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Advantages and Inequalities: The Social Context of Sports and Activities in Catholic High Schools

Andrew M. Guest¹

Abstract: Catholic schools have a particular tradition of excellence in the types of sports, arts, and service activities that have a prominent role in contemporary American education and youth culture. This paper considers ways that tradition may constitute a type of Catholic school advantage in two parts. First, the paper offers a brief social history of activities in Catholic education, suggesting that an emphasis on activities arose for reasons of both educational philosophy and practical need. Second, the paper draws on case studies of two Catholic high schools to explore ways that social history associates with contemporary practice, finding high participation rates and generally positive experiences. There are also indications, however, that developmental and educational experiences with activities vary meaningfully by socioeconomic context. Ultimately, the paper argues that the value of activities depends heavily on social context, suggesting that scholars and educators would do well to attend more carefully to the particular role activities play in Catholic schools.

Keywords: extracurricular activities, sports, service, arts, educational inequality

For a period of time several years ago, *Sports Illustrated* magazine engaged in the somewhat arbitrary practice of ranking what they considered to be the top 25 high school athletic departments in the United States (e.g. Armstrong & Moscatello, 2008). This practice seemed somewhat arbitrary at least in part because a high school extracurricular program ostensibly exists as part of a broader educational process—not as a competitive entity itself. But the composition of the top 25 lists did demonstrate something noteworthy for scholars interested in youth development, education, and activities: over half of the top 25 schools were Catholic. In contrast, according to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics and the National

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Catholic Education for the 2010-2011 school year there were 15,993 “regular public” high schools contrasted to only 1,206 Catholic High Schools (Keaton, 2012; McDonald & Schultz, 2012). This type of disproportionate representation would seem to substantiate a perception shared by many casual observers: Catholic schools tend to be good at sports. And while sport is the most prominent example of an activity domain where Catholic schools seem to excel, many Catholic schools also have reputations for excellence in other activities that are more difficult to quantify such as the performing arts or community service. While there has been considerable academic debate about whether there is a ‘Catholic advantage’ in regard to academic performance, the prominence of sports and other activities in Catholic education raises related questions about a Catholic advantage in the extracurriculum and the role of activities in Catholic education.

This article intends to consider the particular role of sports and activities in Catholic education in two parts: first by offering a brief social history of activities in Catholic schools, and second through a selective discussion of contemporary research perspectives on the role of the extracurriculum in youth development. This latter discussion will include case studies from field research with activities in two Catholic high schools serving distinct socioeconomic communities. Because sports and activities are most consistently institutionalized across high schools, the focus here will be on secondary education and will be somewhat exploratory. While activities such as high school sports play a prominent role in many Catholic schools, there are still relatively few scholarly efforts to analyze activities in relation to the mission of those schools (Kelly, 2015) and thus there is little foundation for conclusive analysis. (In fact, a search of the twenty plus year archive for the *Journal of Catholic Education* found only one regular article focused primarily on the extracurriculum (James, 2007) analyzing ways schools are classified for high school athletic competition) Yet, in the day-to-day experience of many students and in the organization of many Catholic schools, sports and other activities are central to educational experiences.

As an example of how Catholic schools try to integrate sports and activities with their educational mission, it is worth noting the responses I received when undertaking the field research described further below. When I initially approached administrators by describing an interest in the “extracurriculum” one of the schools, a high-achieving suburban Catholic high school which is here called SHS, graciously but immediately clarified that they do not have an “extracurriculum” because all of their activities are integral to the broader educational mission and are considered “co-curricular.” Notably, however, the other school discussed further in this article, an urban Catholic high school here called UHS with a mission of serving students from relatively low-income families who would not otherwise have access to college preparatory education, had no evident problem with talking about the “extracurriculum.” While this semantic distinction has some important philosophical underpinnings, this article will rely on the term “extracurriculum” for the sake of convenience. The article will also, however, address ways that social class may significantly

shape the educational role of the extracurriculum across school contexts.

Overall, the broad proposition here is that Catholic schools do have advantages in the extracurriculum that relate to the social history of Catholic education, but that those advantages are mitigated by the significant inequalities in the contemporary United States. This fits with a broad consensus among scholars that organized activities in general are a valuable potential space for enhancing developmental and educational experiences while also recognizing that social context matters to whether that potential is realized (Mahoney et al., 2009; Vandell et al., 2015). This article explores that proposition by first reviewing scholarly perspectives on how the extracurriculum has taken on meaning in the particular social context of Catholic education, and then describing more contemporary research including case studies in the aforementioned Catholic high schools.

