and demographics of the teachers, staff, and students in participating schools" as predictors of competitive success and found that nonperformance variables accounted for a high percentage of variance in the festival scores (p. iii).

Leadership is a crucial component in any successful music ensemble, including marching bands, and it takes on many shapes and forms. Previous studies have focused on the leadership qualities of ensemble directors (Goodstein, 1987), the effects of leadership styles and ability on band festival ratings (Davison, 2007), the effects of involving students in musical decision making (Petters, 1976), and the sharing of best practices in training student leaders (Palen, 1997). The complexity of preparing students for leadership in musical organizations has stimulated the growth of numerous leadership camps and seminars, as well as texts that discuss various aspects of developing student leadership (e.g. Lang, 2007; Lautzenheiser, 2004, 2006; Parks, 1984). While seemingly thousands of high school and college students continue to participate in musical organizations as student leaders, there exists a paucity of research on the actual experiences of student leaders in music, particularly as told from their own perspectives.

In this study, I seek to understand the leadership responsibilities and experiences of three drum majors of a university marching band from their own perspectives. By engaging in dialogue with the participants about their experiences as drum majors, I aim to understand how the participants make sense of and how they construct the world around them (Glesne, 2006). As marching band continues to be a highly visible part of the music curriculum in high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the United States, we should seek to understand better the triumphs, difficulties, and lessons learned by the students in our marching bands, specifically those students placed in leadership positions.

Method

Participants and Researcher Role

The participants in this study were three drum majors from a major university marching band: Anthony, Sonya, and Nicole. At the time of the study, Anthony, a piccolo player, was 22 years old and a fourth-year member of the marching band. Sonya, a horn player, was a 20-year-old and in her third year as a member of the marching band. Nicole, a clarinet player, was 20 years old and a second-year member of the marching band. All three participants attended high school in the same state as the university and each participant was in his or her first year of service as drum major with the university marching band. Sonya and Nicole had previous drum major experience at the high school level, but Anthony did not. Of the three, Sonya was the only participant pursuing any formal music studies at the university level as she worked toward a double major in music education and science. The marching band director selected the three participants for their drum major positions through an audition process and he purposely selected students of staggered ages and years of membership to maintain continuity in the flow of future leadership.

I was initially introduced to the participants in my capacity as a graduate teaching assistant for the university marching band program. I entered graduate school after six years of working as a director for high school and middle school bands, including the direction of a competitive high school marching band. Though I had no personal experience as a drum major, in my position as a director I auditioned, selected, and trained drum majors each year and these experiences helped me to connect with the participants. As a member of the university marching band staff, I assisted with both the visual and musical aspects of rehearsals, working with the director, other staff, and student leaders to prepare performances. At the beginning of the study, I had worked with the participants for approximately two months, and by the conclusion of the study, I had worked with them for a total of five months.

Data Collection and Research Questions

Data for this study were gathered through observations, a series of short on-field interviews, and longer individual interviews. The marching band practice field served as the initial observation site for the study. Early in the semester, I observed the participants and made "time on task" charts, noting how the drum majors spent their time during rehearsal. A sample time on task

chart is included in Appendix A. These charts helped me gain insight into the drum majors' leadership responsibilities such as setting up equipment, synchronizing conducting gestures through practice, consulting with director and staff members about musical and visual aspects of the performance, and answering questions from band members. Reviewing these charts allowed me to shape the context and scope of questions for the in-depth interviews. In subsequent observations, I continued to make time on task charts and then supplemented these observations with short participant interviews during rehearsal breaks jotting basic field notes in my notebook. Additionally, while I attended all home football games as a staff member, I dedicated my time to specifically observing the participants during one home football game performance to acquire a greater understanding of the multiple roles they fulfilled. The main purpose of the initial data collection phase was to formulate context and questions for the in-depth interviews.

I carefully monitored my place on the participant-observer continuum (Spradley, 1980; Wolcott, Le Compte, Milroy, & Preissle, 1992) during the observation and short interview data collection phase in an effort to balance my paid staff duties with my research agenda. Unable to devote an entire rehearsal to pure observation and unwilling to talk with the drum majors for long periods of time during rehearsal, I carried a small notebook with me throughout rehearsals and tried to negotiate a fair balance between my research and teaching duties.

