All-American Students Making “Exceptional Music”

Take one Purdue University student, mixed together with an instrument costing thousands of dollars and sheets of music that sometimes even staples can’t hold together, then combine a uniform that needs to be kept in “tip-top” shape, united with a schedule where everyday from 3:30PM-5:30PM you are marching down Third Street, and finally seeing the a familiar twinkle in their eyes when they hear “Hail Purdue” and you have found someone unique . . . a Purdue All-American Marching Band Member! This group, found on campus, is one of the most notable because of its public appearances and all around “rah-rah” attitude. What most people don’t realize is just how much time and effort actually takes place prior to game day and just how extensively the band members work on a consistent basis to look their best. Not only do these students endure daily challenges such as practicing in the blistering heat under the late August sun but also yelling, “Ready Up” with rain running down their face in early November, they face the challenge of being able to adapt to any changes within a moment notice of the whistle blast.

These 330 unique students are more concerned about the final outcome from what will be their “encore” performance than anything else. Ask anyone of these students, independent of their musical instrument, and they will be able to tell you what emotions are running through their mind once they have just finished performing a piece for a competition. The anticipation that was once there is now gone, the fear of making a mistake turns into joy for a clean play-through and more than anything, they know that they have just accomplished a performance that took countless hours to prepare. More
than anything, they remember days full of constructive criticism, rolling eyes and whole-hearted laughter. And although these feelings may be most noticeable after a competition, they are also noticeable, if looked for, after a performance at a Big 10 Football Game, the end of a parade route, or even the end of everyday rehearsal.

For an outsider to obtain a clear picture of what it means to exactly be a band member would mean placing themselves in the shoes of those who march down the streets on a regular basis. This can be a challenging task and I for one know just how difficult this can be. Being a member of a high school band is completely different than a college band. Although they still practice and perform, they have a much different outlook on the final outcome, seeing it as more of a display of school spirit than being a performance, especially at college football games. Here is where the Purdue All-American Marching Band is best known. Not only do they have a specific routines that they follow every Saturday starting around 8:00 that morning but they have many faithful followers who are there on a weekly basis to cheer them on and show the ‘Boilermaker’ spirit. Then as the football game is about to begin, well, the rest is history. With the student section filled to capacity and the other 2/3 of the stadium also packed, the Purdue All-American Marching Band races onto the field, welcoming the football team to our honorary ‘Hail Purdue!’ This is very clear, but there is a main aspect of this performance that is overlooked by almost everyone except the performers themselves, which is the rehearsal time they put into earlier that week or even weeks in advance.

