

**Understanding the Impact of Social and Leadership Factors  
on High School Marching Band Retention**

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**Abstract**

Social and leadership factors were investigated in this study, particularly exploring how those factors impact highschool marching band retention from the perspective of high school marching band members. A survey of seven items using Likert scales asked highschool marching band members about the different aspects under social and leadership factors and its effect on their high school marching band experience. The findings revealed social and leadership factors seem to significantly impact high school marching band retention according to high school marching band members. This significant impact is often extended to many different groups within the marching band. Implications and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* Retention, Social, Leadership, Marching Band

**Introduction**

For many years, high school marching bands have played an important role in students' lives and the surrounding community. From football games to parades, marching bands provide excitement and energy while captivating audiences through music and field formations.

Highschool marching bands, unlike concert bands, often require rigorous effort and time outside of school by students in order to perfect their craft. In order to achieve this perfection, effective leadership, from both students and the band director, is essential. At the same time, there are often numerous opportunities to meet new people and socialize with others. In fact, marching band can almost seem like a second home for some students considering the time spent, the friendships made, and the satisfaction obtained.

Every year, inevitably, a new batch of freshmen must replace the departing seniors for next year's marching band. Enrollment in marching band is critical for maintaining or perhaps increasing marching band size; retention of current members is equally important. However, greater emphasis on core academic subjects can undermine music retention rates. As a result, this study aims to understand how aspects of marching band, namely social and leadership factors, influence the retention of current highschool marching band members. The findings may help and guide directors in identifying the types of factors in the marching band that require greater attention to benefit students and stimulate improved retention.

### **Literature Review**

In order to have an adequate understanding of social and leadership factors with regards to highschool marching band retention, surrounding topics such as retention, social, and leadership concepts in highschool concert band and college marching band must be reviewed.

#### **Retention**

Student retention is a fundamental concept in many school-sponsored extracurricular activities. Retention is “retaining members from year to year within specific cohorts of students” (Heath, 2017, p.2). Whether it be an athletic sport or musical program, student retention may be able to provide valuable insight into a program’s worth as well as future growth. As such, researchers have investigated what affects retention in music programs.

#### **Concert Band Retention**

Concert band is a school-offered class in which students rehearse during the school day and is mainly focused on formal concert performances (Gibson, 2016). Researchers have primarily investigated concert band retention from two perspectives: band directors and band students.

#### ***Band Directors***

Hayes (2004) studied the reasons for eighth-grade students continuing to participate in band from the perspective of high school band teachers. Hayes employed a survey asking about different factors of retention including social, parental, and academic factors. He ultimately found that directors believe a variety of factors will help keep students in the band. Some of the factors believed to help in retention include social factors like having friends that participate in band, knowing the high school band director, and having a parent that participated in band

(Hayes, 2004). Humphries (2012) explored the different strategies band teachers used to improve retention. Through a forty question survey, Humphries asked teachers from two school districts, most of whom taught junior highschool students (Humphries, 2012). His findings, similar to that of Hayes, indicated a wide assortment of factors positively influencing retention such as increased student engagement and band director behavior. In particular, Humphries believes students should be considered, or perhaps involved, more when selecting the music repertoire to help improve retention.

The above findings suggest that, according to band directors, there is no particular factor or category of factors that wholly impacts retention. In other words, there is no hard and fast rule to completely change retention. Other research explores whether students feel the same way.

### ***Band Students***

Gibson (2016) examined eighth-graders' perceptions of band and retention factors. Using a mixed method approach involving both surveys and interviews, he studied both concert and marching band. The survey results revealed friends and band directors are both critical influencers on students continuing concert band in highschool. Additionally, friends, wanting to join another activity, and taking part in marching band competitions were identified as factors for marching band enrollment. Furthermore, findings from the interviews reinforced the idea that peers play a large role in whether students continue band in high school. Academic obligations and musical selection were also identified as common themes in the interviews when determining continued participation in high school bands (Gibson, 2016). Gibson's research agrees with other research on the notion of numerous aspects being taken into consideration when determining retention and enrollment in different band programs (Humphries, 2012)

(Hayes, 2004). Specifically, the three studies above seem to agree that the behavior of others (whether it be peers, director, or even parents) play substantial roles in band retention. Notably, social aspects are a prominent commonality for both concert band retention and marching band enrollment (Gibson, 2016).

### **College Marching Band Retention**

Although there appears to be little research present with respect to high school marching band, there has been considerable research exploring college marching bands. Heath (2017) studied the factors influencing retention in college marching bands, specifically those that make first year students want to come back for a second year. By asking them how influential each factor was in their decision to come back again through a survey of factors with a 5-point Likert type scale, he identified four main factors relating to retention: the demand on time, school and work related obligations, performance pleasure, and band-related monetary opportunities. His research also found social aspects were highly viewed as enjoyable by respondents (Heath, 2017). The findings seem to agree with prior research emphasizing the prominent role of various social aspects on retention (Gibson, 2016) (Hayes, 2004). This research also extends prior research regarding time commitments impacting retention to collegiate marching bands (Gibson, 2016).

### **Factors on Retention**

Social and leadership factors may play a role in the experience each member feels, and consequently, whether a member returns or not. Thus, it is important to understand the type of role social and leadership elements have had in collegiate and highschool marching bands. In this

study, social and leadership factors are those explicitly relating to the high school marching band experience.

