The Value of Cocurricular Activities

Cocurricular activities may not be tested or graded, but they educate—and benefit—students in ways that classroom activities cannot.

By Edward J. Klesse and Jan A. D’Onofrio

Cocurricular pursuits are integral to the educational program and—whether or not they carry academic credit—have legitimate links to regular courses and to the purposes of middle level and high schools. They underpin the goal of teaching students to be responsible and fulfilled human beings with opportunities that develop character, critical thinking, social skills, and talents (NASSP 1996). Cocurricular activities also provide students with a network of peers and adults who have interests and talents similar to their own. Students who participate have the chance to excel individually, be part of a group, and gain real-life lessons about the importance of teamwork, responsibility, commitment, and hard work (Educational Research Service 1999).

Participation in cocurricular activities improves an adolescent’s chances of avoiding such risky behaviors as dropping out, becoming a teenage parent, engaging in delinquency, smoking, or abusing drugs or alcohol through three mechanisms, according to Zill, Nord, and Loomis (1995):
• Time displacement: the widely held notion that if a young person spends a great deal of time in beneficial or harmless activities, he or she will not have time to get into mischief.
• Commitment building: the argument that participation in constructive activities, by developing skills, creating aspirations, and providing rewarding experiences, strengthens a young person’s commitment to conventional institutions, such as school, and traditional career pathways.
• Group pressure: the idea that participation in teams, clubs, or other group activities promotes a sense of membership or belonging.

Expanding the Curriculum
Cocurricular activities are an extension of, not a diversion from, a good educational program and support the academic mission of the school. Students who participate in activity programs tend to have higher grade point averages, better attendance records, lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems than students who don’t participate (National Federation of State High School Associations [NFHS] 1999).

Students who participate in cocurricular activities not only do better academically than students who do not but also develop other facets of their personalities in the process. Self-esteem, self-confidence, social cooperation, and leadership skills are just a few of the cognitive factors that are affected. Cocurricular activities allow students to blend aspects of their academic learning into personal actions (Allison 1979).

Cocurricular activities may be one of the reasons many students stay in school or find personal meaning for their middle level and high school years. Students who are involved in cocurricular activities are able to extend and enrich previously learned academic skills through competitions and real-world simulations. In the cocurricular setting, they may also develop and practice artistic, musical, and...
psychomotor talents; leadership skills; and future career and occupational skills (Haensly, Lupkowsky, and Edlind 1985/1986).

Goal-directed activities develop skills in young people, and they may foster positive character traits. Both individual and group activities can teach students the importance of vigilance, hard work, attention to detail, practice, patience, and persistence in the face of setbacks. Group activities encourage cooperation and teamwork, personal sacrifice for group goals, and empathy—qualities that benefit young people in their studies, their jobs, and their personal lives, as well as help them become responsible and successful adults (Zill, Nord, and Loomis 1995).

Cocurricular activities foster success in later life. Participation in high school activities is often a predictor of later success—in college, in the workplace, and in society (NFHS 1999). Consider what any industry wants from its new employees, besides positive attendance records and high academic averages in core courses: The list always includes people skills, the ability to accept responsibility and follow directions, poise, and high personal ideals. These are marketable skills—and skills that are cultivated through cocurricular participation (USA Today 1993).

**Keeping Students Safe**

Research also shows that low levels of participation in student activities are characteristic of at-risk students (Klesse and D’Onofrio 1994). Compared with students who reported spending 1–4 hours a week in cocurricular activities, students who reported spending no time in school-sponsored activities were 57 percent more likely to have dropped out before their senior year, 49 percent more likely to have used drugs, 37 percent more likely to have become teen parents, 35 percent more likely to have smoked cigarettes, and 27 percent more likely to have been arrested (Zill, Nord, and Loomis 1995).

Cocurricular activities encourage personal accomplishments and the development of interpersonal skills. Adolescents who participate in these activities have opportunities to assume meaningful roles and responsibilities. The sense of efficacy students gain from these experiences can be an important protective factor for those growing up under adverse circumstances (Wagner 1999).

As overt acts of racism and the number of school-based hate groups climb, such activities as team sports create bonds that cut across racial lines. For example, 76 percent of all White and African-American student athletes say they became friends with someone from another racial or ethnic group while playing sports (Laphack 1996).

