

MAKING THE CASE FOR MARCHING BAND INCENTIVES AT MSU: AN UNREALIZED OPPORTUNITY

Overview

The MSU Marching Band is a fixture at fall football games, and along with MSU Cheer and the MSU Dance Team, the band forms the backbone of school spirit at Morehead State. As a course (MUSM 372), the band welcomes any MSU student with adequate high school band experience regardless of his/her major. It is the most public-facing and visible element of the university's music department giving it enormous potential for recruitment and outreach.

Description of the Problem

The larger the MSU Marching Band is, the more power the organization has to benefit our university through school and community service and outreach, contribution to campus and athletic events, and as a powerful tool for student recruitment and retention. Unfortunately, there has been a steady decline in the size of the marching band over the past 30 years or more. In part, this can be explained by diminishing regional high school band programs and by declining enrollment at MSU, but we have also failed to update our recruitment approach to fit our times and in ways that appeal to today's students.

Competing institutions have long instituted incentive programs to bolster membership in their marching bands because they know something we have yet to acknowledge: no other curricular program has greater potential as a tool to attract students—not just music majors, but students pursuing every major on campus. We are falling behind, and with no foreseeable end to troubling times for college enrollment, the future of the MSU Marching Band is uncertain.

Research Support

Compelling research exists to suggest improved academic outcomes (e.g., overall academic performance, retention rates, graduation rates, etc.) for students participating in their college marching band. Additionally, research supports marching bands supporting their university in important ways (e.g., athletic event attendance, public relations, positive school spirit, esprit de corps, recruitment, student health, etc.) An full annotated bibliography can be provided to decision makers upon request.



The Status Quo

All instrumental track music education majors at MSU are required to enroll in marching band for four semesters (WKU, UofL, ECU, UK, and Murray State only required two—no other state public or private music programs are comparable). That requirement is the only way we are currently able to maintain a marching band at MSU. All members enroll in the course in order to participate regardless of their major, and the ensemble membership is typically 70% music education majors and 30% from other majors (including music BA and BM). No incentive exists for membership. The bands of the 1960s were over 300 members, the bands of the 1990s were over 150 members, and the bands of the 2020s have been right around 100 members.

Incentive programs for collegiate marching band are not a new idea and have been employed at our other state institutions for many years to great effect. ECU, UK, WKU, and UofL all incentivize their marching bands as does Marshall University in our own region. Without such incentivization, MSU is at a tremendous disadvantage.

Recommendations

Beginning with the 2026 fall semester, MSU should implement a permanent incentive for marching band membership which should be tiered based on number of years of membership (similar to what WKU has and what ECU is working toward). Without question, such action would be a significant “win-win” for our students, our department, and our university and provide MSU Bands what we need to attract the quantity/quality of musicians desperately needed in our music program as a whole.

- YEAR 1 - \$500 scholarship or housing credit
- YEAR 2 - \$750 scholarship or housing credit
- YEAR 3 - \$1000 scholarship
- YEAR 4 - \$1250 scholarship

Implementation

In the event decision makers move forward with the recommendations presented, it will be important to approve clear eligibility criteria and to develop promotional artifacts and a strategy to ensure the expected benefits are fully realized. As most potential music majors audition in February, being able to communicate about the incentive program at that time (or before) would be most effective. For the recruitment of non-music majors, the timeline is less critical. As membership numbers increase and non-music majors make up a much larger portion of the band, music degree requirements can be reduced to two semesters of marching band and the course can be offered for two credits.