### ***Social Factors***

Research appears to demonstrate band members experience socially positive outcomes in marching band. One study looked at high school freshmen and how they were able to cope with the transition process from middle to high school through participation in marching band. The study, through multiple interviews with five freshmen, found common themes of friendship and social belonging (Dandurand, 2018). In support of Dandurand's findings, Carver (2019) primarily found social benefits associated with highschool marching bands such as a very friendly environment and strong relationships. However, there were some concerns over maneuvering through the large amounts of social groups existing within the marching band, which may be a result of the blend of grades participating within the ensemble (Carver, 2019). For collegiate marching band, a portion of the findings in one mixed method study suggests that members are attracted to the social aspects of marching band (Matthews, 2017). Another study, focused on student participation in college marching bands, seems to corroborate those results as it found social aspects to be greatly liked by students in collegiate marching bands (Alosi, 2012). On the contrary, leaders within marching bands may not always encounter positive social outcomes. Utilizing interviews and observations of three drum majors (students who manage and lead the entire marching band) at a university, the study desired to understand the role of a student leader from their own view (Brewer, 2009). It found common themes of identity as well as social tensions with other members of the band (such as changed relationships and social behaviors) because of their elevated position as a leader (Brewer, 2009).

### ***Leadership Factors***

Social and leadership elements are distinct, while also interrelated, parts in the marching band. One study investigated topics of bullying and leadership by interviewing non-student leaders and student leaders from two high school marching bands (Melton, 2012). It found that some students felt some form of belonging even though they were bullied to an extent. Moreover, student leaders improperly doing their job, student leaders bullying, and student leaders facing pressures such as being in the limelight or dealing with students who refuse to listen were frequent areas of concern that all the interviewees seemed to feel (Melton, 2012). On one hand, Melton's research is consistent with research regarding social concerns present in highschool marching bands (Carver, 2019). On the other hand, Melton's study agrees with the other research describing the positive social outcomes of marching band (so much so that it is able to outweigh instances of bullying) (Carver, 2019) (Dandurand, 2018). Furthermore, Melton's research supports notions of student leaders facing pressures or hardships because of their roles (Brewer, 2009).

Member retention may also be affected by the way in which leaders actually lead. One research study, looked into the leadership practices and effectiveness of student leaders within college marching bands. Through other student evaluations of student leaders, their study highlighted the most effective leadership practice for student leaders to be "Model the Way" (Warfield, 2013). This is to be expected as members closely watch and mimic what they see their



leaders doing (Warfield, 2013). Both studies above illustrate that leadership positions for young students can have strong impacts on themselves and/or others.

Student leaders can help reach certain goals set for the ensemble by the band directors (Warfield, 2013). As the central leader, the band director can be vital for students' success and thus, retention (Heath, 2017). A study found directors in concert bands utilizing facilitative leadership, a type of leadership that empowers others to act more independently, lead concert ensembles with better scores in their performances (Davison, 2007). Jones (1989) signals that the student perceptions of a teacher's personality is considerably related to the quality of teaching (as rated by students).

### **Purpose and Goals**

Although current research has looked into highschool concert band retention, college marching band retention, and the role of social and leadership factors in different marching bands, there is a gap regarding the influence of social and leadership factors on high school marching band retention from the perspective of current highschoolers. The goal of this research is to understand how these factors influence retention, if at all, and the general type of impact it has on various groups within the marching band. Thus, the research will be studying the following research question: To what extent do social and leadership factors influence retention in highschool marching bands in a certain South Eastern Michigan school district?

Retention is particularly important for marching bands because improving retention can create better consistency in the instrumentation of the group, which is vital in creating an unique ensemble sound (Heath, 2017). Moreover, it can potentially increase the energy exuding from the band as well as create a 'bigger' and 'fuller' sound, especially integral for marching band

halftime shows and competitions. Through this research, highschool band directors can hopefully better identify whether certain aspects of social and leadership factors may need to be modified or emphasized in order to improve retention.

## **Methods**

### **Approach Rationale**

Past research seeking to understand marching band retention has directly asked marching band members how a certain factor affected their desire to continue in the band program next year, allowing them to focus specifically on the topic of retention (Heath, 2017). This research employed a different method to achieve the same goal by asking about the extent to which a factor had impacted a band member's marching band experience. A factor's impact on members' experience would likely have a similar impact on member retention. For example, if a factor is found to have a large impact on their experience, regardless whether it is a positive or negative impact, then it is reasonable to assume that the factor also plays a large role in whether they will be coming back next year (and vice versa). This study is based upon this reasonable assumption. Although this approach seems uncommon in the field, it takes into account the views of both those who may and may not continue marching band.

This quantitative study utilized survey research to acquire the above information. Survey research is basically collecting information on individuals based on their answers to questions (Check and Schutt, 2012).

### **Participants**

The survey population consisted of highschoolers who participated in the marching band for the 2019 season. These participants were from three highschools, each with their own marching band program, in a certain Michigan school district.

### **Survey Design**

The electronic survey was created with Google Forms and organized into two parts. The first part asked basic demographic data which included a participant's grade, gender, and their role in the marching band (their instrument section, years of previous experience, and possible years of leadership). This information would show how different groups within the marching band are truly affected, yielding a more complete understanding of the extent of a factor's impact.

For the second part, seven questions were used to assess the influence of social and leadership factors. These questions asked how each factor impacted one's marching band experience. Social factors asked include social interactions within the instrument section (also plainly known as 'section'), social interactions outside of the section, band camp (a camp where members focus on marching and music playing), and a close relationship with the director. Leadership factors asked include director personality, student leadership impact on others, and student leadership impact on the student leader. Similar to other researchers (Heath, 2017), respondents answered these questions using 5-point Likert scales ranging from "did not affect my experience" to "enormously affected my experience", clearly revealing the extent of the impact (Figure 1). In order to receive accurate results, the directions in the second part, made it clear that respondents should not answer the questions based on whether they liked or disliked the factor but rather on how influential each factor was on their marching band experience. The positive or negative impact of a factor was not asked as it can change depending on the marching band program. In addition, for this part of the survey, not every item on the questionnaire was

required to be answered in order to be cognizant of the respondents' comfort level in answering certain questions.