   The results of these observations and short interviews allowed me to formulate two overarching research questions for the study:

1.   What are the leadership responsibilities of the participants?
2.   How do the participants experience their role as a student leader in music?

Using these research questions, field notes, and short interview responses as guides, I formulated more extensive interview questions for each drum major. I interviewed the three drum majors in my office on the university campus; these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Establishing Trustworthiness

According to Glesne, "trustworthiness or research validity is . . . an issue that should be thought about during research design as well as in the midst of data collection" (2006, p. 37). In this study, I implemented several verification procedures outlined by Creswell (1998). I used peer review (Creswell, 1998) to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Receiving feedback from peers conducting similar studies during the time of data collection helped narrow the scope of the study to manageable dimensions and make the interview questions neutral. Additionally, I implemented a member check (Creswell, 1998) by including the three drum majors in the process of constructing the latter part of the study.   I provided each participant with a transcript of his or her interview and gave each multiple opportunities, both in person and through e-mail communication, to provide additions, corrections, or clarifications. Though no new information was gleaned from this process, opening the door to this possibility helped to strengthen the

study. Another important aspect of qualitative research is clarification of bias (Creswell, 1998), which requires "reflection upon your own subjectivity and how you will use and monitor it in your research" (Glesne, 2006). I began the study with pre-conceived notions about drum majors, some of them rooted in my background as a high school band director who has auditioned and prepared drum majors. Other personal notions about the participants were rooted in prior interactions with the participants and the university marching band during the tenure of my staff position. As I conducted the study, I worded interview questions to remain as neutral as possible; peer review helped in this process. In observations, I worked toward remaining neutral and non-judgmental. When questions or issues needing clarification arose, I enlisted the help of the participants and asked them for additional information. Although a qualitative researcher cannot fully remove his or her personal involvement from the research process, I strove to remain reflexive during the study through examination of what Schwandt (1997) described as "personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve[d] as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways . . . and for developing particular interpretations" (p. 136).

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (1998), the process of data analysis in qualitative research is not "off-the-shelf; rather it is custom-built, revised, and choreographed" (p. 142). My process of analyzing the data in this study paralleled closely what Creswell described as a "data analysis spiral." I began with the process of data management, organizing the various forms of collected data into appropriate electronic files. With the data management phase complete, I began to familiarize myself with the scope and content of the collected data by printing the relevant pages and reading through each piece, "trying to get a sense of the...whole before breaking it into parts" (Agar, 1980, p. 103). During this phase I penciled in keywords and short notes in the margins, making note of what I had "heard" or noticed in the data while striving to avoid becoming too absorbed in the details of each transcript. At the completion of this phase, with a new sense of "the whole," I returned to the data again and began to confirm my developing sense of recurrent themes. I made comparisons. I searched for details I had overlooked. I searched not only for similarities between cases, but also for negative cases (Glesne, 2006) in order to discover and account for multiple perspectives on the same emerging issues. As I moved into what Creswell (1998) called the "describing, classifying, and interpreting loop" (p. 144), I developed an initial series of codes while noting recurring ideas from the participants' experiences. Upon review and revision of these codes, I grouped the data into three general categories of participant responsibilities and experiences: (a) administrative, (b) musical, and (c) social. The identification and naming of these categories or "families" of data (Creswell, 1998) allowed me to devise a more organized system for coding the data, part of the "progressive process of sorting and defining . . . collected data that are applicable to [the] research process" (Glesne, 2006, p. 152). Moving into the final phase of the spiral, the "presentation" phase, I worked to carefully select interview excerpts that represented well the participants' voices and experiences. A list that outlines the coding structure can be found in Appendix B.

Findings: Themes and Meanings

Three themes regarding the leadership responsibilities of the participants emerged from the analysis: (a) drum major as director's musical advocate; (b) drum major as director's political advocate; and (c) bridging the gap between students and staff. Additionally, two areas of common concern related to the participants' experiences as drum majors emerged: (a) social negotiations, and (b) defining an identity. I organized the remainder of the report according to these categories.

Drum Major as Director's Musical Advocate

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" – The Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900) The three drum majors in this study functioned as vessels for the musical vision of the director. Although they physically conducted the band in performances and rehearsals, the director served as "the man behind the curtain," making musical decisions and interpretations. In this band, the director and staff were responsible for the interpretation of the music and the preparation of the ensemble. When the band rehearsed under the leadership of the drum majors, the drum majors seemed to simply guide the band through the music, re-emphasizing the musical instruction of the director and staff.

