Shade High School
Student Interest Survey Report
2016
Shade High School Student Interest Survey Report 2016

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Purpose

The current research project has three primary goals.

1. To identify student interests, especially those not currently being fully satisfied through school or community programs and organizations.

2. To determine the extent to which students are willing to participate in fund raising activities to support extracurricular activities.

3. To identify student topical interests to help guide administrative support for senior projects.

While some important methodological caveats must be considered, the data collected allows us to address all three goals.
Summary of Findings

For students participating in the survey, we find the following results:

1. Students participate in a total of approximately 5 hours of paid and unpaid work in a typical week.

2. Students are active and engaged in sports and school activities.

3. Students largely do not participate in community based organizations and activities beyond sports.

4. While already active, students are interested in expanding their participation beyond the activities in which they are already participating, including activities not currently available either at school or in the community.

5. Students actively participate in fundraising activities and can reasonably be expected to continue to do so in the future, including for new clubs or organizations.

6. Students are interested in both “giving back” and “learning more” as part of their senior projects, which they anticipate conducting in one of four areas: sports, charity, academics, and occupations.
Students Surveyed and Resulting Methodological Concerns

In order to be useful for future planning, data collection efforts focused on students in the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades. Students in the 11th and 12th grades were not included in the study because they are nearing the end of their time in high school. In order to plan for the future, it is more important to understand the interests of students who will be in the school for the next two to four years, rather than focusing on the interests of students with (hopefully) at most one year of schooling remaining.

In line with guidelines for ethical research, parental consent forms were sent home with the approximately 120 students who make up the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades. Of these students, 28 returned signed consent forms. On the day of data collection, one student withdrew from the study and four were attending the vocational program and were not available, leaving 23 students with data or approximately twenty percent of the initial population of students.

While a relatively large percentage of the population was surveyed, it is unlikely that this twenty percent of the student population is representative of the 8th, 9th, and 10th grade student body. For instance, male students represent 78 percent of the 8th grade students surveyed, while female students represent 91 and 100 percent of the students surveyed from 9th and 10th grade respectively. The concentration of survey respondents by gender within grade suggests that the data will not be representative of all students within each grade (unless male and female students have the same interests, which seems unlikely). Also, with only eight male students participating across all grades, it is unlikely that male student interests are well represented in the data as a whole. Finally, with respect to gender and grade, only three students from 10th grade participated in the survey, all three of whom are female. So, the interests of 10th grade students are also likely to be underrepresented in the survey data (unless students’ interests do not differ by grade, which seems unlikely).

A second caution in relation to the representativeness of the data is the possibility that engaged students were more likely to participate than students more generally. Only two students report not currently participating in any activities, while the average student reports participating in nearly four activities over the last year. Additionally, two students reported participating in ten or more activities. These data points suggest either a highly engaged, active student body or a tendency for engaged, active students to secure and return parental consent paperwork and to be interested in participating in a survey of students’ interests. While there is no way to know for sure, our hunch is the latter is more likely than the former.

Due to the lack of gender representation by grade, the relative lack of respondents from 10th grade, and the likelihood of engaged, active students participating in the survey at higher rates than other students, the results of the survey are likely not to be representative of the student body as a whole. Despite this potential drawback, some meaningful insights and conclusions, which can aid both the school’s administration and the community plan for the coming years, can still be drawn from the results of the survey.
Findings

Work

While breaking the data down by gender and grade could lead to important insights about the kinds of interests male and female students have and how those interests change as they continue through school, the concentration of male student respondents in the 8th grade and the concentration of female student respondents in 9th and 10th grades make such disaggregated analyses impossible. Instead, aggregate analyses have been conducted to provide a broad overview of the students’ activities and interests.

The students sampled report spending an average of approximately 7.6 hours a week on paid and unpaid work combined, although this number is inflated by a few students reporting over 20 hours of work in a typical week. Given this distribution (a distribution with just a few outliers at the very high end of the scale), the median likely provides a better estimate of how much the average student is working in a typical week. The median total hours worked is about 5.