**Teaching Young People To Serve**

Youth service can build a community. When young people from different racial, ethnic, economic, and educational circumstances work together in close quarters, they come to trust each other and depend on each other. Youth service can build up the young people themselves: When young people engage in community service, they become valued, competent resources, rather than clients of social institutions, such as schools, and gain self-satisfaction and respect. Their experience can transform who they are—in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Youth service can inculcate a
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sense of civic responsibility as young people come to appreciate the value of the community and the contribution they can make to it; they develop a lasting commitment to do their part and do it well (Commission on National Community Service 1993).

The health of the United States depends on its young people gaining a sense of their connection to the larger communities in which they live. One of the best ways to create such ties is through service learning, which enables young people to contribute to the community and helps them reflect on what they learn from their participation (NASSP 1996).

The Gift of Participation
In a study of cocurricular participation and school size, Shoggen and Shoggen (1988) found that, on average, students in small high schools participate in cocurricular activities at a higher rate than do their counterparts in large high schools. Especially noteworthy is the higher percentage of students in larger high schools who, relative to those in smaller schools, show no participation in any school activities. The largest schools had about five times as many available cocurricular activities as the small schools, but evidence suggests that students in large schools do not take advantage of these opportunities. Although small schools may not provide a wealth of activities, the average student in a small school has a greater degree of involvement in the activities available.

Most studies do not establish whether participating in cocurricular activities leads to success, whether successful students are more likely to participate, or whether both theories are correct. However, cocurricular activities appear to provide all students, at-risk and gifted students alike, an academic safety net. Students involved in activities often experience heightened interest in academic courses, have a platform on which to practice leadership and fellowship skills, have opportunities to socialize with students and interact with teachers outside the classroom, are recognized for their involvement and achievement, and have a healthy use of their leisure time. The cocurricular program can be viewed as a training ground for adolescents for participation in fundamentally similar organizations as adults (Hlebowitsh and Wraga 1998).

References
STUDENT ACTIVITIES ARE NOT EXTRA

Let’s bury the term extracurricular activities. Extra implies something not necessary and suggests that student activities are just fun and games, which makes it easy for them to be dismissed or removed. Activities are school-sponsored programs and should be thought of and referred to as cocurricular.

There are numerous studies that show that students who participate in student activities usually have better grades, better attendance, and are more successful in later life than students who don’t participate (see Klesse, p. 5). If school administrations feel that activities are valuable enough to sponsor and teachers are required to serve as advisers, activities should be regarded more than “extra.”

Extras are the things kids do outside of school, such as Scouts, church activities, and the like. Principals and faculty members who serve as advisers have an obligation to ensure that students are learning something by participating in an activity. Of course, student activities should be enjoyable, but there are also valuable skills and lessons that can be taught to those who participate, such as goal setting, communication, organization, decision making, teamwork, conflict resolution, and tolerance. These are sometimes thought of as leadership skills, but they are really life skills that can be practiced as part of a club or organization and complement what is taught in the classroom. For example, service projects contain lessons in family and consumer science, social studies, math, English, health, computer science, business, marketing, and journalism if participants implement a creative project plan with appropriate public relations activities.

In light of recent incidents of school violence, I believe that student activities can play an important role in creating a school climate in which students feel involved and favorable toward school, teachers, and administrators. Our goal should be to have all students involved. The only way that we will reach this goal is through a systematic approach in which we track all students’ participation in activities just as we track all students’ academic progress. Educators can use surveys to ascertain what areas students may be interested in, and students who are not involved can be encouraged to participate in activities that correspond to their interests. Some students will not participate until someone reaches out to them. You might have to convince them, for example, that their artistic talents could be used for a drama production or for posters advertising the homecoming dance. I realize that involving all students in activities is a lot of work, but in the long run, everyone will be better off if we can help students achieve academically and socially balanced skills.

I’d be interested in hearing from any of our members who are already doing some of the things that I have suggested. You can reach me at MaranoR@principals.org. I hope that you will join the NASSP Department of Student Activities in our belief that Academics + Activities = Excellence. And please encourage your colleagues, teachers, students, parents, and the public at large to refer to student activities as cocurricular.

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