

Retaining the Tech-Savvy Generation

John Mlynczak

Students are growing up in the most connected world ever, where devices and social media dominate communication. How do we use technology to recruit and retain this generation? How do we integrate intriguing and engaging lessons into our programs in the world of ever-changing technological tools? How do our music programs relate to the device-driven world in which students consume music?

Traditional recruitment and retention activities exist on academic cycles, specifically the beginning and ending of school years. The recruitment tours will always be valuable and we should always take the opportunity to perform live; however, we should also not limit ourselves to these calendar based-activities. The school music program should be highlighted all year long.

Technology provides powerful recruitment and retention tools that we never before had. There are two ways to utilize technology: Music distribution and music creation. Music distribution refers to recording,

marketing, and sharing the music of performance ensembles. Music creation refers to using software and hardware to compose, arrange, and record music. Either way, we should use the recorded and creative output of our students to cultivate consistent enthusiasm and excitement for the music program.

Music Distribution Record Everything.

This essential step allows students to have a tangible file to share with friends and family.

Consistency is key here. Consider a recording of the week, a sharing contest, and playing over the school PA or before faculty meetings. Seize every opportunity to show off ensembles for all students and faculty. This not only drives interest from non-music students, but builds the confidence of the current students.

Make Your Kids Rock Stars.

Along with sharing recordings, how do we market and sell our program and our students? Our students live in a pop culture world and we can take a cue from how artists are marketed and

promoted and apply these concepts to our ensemble members. Does each ensemble have a marketing web page? Not just a music program website with calendar dates and the downloadable handbook, but a marketing page that promotes the ensemble?

What is the perception of a music student in your school? Have the music students create profiles for themselves and share them with their peers.

Empower the Students.

At some point every teacher has the realization that we are no longer “cool”. Once we accept that, we understand that all of the above should be student-driven. Have the students form committees for marketing, recording, webpage, social media, etc., and let them run the image of the ensemble. This allows them to take ownership of the group and be proud to be a member. Student ownership is key for retention as well as recruitment. The music kids are the most effective at convincing their peers to join and stay in a music ensemble.

John Mlynczak will present more on this topic at the Convention/Clinic this summer. We invite you to attend for further discussion!



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Music Creation

Have All Students Compose.

Part of taking ownership of a program is taking ownership of the music performed. Technology has changed the way we compose and create music, particularly in that the creative process no longer requires a semester of music theory to get started. Using software, students can experiment and compose their own music easily, from anywhere. This is a pedagogical shift from how most of us were taught to compose in college, so here are a few tips:

1. Start with short lessons. A composition lesson does not have to be a large, time-consuming project; instead, it can be as simple as an 8-measure melody. Get started right away with easy and consistent assignments.

2. Build off of what you have. Using the music you are already playing in class, have students write alternative melodies, counter melodies, re-harmonize current melodies, rearrange sections for small ensembles, or experiment with various keys and modes.

3. Focus on a skill. Start by breaking down composition into elements and use assignments that just work on melodic shape, or harmony, or counter melody, or orchestration. You can gradually build up to larger composition assignments that include a combination of these elements.

4. Create, Perform, Respond, and Connect in every lesson. Have students share their music, provide feedback, perform their pieces, and connect their ideas to the outside world in every lesson, no matter how big and small. It is important to include the whole process from creation to connection starting at the very first lesson.

5. Build confidence. Remember that a student composition represents a creative idea which they are sharing with others, so always be sensitive in feedback and continuously build confidence.

Create a Course.

A well-rounded secondary music program in the 21st century should include a thriving band, choir, orchestra, and music creation course. The music creation course can use any variety of software and hardware, but the most important element is that we are providing a course where any student can join the music program at any level and where students are learning to create and market music for the entire school program.

The necessity of strong recruitment at key entry points, traditionally sixth grade, is driven by the barriers to entry into a music program in subsequent grades. So often students in 8th grade cannot join a beginning music ensemble because of grade-level elective scheduling, and a high school student with no musical training struggles to join a performing ensemble where students have four to seven years experience. A music creation course allows an entry point for any student at any level to join a music program.

A school music program should be cooperative and collaborative, where all courses work toward common goals of engaging more students in musical activities and creating better human beings through the arts. The music creation course can serve as a central hub where students are recording and promoting the ensembles, creating music for ensembles, and marketing the program. In many ways a music creation course that functions in this manner can serve as the best recruiting tool for performance ensembles.

Conclusion

We need to take a cue from the technological and device-driven world in which students live and start thinking about how we can recruit and retain the current and future generation of music students. This process should be student-driven and our focus should be to cultivate an organic culture of consistent enthusiasm for school music programs among our students and their peers. In fact, isn't this why we teach music in the first place?

John Mlynczak is President-Elect of the Technology Institute for Music Educators, Adjunct Professor of Music Technology at LSU, and the Director of Educational Technology for Noteflight, a Hal Leonard company. Mr. Mlynczak is also a passionate advocate for music education, serving on the NAMM Support Music and State Advocacy Coalitions, the NAfME Advocacy Leadership Force, and is Advocacy Chairman for the Louisiana Music Educator's Association.