



Success with Non-Varsity Band Programs

By John Carroll and John Mireles

The non-varsity band plays a vital role in the overall health of a program, and as non-varsity directors, it is our responsibility to help students develop in their musicianship and leadership. If we are successful in this endeavor, the transition into a higher-level ensemble will be more organic. The expectations of non-varsity individual members and the ensemble should mirror those we hold for the varsity ensemble.

The UIL evaluation process has provided us with a standard by which we can measure successes along the way. In preparation for these evaluations, our task is to develop better student musicians as well as provide students opportunities to perform at high levels. UIL preparation allows us to extend that standard of excellence to all non-UIL events as well. The success of an ensemble relies on the development of the individual student's abilities. Three fundamental areas for any student's progress are *tone quality*, *technical facility*, and *musicianship*.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FUNDAMENTALS: TONE

Tone quality is arguably the most important consideration in playing wind instruments. Non-varsity band students can and should be pushed to attain characteristic sound quality, just like their varsity-level peers. Daily long-tone exercises, of which there are a myriad of possibilities, are a must for the development of high-quality tonal centers. These fundamental exercises not only allow for students to grow in their tonal concept but also provide them an opportunity to refine air control, pitch consciousness, and sound clarity. In considering specific brass sound production, lip flexibility drills should be considered a staple in students' daily musical diet.

While we work on sound production skills with our brass sections, what do our woodwinds and percussionists do? This is the time to get creative in your approach. Try maximizing this time by layering woodwind and mallet technique exercises over the brass flexibility exercises. Not only do the woodwinds improve, but it also

promotes an environment in which percussionists are engaged in the fundamental routine.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FUNDAMENTALS: TECHNICAL FACILITY

Along with the development of tone, we must help our students build technique. Take great care to ensure students do not play faster than appropriate for their skill level. Playing too fast too soon can diminish the work they accomplished on developing tone quality. Technical exercises allow the director to draw inspiration from multiple sources. We can use scales, arpeggios, Clarke Studies, and, most importantly, technical selections from music the students will perform.

Be sure to layer articulation exercises into the fundamental routine. Students should be capable of playing styles such as legato, marcato, and staccato. Rhythmic exercises can be found in many resources. Key signature study can be drilled through daily sight-reading exercises. Incorporating these technical elements into our instruction not only enhances students' overall musicianship but also lays a strong foundation for their future growth.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FUNDAMENTALS: MUSICIANSHIP

With well-developed tone and technique, students can perform with a greater sense of musicianship, but that doesn't mean one precedes the other. Musicianship should be developed concurrently with progress on tone and technique. For example, the band can perform long-tone exercises with dynamic contrast. Another example of how musicality can be layered onto an existing fundamental warmup is by providing line and shape to every technical drill. At the beginning of our careers, we were unsure of when to *add musicality* to the process. As time went on, we realized that it must be *part of the process*. It frustrates us and our students when we learn the rhythms and notes and *only then* add musical nuance. When a student changes styles and articulations without

being prompted, it is a marker that they are developing musicianship.

A final thought about fundamentals—*students did not join the band to work on fundamentals*. Be creative in pacing your rehearsals in an efficient way that balances fundamentals and the rehearsing of repertoire to keep the students (and you) engaged.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH REPERTOIRE

The correlation of advanced fundamentals and high-quality music cannot be overstated. It is imperative to choose the appropriate repertoire, capitalizing on the ensemble's strengths while promoting growth in weaker areas. Even before a rehearsal begins, our repertoire choices have the potential for setting students up for success or failure. Looking back on our careers, we realize the most frustrating years were those when we failed to choose music appropriate for our students.

Keep in mind that there is *rarely* a one-size-fits-all piece for your band. Influential band director James Keene would say to write down the strengths and weaknesses of every section in the ensemble. Then note what, if any, soloistic strengths were present. With clarity on what can and can't be featured and what needs further development, you can proceed with music selection.

In addition to music selection, one of

our responsibilities is to rewrite material when needed to enhance the quality of our ensemble's performance (always keeping the composer's intent in mind). For instance, we might rewrite a horn line for euphonium. A developing third clarinet section could be enhanced by the addition of the alto saxophone.

CUSTOMIZING EXERCISES

As you prepare for UIL evaluation or any other performance, be creative with your routine, focusing on the demands presented through your repertoire selections. For example, if you have a difficult technical passage in the woodwind/mallet section on a piece, write it as a long-tone exercise. This can then be modified to full runs at slower tempos. All this can be done while brass and percussion work long tones or lip slurs. This provides students an opportunity to stay engaged, which of course helps with classroom management. Another example of using material from your repertoire is to take problematic rhythms and work them into rhythm sheets.

As mentioned earlier, the ensemble director is tasked with addressing developmental needs of the ensemble and its individual musicians. By doing this, we offer any student who may have a weakness in a particular skill an opportunity to grow. For example, a student may not be fully proficient at performing a technical line. Before deciding to rewrite it, devise a

warmup that offers the students a slower, more methodical approach. While higher-achieving students capitalize on the extra reps, those needing more skill development have the opportunity to grow without the performance tempo pressure.

To make better, more educated repertoire selections, utilize good recordings and consult with mentors and colleagues. When working with clinicians, it is best to have them listen to your ensemble early and often. Directors often invite clinicians to visit rehearsals just prior to a performance or UIL evaluation. When we ask clinicians to listen to our ensembles at their most vulnerable state, the clinician can offer effective suggestions for individual growth and the future development of the program. *There is no such thing as changing a repertoire selection too early, but there is such a thing as changing it too late.*

Once you select music, work back from any performance dates to map out tempo plans to determine where to begin the process. Often, the first measure is *not* the optimal starting place. Offer yourself and your students benchmarks along the way. These checkpoints should offer easy ways for students to experience success. For example, share your plans for the day, week, and month with them. This allows students the opportunity to monitor their progress along *with* you.

As student abilities evolve throughout the semester, be sure that you and they pause to enjoy their successes. We've each experienced times in our careers where we and the students missed the joy brought by the process. The act of music-making with our non-varsity band students should be something that promotes both happiness and student development.

Our students deserve the best we have to offer. They, in turn, will give of themselves and make the music-making experience more enjoyable and memorable for all. 🎷

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