Anthony discussed the importance of paying close attention to the director's requests so he could repeat or emphasize instructions to band members:

> [It's important to make] sure that we always know what stage we're at over the course of the rehearsal, make sure that we're always listening to [the director], making sure we know exactly what he's working. A lot of times we'll get questions from people down on the field who weren't listening. We have to be on top of our game, in order for everyone else to be on top of their game. Even if the band isn't always watching us, we still have to listen to [the director] and we still need to know what's going on.

Nicole discussed this same topic as she described the duties she performs during rehearsal. Sectional rehearsals were run by various staff members and during this time the drum majors worked collaboratively to coordinate and refine their conducting gestures and circulated to different sectional rehearsals to hear how musical parts fit together:

> If the staff has a lot of time in sectionals we travel around and kind of listen to each section and hear the different parts. . . . I know what the melody sounds like, but a lot of the time it's the bass line you have to listen to. If I never hear the tubas, trombones, or baritones and they're way in the back of the field, I don't know what it's supposed to sound like or what I am supposed to listen for. I also try to find out if there's anything the staff members are emphasizing that I should re-emphasize.

Later in the interview, Nicole emphasized the logic behind leaving musical interpretation to the staff and director:

> N: I'm not a music major, so if you put me in charge of music it probably wouldn't sound as good.
>
> W: You don't feel equipped to make those decisions?
>
> N: Correct. And I don't really feel that I need to be. [The director] is being paid to make the music sound good and to organize a band. It's heard by so many people and if you put a student in charge of that, it just wouldn't sound as good.   It's our job, since [the director] is not conducting, to take what he says and put that into motion. He can say "crescendo," but people forget.   When we do this (makes gesture), then people [in the band] are like "Oh yeah, crescendo."

Drum Major as Director's Political Advocate

According to the participants, drum majors are under a direct obligation, spoken or unspoken, to publicly support the band director at all times. As an extension of the director's vision and leadership, the drum majors in this study felt a great deal of loyalty to the director. They supported the director's decisions, especially in front of other band members. Nicole described this as "one of the laws of drum majors":

> I was taught that the director is always right. If you start to undermine the director, the students think less of the director. They can hate me all they want, but if they still respect [the director], then they can pay attention to him. . . . If I disagree with [his opinion], I try to find his reasoning and make that my reasoning.

Sonya discussed supporting the director as she described smoothing out conflicts or dissention among the ranks of the band members. She felt it was her duty to support the director's decisions and inspire people to follow through:

> Whenever there are situations when you have people with conflicting feelings toward the way we're doing things, you have to be the one that inspires them to see past what they don't like and actually follow through with what they need to do. It's basically getting to know everybody well enough to where you could say, "Hey, we need to do this and even though you don't like it, it's going to be great in the end. You've just got to trust me." . . . Whatever the director says goes.

Bridging the Gap between Students and Staff

Drum majors occupy a special place in the marching band as peer leaders who continue to share many commonalities with the other band members. In this study, the drum majors, like most band members, were also undergraduate students. As a result, the drum majors were able to

develop and maintain a different rapport with band members than the director or staff members. Nicole talked about how student leadership can supplement the leadership of the director:

> When [the director] wants silence on the field, he can yell at the people all he wants, but sometimes when the teacher yells, it's not as effective as when another student yells. . . . If he wants something done but he can't do it himself, he sends out the three of us and we go do it.

Sonya discussed bridging the gap between students and staff, including the director, as she described her version of the power structure of the marching band and her place in it:

> Sometimes it's hard [for the members] to talk to the director directly during a rehearsal because the director is busy. So whenever we have questions about drill or anything, the next people we have to ask are the TAs [teaching assistants] and then the TAs talk to the director. . . . Referring back to that personal [rapport] that we have with the section leaders, sometimes [section leaders] feel more comfortable asking a drum major versus a TA. . . . Although kids sometimes relate to the TAs really well, sometimes it's easier for them to talk to somebody they know.

Social Negotiations

> "The conductor's stand is not a continent of power, but rather an island of solitude." - Riccardo Muti

The drum majors in this study operate in a system of complex social dynamics. On one hand they are typical young adults, striving to do well in school and enjoying their time in college. In another sense, however, their leadership positions demand a high level of responsibility that may be atypical of the undergraduate experience. In this study, the participants spoke of ways in which they negotiated seemingly complicated social interactions and felt required to make sophisticated decisions as they balanced their public role as a leader and a desire to be "just themselves."