### Figure 1

#### *Example of Question*

7.) How have social interactions within your section affected your 2019 marching band experience?

|         | Did not affect my experience | Barely affected my experience | Somewhat affected my experience | Significantly affected my experience | Enormously affected my experience |
|---------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Answer: | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>           | <input type="radio"/>                | <input type="radio"/>             |

There seems to be no instrument bias as the factors asked were a part of each school's marching band season. The anticipated findings for this study were social factors would have a high impact on retention levels. However, leadership factors will largely have a low impact on retention levels.

### Rationale for Survey

Survey research was the best way to gather and understand the data related to this study. Other similar research has also used interviews of members to understand retention (Heath, 2017). However, interviews require lots of time and are not suitable when researching with a large sample size (Ponto, 2015). Additionally, with interviews, the excessive amount of time could dissuade busy highschool students from participating in this study.

### Distribution of Questionnaire:

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent from the school district, a web link to the survey was sent to the band directors of the participating schools, who then shared it

to the highschool marching band members and their families. Additionally, time in class was made for some or all of the concert ensembles from each school so that students could answer the questionnaire using their phones (as many of the students in the concert ensembles participate in marching band).

### **Pilot Study**

Before finalizing the survey for distribution, an informal focus group, consisting of about 12 students who had participated in a marching band, was set up. A focus group allows one to check if the survey questions and terms were understandable (Check and Schutt, 2012). Constructive feedback was given regarding the answer choices, the usability, and the directions of the survey. Changes were made as appropriate before a finalized version of the survey was given. It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, only a portion of the survey was used to explicitly understand relevant social and leadership factors.

### **Data Analysis**

The distribution of the responses for each factor was analyzed graphically to identify the overall impact of a factor. The responses were broken down by the demographic data to determine whether the overall impact extended to various groups across the marching band, irregularly impacted some groups, or was concentrated in one group.

### **Uncontrollable Variables**

The participants' skill level on their instruments was not controlled. Thus, a wide range of players were represented in the survey with different perspectives and experiences that may have been affected by their skill on an instrument. Additionally, the honesty of the participants can not be controlled as it was left to the respondents to accurately answer the survey questions.

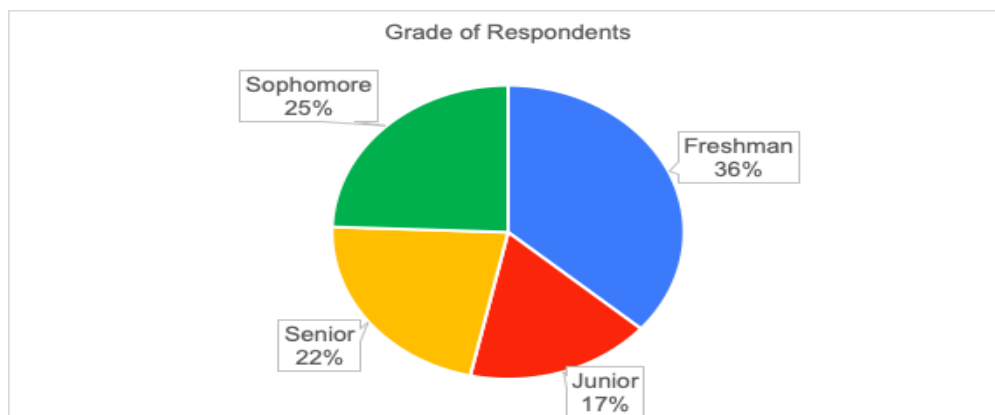
## Results

### Participant Demographics

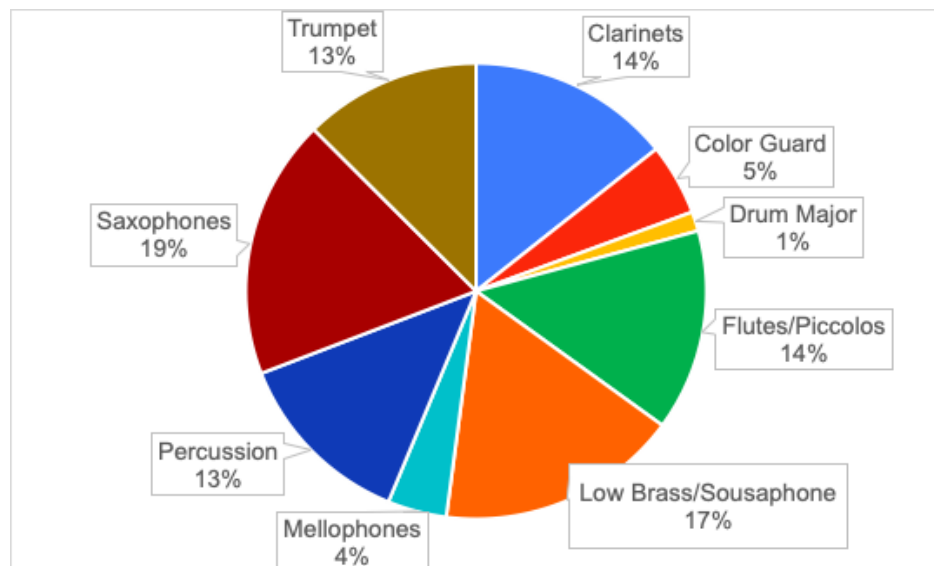
A total of 217 responses were recorded for the electronic survey after removing inappropriate responses. However, not every factor will have 217 answered responses as respondents were free to skip any question. Around 122 (56.2%) of the respondents were male and 87 (40.1%) were female while 8 (3.7%) respondents preferred not to answer their gender. Freshmen was the largest class represented in the survey (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Grade of Respondents*



A wide variety of sections participated in this study (Figure 3). Those that responded “pit” or “drumline” (2 respondents) were automatically placed into the percussion section.