Beginning Monday at 3:30PM sharp, Dr. David Leppla, Director of Bands, begins rehearsal. Along with his assistant directors, Dr. Pamela Nave (percussion specialist), and
William Kissinger (Associate Professor) join over the 330 members: Marching Band Students, Goldusters, Flag Corps and Twirlers, by reviewing a previous performance or otherwise presenting what is on their agenda for the week. This would include new music memorization, marching rehearsals, play through of new songs, and group sectionals. Not to mention the final days, Thursday and Friday, where they spend close to two and a half hours working constantly on the field show, perfecting the movements and cleaning up mistakes. These days, as many of the students know, are the most challenging and tiring days of the week. They not only are coming closer to the end of the academic week but are practically just beginning the performance weekend, and for band members, this becomes a usual routine. The directors themselves hold a very important place within the band; they not only hold a position of authority but also hold one of the most important jobs: keeping the students motivated and having fun. Dr. Leppla contributes Purdue’s continuing outstanding bands to ‘students who like to have fun, even though they are working hard. They know that when they become a band member, they are joining a whole new group of people who eventually become a family to them and they feel more at home than some people I know!’ Not only does Dr. Leppla have this attitude, so do many of his colleagues, including author Thomas Bough whose article entitled, ‘Four Views on Developing an Outstanding Marching Band’ was recently published in the musical review “The Instrumentalist.” Bough writes, ‘Some directors seem to have good marching bands year after year because they balance entertainment aspects with work on the fundamentals of good musicianship.’(Bough 13) This line, states that not only does the director have to carry out rehearsals in an orderly fashion but he also needs to know how to keep his students constantly moving on becoming better musicians.
In order to become better musicians, the largest aspect that students dislike is warm-up. Warm-up in band terms is time set aside to push air through the instruments, essentially warming them up, therefore, allowing better tuning between instruments. During this time, band members play scales, arpeggios, chords and small selections out of songs. The director is able to critique and give the members a concise feel for how loudly or softly they should be playing and if they need to move their “tuning slide” or “roll in or out.” By doing this, they help keep a consistent sound being neither sharp (higher than the proper pitch) nor flat (lower than the proper pitch.) Warm-up is a time set aside to limber up embouchures and prepare wind players for the long rehearsal ahead. During this time, one aspect that is sometimes overlooked continues to be the most important. That is developing new skills and refining the ensemble’s playing; by taking this time, each student gains extra rehearsal time in practicing the basics of being a musician. If students are fully aware at the beginning of warm-up and follow the directions of the leading director, a good warm-up can be completed in 10-15 minutes. This time frame is what Dr. Leppla and the other directors strive for, enough time to fully prepare the students but not taking too much time away from their performance rehearsal time. From personal experience many students dislike this time and want to find ways of getting rid of it, especially if they warm-up inside and then go play outside, where the temperature changes the tuning of the instrument. All directors, including my high school director, Mr. Greg Masarik disagreed with the thought of canceling warm-up and once seeing a full band correctly warming-up; it’s easy to understand the importance of this element in musicianship.
In making music, proper time usage is imminent. Because of the structured schedule and limited amount of time for a group of this magnitude to get together, being able to “use your time wisely,” as directors say is imperative. This is only one of the many “band terms” that I heard being used on a consistent basis throughout the semester. A basic fundamental that is taught and reiterated throughout the rehearsal is proper posture. In following my field site closely, I found that almost all students on a regular basis display this fundamental with pride and prestige. In his book, Band Pageantry: Five ‘Half-Time’ Field Shows, Hal Bergan gives an example of this posture. He writes, “Heels are placed together; toes at a 45 degree angle; knees straight; hips drawn back, but not stiff; chest out; shoulders back; head erect with eyes straight ahead; arms at the sides with the thumbs along the trouser seams, this is what will gain the judges eyes! If you look at any college band, they will have 4 or more of these elements at all times, therefore it stands as an important standard.” (Bergan 1-17) By using this time wisely, the director and students are able to make necessary adjustments and critique not only their but their peers work. When Saturday approaches and they are not fully prepared, it is not anyone’s fault but their own. This feeling is said to be “one of the most indescribable feeling that you can think of. You have not only let your friends down but also the audience that you are performing for. All you can do now it hold your head up and I look like you are ready and then prepare ten times better the next week,” expressed Junior Drum Major Jed Wilkinson. When the band is fully prepared, they can achieve the necessary “attention grabbing” performance which is crucial at football games where their main job is to keep the audience excited and ready to cheer on the Boilermaker football team.
Being able to play well isn’t necessarily as important as good musicianship. Being able to sight read music, play with correct crescendos and decrescendos, accents, staccatos, and other musical marks on the page are key. If one member doesn’t play with this type of awareness, it can be clearly and cleanly head through the music. Accuracy is a main key in compiling a successful marching band. Feeling the music, memorizing the notes and articulation, and being able to clearly distinguish precisely the types of selections that are appropriate for the group is imminent. Before introducing the music to the band members, Dr. Leppla will play a recording of the song. Through this, they are able to follow along in their music and also get a feel for the rhythms and speed of the piece. Because of this attitude towards excellence there are many “firsts” that the Purdue B and has also done throughout its history including:

- First band to carry all the colors of the Big 10 schools
- First band to play the opposing school’s fight song.
- First band to think enormous when it came to drums, creating what’s still considered to be the "World’s Largest Bass Drum."
- First band to perform at the Indianapolis 500, a tradition that continues today.
- First band to stage a night half-time show on a completely black field by lighting its members and instruments with tiny, battery-operated strings of lights.
- First band to create nation-wide recognition for its featured twirler - the Golden Girl.
- First college band to play at Radio City Music Hall.
- First band to have an alumni on the moon - Neil Armstrong in 1969.
- First college marching band to appear in Singapore Chingay Procession.
Although musicianship is “everything,” being able to play an instrument isn’t. There are many traditions that the Purdue All-American Marching Band performs on game days at Ross-Ade Stadium. The “Block P,” which is performed at the beginning of each football game, is one of the oldest standing traditions. Dating back to 1954, Director Paul Spotts Emrick began this tradition by marching the band out of its military-like formation. It became an instant hit with the audience and continues to be today. Another standout point of Purdue’s All-American Marching Band is the Big Bass Drum (BBD for short.) ‘Since presented in 1921, it has served as a reassuring constant throughout the band’s history. The drum strikes the beat of the music, serving as the heart of the band and keeping all other element in line and in time.’ (Purdue All-American Marching Band website)