Anthony discussed social decision making as he described an out-of-town band trip. Despite peer pressure, his obligations to the band influenced his decision to skip an outing to a local bar:

> There were a lot of people who wanted me to go with them [to the bar] and there were a couple of people who were upset that I didn't. But that's just a personal choice that I make, because regardless of whether kickoff is at 11AM or 7PM, I'm not comfortable that I could cause trouble for myself the next day if I get out of hand the night before.

Nicole and Sonya described this dynamic from a different perspective. All three participants discussed the "band parties" often held after football games. None of the drum majors described themselves as someone who would have normally attended these parties prior to assuming a

leadership position. Since assuming the responsibility of drum major, however, Sonya and Nicole felt obligated to attend these parties, despite their lack of personal interest in doing so. Sonya explained:

> For the past two years when I wasn't a drum major, I didn't really go to those parties because it just wasn't my cup of tea I guess. Since I became drum major though, I've always gone just to let people know that I'm human too, you know, and just to get out of the drum major role for a little bit. . . . I still carry on that leader sort of thing. You've got to be that role model in every aspect . . . in grades, in performances, in just the way you do things. I feel that if you are a leader, you've got to be a leader all the time. The eye is always on you.

Nicole discussed how attending the band parties had helped her develop rapport with members of the band:

> The previous drum majors came in and told me that I was required to at least show up at the parties. Because I don't drink alcohol, I never went to the parties. I have a fear of new people. I don't like close social interactions with people I don't know. Since I've become a drum major, I've actually gone to more parties now. [The previous drum majors] said, "This is when they see you as a person and not just as a drum major." . . . It is remarkable how many people will talk to me after [I go to the parties].

Sonya and Nicole also discussed how becoming a drum major impacted not only their social decisions, but also friendships with other band members. Sonya described a realization that her new position as drum major had strained the once close friendships she had with the section of the band she once performed in, the horn line:

> Before I was drum major it was always me hanging out with the horn line. We just always did everything together and hung out on trips and everything, but since I've been drum major, it's been me hanging out with the drum majors and staff focusing on getting my job done. When we went [out of town though], it was like, "Ok, who am I going to room with? I haven't spoken to anyone on the horn line in weeks." It was just really different. Usually I would be with the horn line, but they have their own little clique now. Although I'm still friends with them, it's not as big a friendship I guess.

Nicole discussed an even more extreme example of a strained relationship with another band member and friend who had unsuccessfully auditioned for the drum major position that the director awarded to Nicole:

> My big brother in the [band] fraternity also tried out for drum major. She didn't talk to me for a week and a half after I made it and she didn't. She really felt that as an upperclassman and a returning member, she should have been selected. Regardless of the fact that she was my big brother, who is supposed to be my best friend in the fraternity, she deserted me. I went up to hug her and she turned her back and walked away. Things are still not really great between us. She'll hug me now and she kind of got

over it, but there's still that edge. I get this feeling that if something goes wrong, or I make a huge mistake, she's kind of like, "Well good for you."

Defining an Identity

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed how they were just like everyone else in the band, but different. In striving to define an identity as student leaders, the participants discussed effective leadership based on earned respect rather than titles. They recognized that they had been given a unique position, but also yearned to be recognized as "one of the gang." They worked hard to maintain social ties to other members of the band and did not necessarily see themselves as "more important."

Anthony discussed this tension between being a peer and a leader during a conversation about why drum majors wear different uniforms than the rest of the band:

> I can understand the uniform is, in one way, a form of stature. You're in a different uniform so obviously you're different from everybody else. People understand that you have a different role. I don't see it as a more important role per se, but as a different role. . . . I'm no virtuoso magician, I mean musician (laughs). I'm just like everybody else. When I put on the uniform, I still feel like I'm [just like] everybody else, but it's a way to define what I do.