**Figure 3***Sections Represented in Survey*

Many of the participants (40.6%) had just one year of marching band experience. Those who had two, three, and four years of marching band experience comprised 24%, 15.7% and 19.8% of the respondents respectively. Forty-three respondents answered an optional question (regarding years of leadership experience) that asked only those who had a leadership position to answer. Those who had one, two, and four years of leadership experience consisted of 74.4%, 20.9%, and 4.7% of the 43 respondents respectively.

### **Factors and Their Influence**

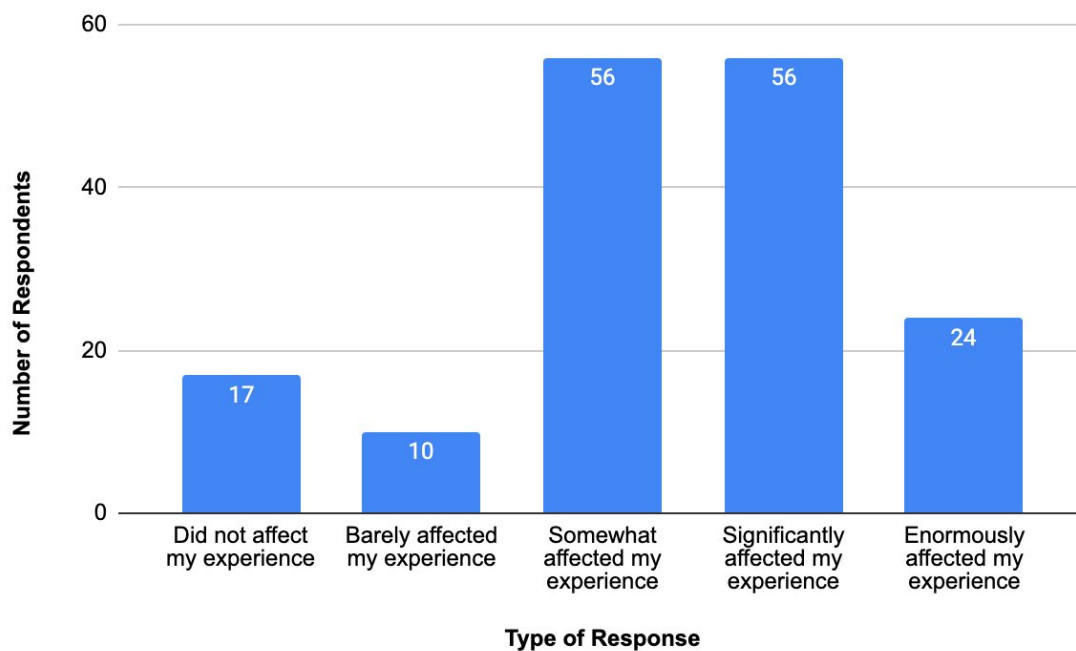
The question about the impact of a close relationship with the band director yielded 163 responses as respondents were asked to skip the question if they did not have a close relationship with the director (Figure 4). An interesting finding was observed when breaking down those responses by grade level. ‘Significantly’ or ‘somewhat’ affected responses were more than 50%