All students reported engaging in at least one kind of work in a typical week. Responsibilities and chores make up the bulk of this work with an average of 4.1 hours reported. Supervising siblings either before or after school also occupies a significant amount of time in the respondents’ typical week, averaging 2.7 hours. Given their ages (the average age of survey respondents was 14.5 years old), it is not surprising that few students report working in internships, apprenticeships, or at family owned businesses or farms. Only three students reported this kind of work, although two of those three students report working for between five and nine hours a week in this kind of work.

Time is a zero-sum commodity. Time occupied in paid and unpaid work takes away from time which could be used for other kinds of activities. Given the amount of time the students report being engaged in work of some kind, time for other kinds of activities is potentially limited. Although, as the next section suggests, students are finding the time for other activities.

Current Non-Work Activities

Beyond work, students who participated in the survey report participating in a number of organized fun and educational activities. On average, students report participating in approximately 3.7 organized activities in the last year. However, two students or almost nine percent of the sample were not involved in any activities beyond work. Most of the activities students are involved in center on sports and the school. Only nine students reported participating in any community groups and organizations, beyond sports. On average the students report participating in just shy of 2 sports and 1.3 activities offered by the school, such as clubs and organizations, in the last year, while the average participation in community groups was less than one at .6.

Students’ voluntary associations are clearly dominated by sporting and school organized activities. If these students are representative of the student body (which as discussed above, may be an incorrect assumption), then the school is performing its role as a center of students’ social lives well despite its constraints as a small school system.
Less positive is the fact that few students are engaged in organized activities outside of sports and the school. A common finding in social science research is that it is in these community based organizations that students find connection with their community and through them that they likely improve their quality of life, their earning potential, and their civic engagement. (Because this is a massive area of research, it would take several pages to fully source these conclusions. However, please see the following academic articles for relatively approachable, but incomplete, entrances into this field: Tolbert, Lyson, and Irwin 1998; McFarland and Thomas 2006; and Whitham 2012.)

While it is impossible to know anything for sure on the basis of one survey, which did not include questions on social cohesion or solidarity (which would be necessary to directly assess this conclusion), these results suggest that even active and engaged students lack substantial connections to their broader community. Therefore, it may be helpful for the community, including the school, to focus on incorporating students into community based social groups.

*Future Non-Work Activities*

While students who participated in the survey already report being highly active and engaged, they anticipate increasing their level of participation even more in the coming year. We asked students three kinds of questions to determine their anticipation of future involvement in organized activities. First, we asked if students planned to continue participating next year in the activities they are participating in currently. Next, we asked students to tell us which currently available activities they would like to participate in next year even though they are not currently participating in the activity this year. Finally, we asked students to think about activities that are not currently available, but in which they would like to participate if they were available.

First, out of the 86 activities in which students currently report participating, students only anticipate discontinuing their participation in nine activities. The overwhelming majority of students expect to continue participating in all their current activities again next year. A few students plan to stop participation in a single activity. Three students plan to stop participating in more than one activity next year, but these students will continue to be active in a number of other activities. Given that students responding to the survey are already highly active, they anticipate continuing that high level of activity again next year.

We also asked students to tell us which currently available activities they would like to participate in next year even though they are not currently participating in the activity this year. While a few students did not understand the question and chose activities in which they are already participating, most students correctly identified activities in which they did not participate in the previous year. On average, students would like to add about five activities to their already active schedules. Every student indicated interest in at least two additional activities, while one already fairly active student indicated an interest in an additional 11 activities. As with current activities, sports and school based groups dominate students’ future plans. On average students are interested in participating in about 2.1 additional sports and about 2.1 additional school based clubs. Again, we find that students are less interested in participating in community based organizations and activities. On average students are interested in adding less than one additional community based activity to those in which they
are already participating (the exact average is .8 additional community activities). Although students are already fairly active and are clearly overestimating the number of activities in which they could reasonably participate, these findings suggest that students would like to explore more interests than they are currently.