Standing more than 10 feet high, the “monster” as band members call it, is about eight feet in diameter and is nearly four feet wide between the two heads. The drum is handled by a crew of four silver-helmeted bandsmen, who are selected for their strength and agility, along with two beaters. They painstakingly rehearse every movement of the "Monster" drum to assure its being in the right place at the right time in accordance with the split-second timing necessary for the fast-paced shows presented by the "All-American" Band throughout every rehearsal.

When practicing daily for two and a half hours at a time, it is not surprising that friendships form. These friendships form within musical sections, through your rank in the band and also through unexpected meetings. Author Brad Townsend wrote this year in the musical journal, *Journal of Band Research* that, “many of the students felt a differing intensity level in the college band, and responded favorably to performing different halftime shows with less emphasis on competition. Many also seemed to enjoy
the different pace of college band and the lighter schedule from a day to day basis.” (Townsend 74) Being part of the Purdue All-American Marching Band has a tremendous affect on the social lives of the students. These individuals have to develop well thought out time management skills and plan accordingly making the band one of their number one priorities. In doing this, they loose some of the social aspects that other college students experience. Thinking that this might be a concern I asked a group of trumpet players this question, “What do you do when your friends, who are not in the band are hanging out and you are not able to be with them? Is this a major concern for you?” All of these men and women answered without a doubt that “although they cannot spend as much time as they would like with these people, we have two groups of friends, one in the band and one outside of it. At times it can be hard to make a decision on what to do but after awhile, it just becomes natural to put the band first.” “We have fun, whether we are in our ‘band groups” or we are with our regular friends, we still are college students and do the same things that college students do!” It’s not unusual to see band members walking and talking together, they just a group of friends hanging out and having a great time together.

Besides the cultural aspect, there is the academic aspect to uncover. Most students that I talked to who were not in the band but wanted to be decided not to join because of a fear of ‘too large of a time commitment.” When I asked Dr. Leppla to clear this up for me, he stated, “although it may seem like a lot, the band only practices daily from 3:30 -5:30 as a group and if the individual sections want to do something after that is their choice. We all understand that they are college students with homework and other studying to do so we only hold them to what we tell them. This is as fair as we can be, especially when they
only receive 2 credits for the course! The students that we currently have enrolled are
more than willing to make the most of their scheduled time and that is why we are very
efficient in what we do!” After hearing this I was almost stunned by this answer. I,
myself would have though that they rehearsed more than just this amount of time but it is
true. If you take the time to sit and watch one of the Purdue All-American Marching
Band rehearsals, they are done “relatively” smoothly and concisely. There are many
leaders throughout the band, concentrating on the senior class members in particular.
They have the most experience and are glad to help the underclassmen in any way that
they can. Being an older student in the band doesn’t necessarily mean that they have
seniority over you, it means that they just take more charge and even sometimes more of
the blame for a mistake.

It is evident that there are many aspects that make up and exceptional marching band:
warm-up, school spirit, musicianship, tuning, posture, time management, an exciting
history, friendships, presentation, and last but not least the director’s influence on the
band itself! These are just some of the aspects of the band that most people do not get to
see. They come and focus on the performance forgetting to taking into consideration the
time beforehand put into making that performance a success. The audience will look at
just the performers and forget to think about those who work behind the scenes and even
the director at times, whose expertise is the one who has guided these students in making
“exceptional music.” They appreciate the music that they have just listened to but not the
time and dedication that was put into it.
College band students experience many different aspects of college life than just regularly enrolled students. They are able to go with athletic teams to bowl games and playoff matches and this band is no exception. The Purdue All-American Marching Band shows Purdue University’s school spirit around the world and sometimes even explains exactly just what a “Boilermaker” is! A genuine love for music and a love for spirit is what make up the greatest part of these students. This is true for all students, whether they are freshman to seniors. As the final year approaches, band members will more than likely find it easy to reflect on the memories that they have made and what they feel has been the most important aspect of their life so far. At the end of the day, they are proud to be called part one of the greatest college bands in the United States and will more than willing play their rendition of ‘Hail Purdue” at your request! GO BOILERMAKERS!

Work Cited Page


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