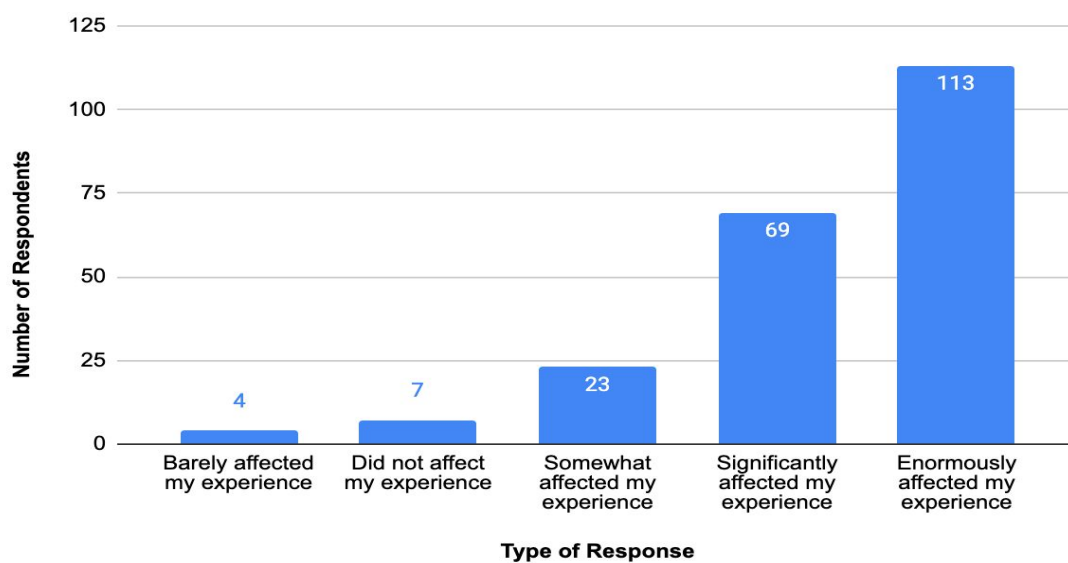
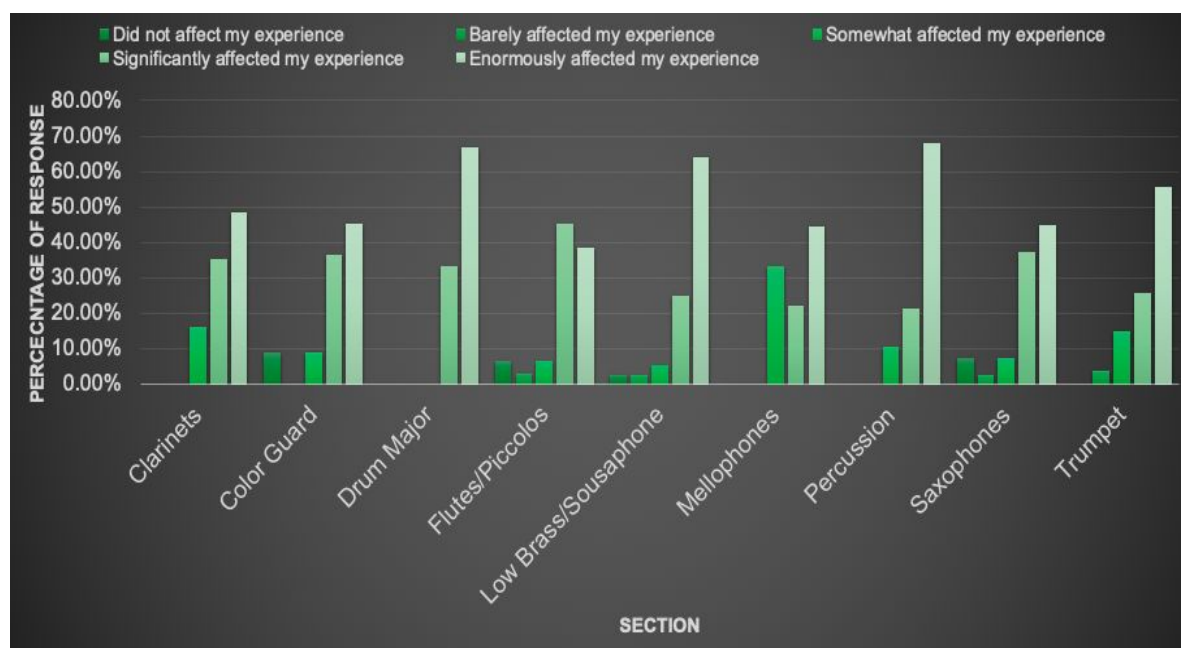
of the responses in each grade. ‘Enormously affected’ responses ranged between 10% and 20% for all grades and the responses of ‘did not affect’ and ‘barely affected’ were under 15 percent each for all grades.

**Figure 4**

*Impact of Close Relationship with Band Director*



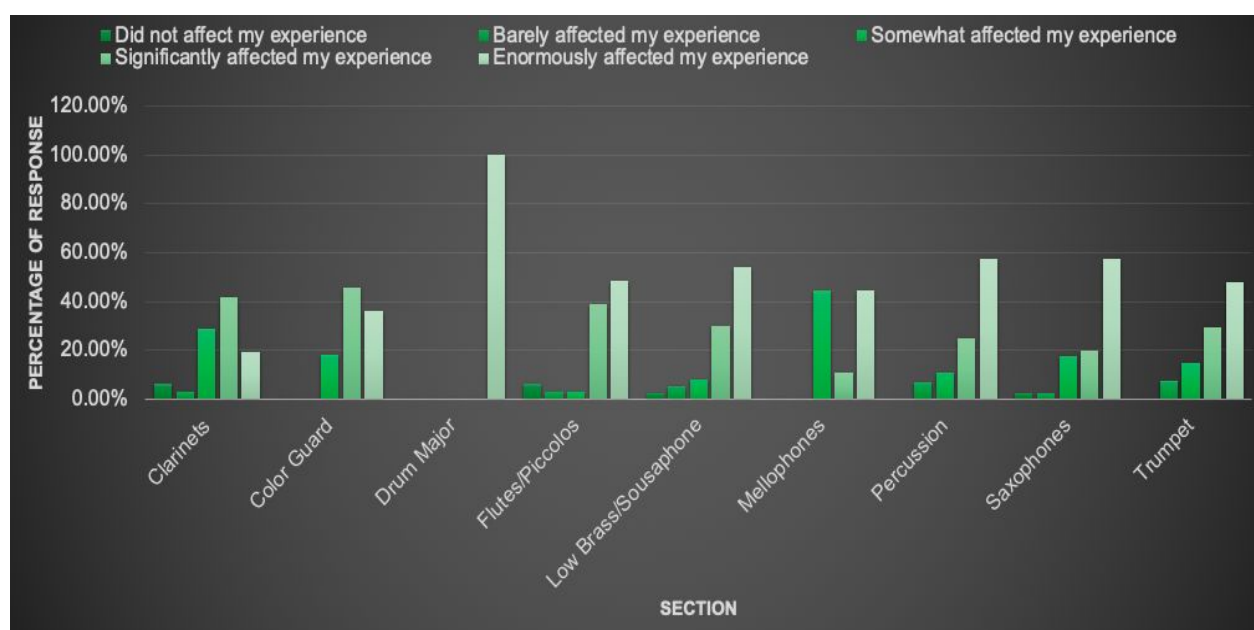
For the question about the impact of band camp, 84.3% of the respondents answered on the right end of the Likert scale (significantly affected or enormously affected) (Figure 5). Another view of participants' responses by section revealed that certain sections were impacted much differently by the band camp experience than other sections (Figure 6) .