Nicole discussed her leadership role identity in light of the duties that she performs preparing for rehearsal and helping band members to execute marching drill correctly:

> [Becoming a drum major] is moving up in a sense because we have a greater responsibility . . . but it's also just a different role of a band member. I have my own instrument (shows hands). I have to make sure I'm ready. I have to make sure that I know the music. . . . But it's not really like an elite status or anything because if I tell someone to move over in their spot, that's just the same thing as a section leader saying that. It doesn't make me any more special. Some people will say, "I'll listen to a drum major more than a section leader," but that's really not the case. We're both just student leadership.

Discussion and Implications

While the experiences of the three participants in this study may be representative of the responsibilities or experiences of drum majors in other settings, the aim of qualitative research is not to create generalizable results, but to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through rigorous inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The experiences shared by the participants in this study illuminate, from a student leader perspective, some of the inherent challenges of being a student leader in music and the skills necessary to face these challenges.

In this study, the drum majors serve in a supporting role to the director of the band, both musically and politically. While musical skills may often be a primary criterion for selecting student leaders, these skills were not specifically addressed by the participants. Rather, a sense of loyalty to the director's musical and administrative decisions and a commitment to the position itself seemed to be more highly regarded.

The participants in this study hold a leadership position within the band, yet they do not hold any substantial decision-making power; instead, decision making is left to the director and staff. Taking this dynamic into account, it may be of importance to select leaders who can demonstrate the ability to work independently of the director, but also consistently demonstrate an understanding of the decisions made by the director and staff and possess the ability to communicate these decisions to band members. Additionally, the social and identity tensions associated with being a student leader, as expressed by the participants, demonstrate the need for leaders who have more than just strong musical skills. Because they may experience feelings of separation from the rest of the ensemble, student leaders may encounter unanticipated isolation, resulting in tensions with friends and other band members. In this regard, it is essential that directors select confident and stable leaders and prepare those leaders for the social challenges that student leadership positions can bring. By striving to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants in this study, we may better prepare and support other musicians who perform similar leadership functions and confront similar difficulties.

While this study explored the responsibilities and experiences of drum majors in a university marching band, it may be of value to further explore student leadership from other perspectives, including the perspectives of section leaders, directors, and band members. These paths of inquiry could also include both high school and university ensembles. Additionally, divergent definitions of student leadership roles and responsibilities within ensembles can cause communication issues; a study on student leadership from multiple perspectives within a single ensemble could produce interesting results.

Through continued research in any applicable methodologies, directors and student leaders alike may better understand the roles and experiences of student leaders in marching bands and other musical ensembles. By examining the responsibilities, experiences, and characteristics of successful student leaders and then sharing best practices, directors may better appoint students who are suited to the position. By better understanding the experiences of current student leaders in music, directors may better prepare new student leaders for the rewarding, but often difficult task of leading musical ensembles.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Sample Time on Task Chart

(see attachment)

Note. The information displayed in Appendix A is based on the observation of one marching band rehearsal, a two-hour block with additional time for set-up and tear-down of equipment.

Appendix B. Analysis and Coding Scheme

Administrative
AEQ – Equipment setup and takedown
APL – Planning with the other drum majors
AQU – Answering questions from the band, imparting information and knowledge
ADI – Taking instructions from the director (linked to AIB usually)
AIB – Giving instructions to the band (linked to ADI usually)
APL – Working as peer/leaders
AMV – Working as motivators
ATF – Taking feedback from band members
Musical/Marching
MCD – Conducting
MQC – Quality control of music and marching
MST – Communicating musical and/or marching style (linked to ADI)
MPR – Practice and preparation (subgroups I – Individually and G – in a group with other drum majors)
MPS – Diagnose and solve problems with music and marching
Social
SDM – Social interactions with other drum majors
SBM – Social interactions with other band members
SFR - Social interactions with friends (sometimes blurred with SBM/SDM)
SPL – Social interactions as a peer leader

> About the Author **-** Wesley D. Brewer is assistant professor of instrumental music education at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. He completed his doctoral studies in music education at Arizona State University (ASU) and has presented findings from his research at state, national, and international conferences. His current research emphasis is on role-identity development among preservice music educators. Prior to his arrival at Roosevelt, he served as a teaching assistant for the music education department at ASU and as an instructor for the ASU Concert Band and Sun Devil Marching Band. He previously taught high school and middle school in southern Arizona where his concert, marching, jazz, and percussion ensembles consistently received high ratings. Dr. Brewer also serves as an adjudicator, clinician, and guest conductor for numerous ensembles, and has given pedagogical presentations at music education conferences.