Finally, we asked students to consider activities beyond those currently available. Of the 23 respondents, 18 or 78 percent were interested in participating in activities not currently available either through the school or in the community. The club type producing the highest response with 13 students expressing an interest was “Outdoors Clubs (like rock climbing, hiking, rafting, etc.)”. Second in popularity with nine students interested was “Sports or Sports Clubs (like ski club or gaming club)”.

“Drama or Theatre Club” was another popular choice with 6 students expressing an interest. Finally, a set of closely related academic clubs also received a lot of support, although often by the same set of students. “Academic Clubs (like history, science, or poetry clubs),” “Debate or Forensics Club,” “Mathletes and other trivia clubs,” “International Language or Culture Club,” and “Art Club” received between seven and four interested students. While this may not seem like many interested students, (especially since many of the same students are interested in these clubs), five students represent over 20 percent of the students surveyed. Together, the overall level of interest in this set of clubs suggests support exists for some form of academic club, although the direction it should take is an open question. All other clubs received three or fewer interested students, suggesting there is little existing support for additional clubs at the school beyond the four just mentioned above.

In summary, while students are already highly engaged in sports and school organizations and activities, there is significant student interest in exploring more of their existing interests and in adding a select few clubs to those currently available.

Fundraising
In addition to gauging student interests and the extent to which those interests are being met, the second major goal of the survey is to assess the extent to which students are interested in supporting their activities through fundraising. We decided that asking the question directly would likely result in misleading findings. We anticipated that when asked directly most students would affirm a willingness to fundraise in order to participate in an activity in which they just expressed interest. To address the same question another way, we asked the student to choose the three favorite activities in which they are currently participating and to report on any fundraising events in which the activity engaged. We then asked them to report in which of these events they participated, if any. Our position is if students are willing to participate in fundraising activities to support current activities, they are likely to be willing to participate in fundraising activities to enable other groups or clubs to obtain operating funds.

Of the 46 “favorite” activities reported by the students, 44 of those activities engaged in some kind of fundraising activity. Of those 44 fundraising activities, students reported actively participating in 37 of them. So, over 95 percent of students’ favorite activities have some sort of fundraising component already, and students participated in just shy of 85 percent of those fundraising events. While not definitive, these findings suggest that students – at least the students who participated in the survey – would be willing to participate in fundraising activities in order to support the clubs and organizations in which they actively participate.
Activities and Funding Summary and Suggestions
The survey results suggest that most of the students who participated in the survey are engaged in approximately 5 hours of some form of work and are well integrated into the school environment through their engagement in a number of activities and plan to be engaged again next year. One important caveat is that it is possible that engaged students are more likely to have taken the survey; and therefore, we are overestimating the involvement of the student body as a whole. Also, the numbers are being inflated slightly by a few “super participators” – students involved in a very high number of activities who also plan to be involved in an impossibly high number of additional activities next year. Despite these two cautions, based on students’ self-reports, the majority of students participating in the survey are actively engaged in school and sports oriented activities. This suggests that the school is doing a good job of engaging and satisfying students’ interests.

The one potentially negative finding is that few students are engaged in community based organizations or activities. Given the importance of such activities for building up social connections within and to the community and in creating social trust and solidarity, the lack of involvement in community based organizations is somewhat of a concern. Perhaps steps could be taken to strengthen connections between the school and community organizations which would give the students increased opportunities for or access to community based programs and activities. Such programs could benefit both students and the broader community and may have the added benefit of shifting some of the funding burden away from the school.

Students are particularly interested in outdoors activities, such as rock-climbing, hiking, rafting, and other nature and nature-sports related activities. These kinds of activities may provide the opportunity to link up with outdoors focused groups in the community. Additionally, given the interest in academically oriented clubs, it may be possible to incorporate academic interests into an “Outdoors Club,” if one were to be developed. An “Outdoors Club” would most obviously connect to biology and other natural science academic interests, but could also tie into social science and humanities interests as well, especially civics, geography, history, literature, and writing.