**Figure 5***Impact of Band Camp***Figure 6***Impact of Band Camp by Section*

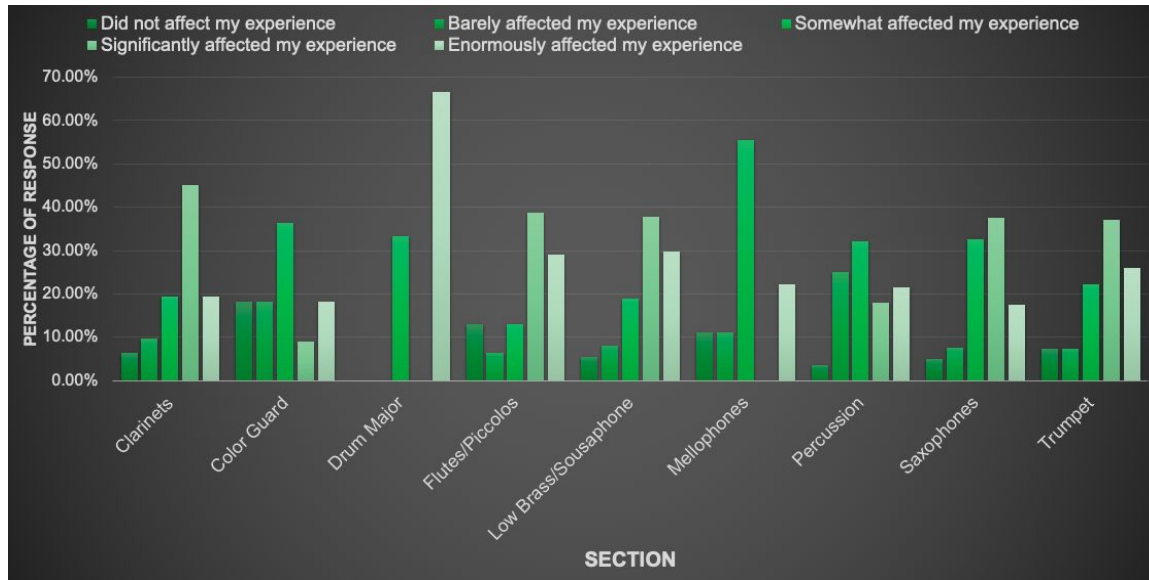
Respondents were also asked about the impact of social interactions within their section. 2.8% of the respondents answered did not affect, 4.2% answered barely affected, 15.2% answered somewhat affected, 30% answered significantly affected, and 47.9% answered enormously affected. Further analysis revealed most sections have similar distributions of the responses (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

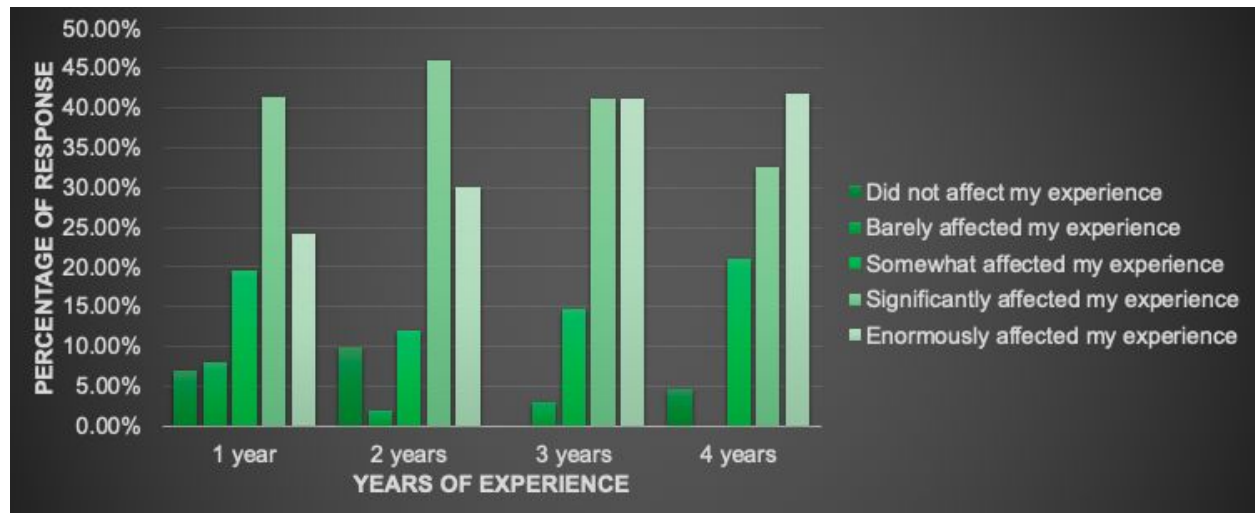
*Impact of Social Interactions Within Sections by Section*



In regards to the impact of social interactions outside of one's section, 7.4% of the respondents answered did not affect, 10.6% answered barely affected, 25.4% answered somewhat affected, 32.7% answered significantly affected, and 24% answered enormously affected. These responses were broken down by sections (Figure 8).

**Figure 8***Impact of Social Interactions Outside of Sections by Section*

Responses to impact of the band director's personality were also one-sided: 6.1% of the respondents answered did not affect, 4.2% answered barely affected, 17.3% answered somewhat affected, 40.7% answered significantly affected, and 31.8% answered enormously affected. This data was further analyzed by years of experience (Figure 9).

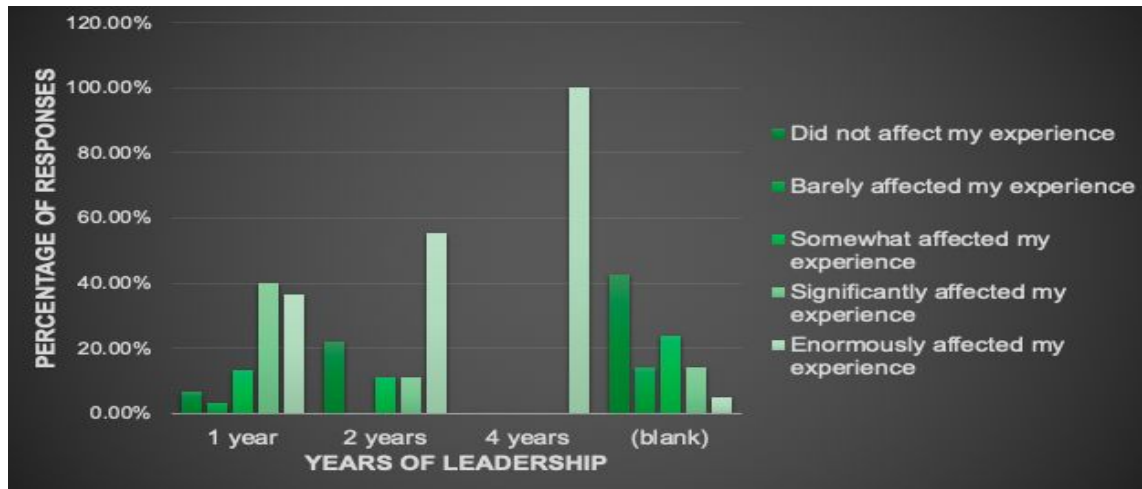
**Figure 9***Impact of Director's Personality by Years of Experience*

For the question about the impact of the student leadership role on the leader's experience, only 61 respondents answered. This is because it asked only student leaders to answer. 21.3% of the respondents answered did not affect, 6.6% answered barely affected, 16.4% answered somewhat affected, 26.2% answered significantly affected, and 29.5% answered enormously affected.

When further analyzed by years of leadership experience, a mix of results occurred (Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

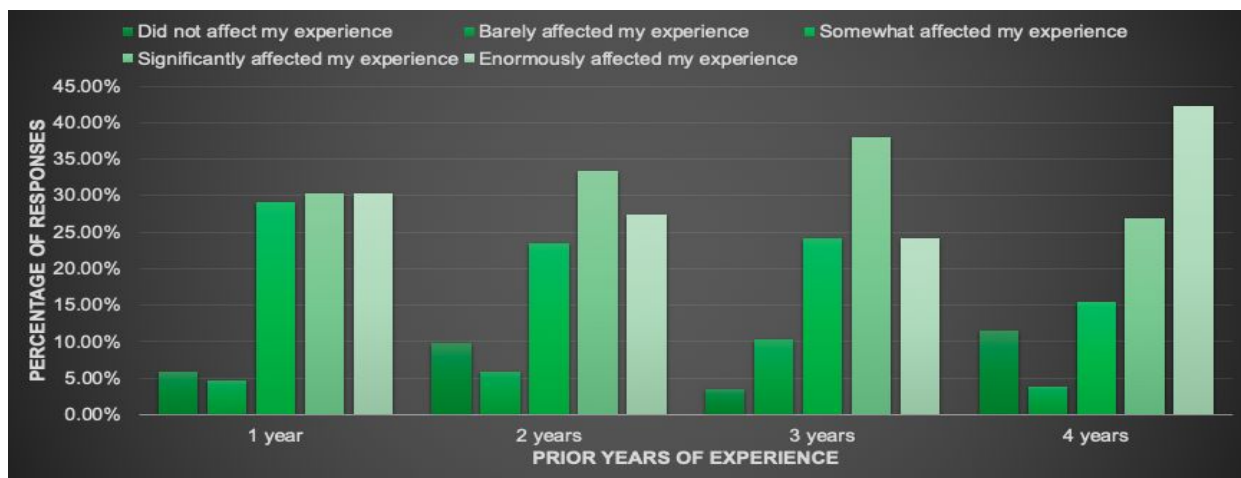
*Impact of Leadership role on Student Leader by Years of Leadership Experience*



The question regarding the impact of leaders within a one's own section on one's experience found 7.3% of the respondents answered did not affect, 5.7% answered barely affected, 25% answered somewhat affected, 31.8% answered significantly affected, and 30.2% answered enormously affected. These responses were also broken down by prior years of experience (Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Impact of Student Leadership on Other Member's Experiences by Prior Years of Experience*



### **Discussion**

In general, social and leadership factors appear to influence high school marching band retention to a significant extent, although vary in degree depending on the specific social and leadership factor.