Finally, it is important to point out that students are already actively helping to fund the activities in which they participate through fundraising efforts. While it is important to not burnout students and students’ families, friends, and neighbors by relying too heavily on self-funding activities, it is also important to recognize students’ efforts in not just passively participating in what is available to them. Students are actively engaged in supporting their activities. Given this active support for existing student activities, we expect students to continue to be willing to support new clubs through such activities as well.

Senior Projects
The final goal of survey is to provide information which is potentially useful for the school administration’s planning ahead and working with students on their senior projects. The findings in regards to senior projects are remarkable in how consistent the students are in their interests and ideas. The topics students’ foresee working on for their senior projects break down into two broad goals across four areas of interest.
First, the two broad goals are divided between students interested in learning more about a topic or career and those interested in giving back to a community or helping others. While some students expressed interest in achieving both of these goals, they did so as part of separate potential projects. No students ever combined both goals in a single senior project idea or topic. Each topic always expressed one of these goals or the other but never both.

Second, students focused on four broad areas of interest: sports, charity, academics, and occupations. Students interested in sports or charity work typically expressed an interest in giving back or helping others. Students interested in academics or occupations typically expressed an interest in knowing more about a topic or career. While these interests were often aligned with one broad goal or the other, a few students crossed-over using an area of interest typically associated with one goal to achieve the other goal. For instance, a student might say they were interested in studying a sport or using a sport to understand a topic or career, while most students interested in sports were interested in using sports programs to give back to the community or to use them as a mechanism for doing charity work.

As mentioned above, most students suggested topics or projects focused on achieving both main goals, even though they always focused on just one of the goals for a given project. This suggests that the majority of students are interested in achieving both goals but cannot connect them within a single project or topic. If it is important to make these connections in the senior project, it is helpful to know that students are struggling to make them on their own. If it is satisfactory for senior projects to focus on just one of these outcomes, it still may be useful to know that most students are interested in achieving the other goal as well.

Additionally, the remarkable consistency in students’ goals could come from the students’ perceptions of the goals of the senior project. (It is important to note that the survey did not ask about the students’ perceptions of the goals of the senior project, so we cannot be sure that this is from where the consistency stems. However, the consistency is striking, and this was the best explanation for it that we could construct.) If they believe that the senior project is supposed to focus on community service or on exploring an area of interest, it would come as no surprise that these are the goals that they attempt to articulate when answering a survey question about their goals for their potential senior project. If these are the two primary goals of the senior project, then that message is reaching the majority of students as early as 8th grade. If there are other senior project goals which are either required or encouraged, perhaps the administration could begin to introduce those goals earlier so that students begin to internalize them as much as they seem to have with the goals of giving back and exploring a topic.

Finally, the focus on community service in the senior project was somewhat surprising given the absence of it in the activities portions of the survey. While a few students are active in community service community organizations such as the humane society and potentially church based youth groups, the vast majority of students were not involved in such organizations. Additionally, only one student was interested in joining “Key Club (community service club)” when asked to select currently unavailable clubs that they were interested in joining if available. Why students express interest in community service as part of their senior project but are otherwise uninterested in it is an open question which cannot be addressed using the data from the current survey. (If the students have developed a perception that this is a goal of the senior project, it may explain the discrepancy. As with the above discussion on consistency in
senior project goals, this is just speculation, but we believe it is a reasonable conclusion to draw.)

In terms of future planning, the school’s administrators can anticipate senior projects which focus on four primary topics (sports, charity, academics, and occupations) which try to address one of two goals (giving back to the community or learning more about a particular topic or line of work). While students are interested in achieving both expressed goals, they do not combine them within a single project. Finally, there seems to be a disconnect in the number of students interested in community service as the primary goal of their senior projects but a relative absence of community service in their other expressed interests. Knowing about these trends will hopefully help the administration help students through the senior project process.
References