#### **Social Factors**

Although close relationships with the director may be beneficial, it is moderately influential on highschool marching band retention as that factor's median response was 'somewhat affected' (Figure 4). However, this could vary depending on the director and the general size of the band. The responses were unexpectedly distributed equally when broken down by grades. One would assume that those who have spent more time in the band program (upperclassmen) might be more impacted because they likely would have known the director more personally than underclassmen; however, this was not the case as those relationships may be a small component of the entire marching band season. These results are also a slight extension of previous research, which found that knowing the highschool band director can help retain 8th graders in the transition to highschool concert band (Hayes, 2004). Band camp can impact marching band retention to a very large extent as an overwhelming majority of those responses for that question were on the right end of the Likert scale. This is understandable as band camp can often be one of the earliest and most memorable events of the season. Its large impact seems to extend across the band, irrespective of a member's section, as the majority of respondents' choices in almost all the sections felt band camp "enormously impacted" their experience (Figure 6). The factor of social interactions within one's section also seems to be a critical influencer on student retention. The bulk of respondents expressed that these interactions

have a significant impact or greater on their experience. These interactions affect all the sections similarly and significantly, with the exception of drum majors and mellophones, as each section has a similar distribution of responses (Figure 7). The abnormality of the drum majors' response may be due to them being a small group that work extensively together to lead the band. The mellophone section has a slightly strange distribution of responses as well, but still seems to be at least sizably impacted (Figure 7). Outside social interactions can have a sizable influence on retention, but not as much as social interactions within one's section, as only a slight majority of responses answered on the right end of the Likert scale for this factor. This may be due to members spending more time with their sections than with others. Further analysis reveals that drum majors was the only section that had 'enormously impacted' as the most selected response (Figure 8). Because it is such an outlier compared to all other sections, there is possible merit to Brewer's study revealing drum majors may face challenges with social and identity in the marching band (Brewer, 2009). As a result, the type of relationships appears to dramatically influence retention of drum majors.

### **Leadership Factors**

Overall, the director's personality seems to be a very influential factor on retention as a large majority of responses were on the right end of the Likert Scale. This finding firmly suggests the notion that marching band is more than an activity that the director simply facilitates. The director is perhaps an integral part of the activity itself, causing students' experience (and thereby retention) to be massively impacted by the director's personality. This finding builds on the research by Jones (1989) regarding the impact of student perceptions of director personality. Additionally, this impact seems to consistently span across members despite



having different years of prior experience (Figure 9).

The impact of a leadership role on the student leader on retention seems to be substantial but it is not clear-cut as both extremes of impact have substantial amounts of responses. The results indicate a majority of respondents felt that their leadership role had impacted them at least significantly, but more than a quarter of respondents reported it did not affect or barely affected them. Oddly, a vast majority that answered 'did not impact' for this factor, also did not answer the previous question regarding years of leadership experience (Figure 10). This suggests that many respondents may have misunderstood the directions for the question or may have simply missed the prior leadership experience question. However, these findings illustrate the possibility of some being greatly and negatively affected due to the pressures and challenges leaders face as outlined in other studies (Brewer, 2009)(Melton, 2012). In addition, when the data was broken down by years of leadership experience (Figure 10), those with one year seem to be slightly more impacted than those with two years, perhaps because those with two years were more comfortable with the position. Student leadership can also significantly impact the retention of other members of the band despite their prior experience (Figure 11), strengthening the notion of leadership being more than a passive component of marching band.

### **Implications**

The research findings suggest social and leadership factors have profound, although vary in degree, impacts on retention. However, this impact can take a negative or positive note, depending on the marching band and the person. As a result, it may be advantageous for band directors to closely examine these aspects in relation to their respective ensemble to improve retention. For instance, it may help directors to identify social practices occurring in sections that

felt band camp enormously (and positively) affected their experience, similar to what previous research has proposed (Alosi, 2012). Directors may then explore ways to bolster these social and leadership aspects in a positive way and perhaps improve retention. For example, directors may create more opportunities for positive social interactions in marching band at appropriate times. Likewise, directors may provide more guidance for leaders to not only lead better but also to handle pressures, struggles, and challenges that may be associated with being a leader.

### **Limitations**

A key limitation to note is that this study's assumption, the impact of a factor on the experience translates to a similar impact on retention, may not be true always. Thus, it may be useful for new research to directly ask marching band members the impact of a factor on their experience and on their decision to return (retention), and compare the findings. Additionally, the findings of the study can not confirm that all social and leadership factors in marching band are substantially impactful on retention as this study only explored the prominent aspects within those factors. Perhaps future research may study the social and leadership factors more comprehensively, through additional factors or through interviews, on retention. Lastly, the generality of this study is limited as the study analyzed only one school district. Future research may replicate this study with other highschoolers to verify these findings.

### **Conclusion**

This research aimed to understand the extent to which social and leadership factors influence retention levels in high school marching bands from the view of high school marching band members. The study found social and leadership factors seem to significantly impact high school marching band retention according to high school marching band members. This significant impact is often extended to many different groups within the marching band. As a result, retention may be improved as directors assess whether the impacts of different leadership and social aspects are positive or negative and take appropriate measures. Research has shown social factors can influence retention into highschool concert ensembles (Gibson, 2016). This research not only extends the current knowledge regarding social factors' impact on retention to high school marching bands but qualifies that significant impact to members across many groups within the marching band. Furthermore, this research has further shed light on the importance of leadership in such a large and complex ensemble like marching band, supporting the notion that leadership is not a passive component of marching band but can substantially impact students' decisions to return.

This research could be furthered by inputting open-ended questions for respondents to explain their survey answer choices. With open-ended questions, one could analyze respondents' choices and look for common themes to gain more insight into how and why the particular factor is impactful. Further research should also explore other factors such as performance-related factors and how that impacts high school students' marching band experiences. Further research may also explore why students discontinue high school marching

band, perhaps by interviewing those who discontinue. This will give band directors a better scope of what areas to specifically address so other students won't face those same issues.

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