A Brief Social History of the Extracurriculum in Catholic Education

Catholic schools' emphasis on educating the "whole person" in body, mind, and spirit offers a broad opening for promoting educational experiences outside the regular curriculum. This emphasis clearly relates to basic Catholic theology attending to the integration of body and soul, but also fits well with early trends in American education more broadly to integrate extracurricular activities into school communities. This section offers historical examples of how that integration created opportunities for Catholic schools both to shed a history of social marginalization through competitive interscholastic activities, and to enact a particular educational philosophy emphasizing community, character, and service. The resulting prominence of extracurricular activities is not unique to Catholic schools, but it is a symbiotic fit with Catholic educational philosophy.

The Extracurriculum in Catholic Theology and the History of Western Education

The Catholic educational philosophy focused on educating body, mind, and spirit has deep roots in the history of Western formal education. In his 2012 book *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*, for example, Kelly argues that the earliest organized schools drew much from a Catholic theology that attended to the whole person and encouraged recreation. Kelly notes that as far back as 12th century Europe theologians such as Hugh of St. Victor included among the proposed curricula of Catholic schools the "science of entertainments" which he also called "theatrics." Hugh apparently modeled this "science" off entertainments in the ancient world, noting that

Some entertainments took place in theatres, some in the entrance porch of buildings, some in gymnasia, some in amphitheatres, some in arenas, some at feasts, some at shrines. In the theatre, epics were presented either by recitals or by acting out dramatic roles or using masks or puppets; they held choral processions and dance in the porches. In the gymnasia they wrestled; in the amphitheatres they raced on foot or on horses or in chariots; in the arenas

boxers performed; at banquets they made music with songs and instruments and changes, and they played at dice; in the temples at solemn seasons they sang the praises of the gods. (Kelly, 2012, p.108)

Though many centuries old, there are ways in which those scenes could describe many contemporary American high schools after the end of the final academic period of the day.

Kelly also explains that the early integration of recreation into Catholic cultures and educational institutions derived from factors including: the Christian understanding of the material world as good and of the human persona as a unity of body and soul (or body, soul, and spirit); the view that a virtuous person should be moderate in his studies or work and take time to engage in play and recreation; and an understanding of the relationship between faith and culture, which tended toward the acceptance of non-Christian customs and cultural traditions that were good in themselves (or at least not objectionable on moral grounds), and their inclusion in the religious tradition. For some theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, play itself was even understood to have spiritual significance (Kelly, 2012, p. 2).

Of course, many non-Catholic cultures and educational institutions also put significant emphasis on sports, games, and other activities, but from Kelly's perspective that emphasis was based more on promoting an individualized version of "muscular Christianity" and less on broader community norms accepting the value of recreation and an integral curriculum.

Those community norms befit a broader American tendency to make organized activities an integral part of American childhoods and American education of all types. As far back as the 1920s, scholars were describing the extensive palette of extracurricular activities in American schools as the result of the early 20th century explosion in access to secondary education—when schools moved from serving the elite to the masses. As far back as 1925 scholars including Foster explained, "With this phenomenal growth came a broadening of purpose, a more varied curriculum, a more cosmopolitan body of students, and a manifest tendency on the part of the students to imitate the life of the community in which they found themselves ... extra-curricular activities utilize the social instinct and the socializing, integrating factors important in establishing a common basis of feelings, aspirations, and ideals essential in a democracy" (Foster, 1925, p.3-4). Another prescient sounding scholarly analysis from the 1920s noted an astonishingly contemporary sounding list of activity types (categorizing 848 activities into 231 different types ranging from track teams to inventors clubs and literary societies to social service clubs) and familiar claims of diverse assumed benefits (including "training for social cooperation, actual experience in group life, training for citizenship in a democracy, training for leadership, and an improved disciplinary situation and better school spirit," (Koos, 1926, p.10). There were even prophetic concerns about the "evils of over-participation" (p. 17) and a sense that some of the enthusiasm from promoters may be "somewhat over-sanguine in the matter of the values claimed" (p. 12). This nearly one hundred-

year-old rhetoric suggests a recurring discourse in American education promoting the value of the extracurriculum for creating opportunity and encouraging a democratic ethos.

Catholic schools in the early 20th century were distinctively positioned to endorse that discourse due to their social marginalization. In fact, one argument for the prominence of sports in many American Catholic educational institutions suggests that athletic fields were an important symbolic site where early 20th century Catholic communities could prove their competence and ‘American-ness.’ Since many early 20th century Catholic schools were intended for immigrant groups and as a way to counter religious discrimination, sports made for a highly visible proving ground (Gems, 2018). As Kelly (2012) notes, “many Catholics viewed these sporting contests [between Catholic schools and public schools] as an opportunity to show that they were as capable (that is, as strong, smart, resourceful, and so on) as the Protestants and to claim a place for themselves in the wider society” (p. 23). At a national level, this attitude was perhaps most famously represented by attention to Notre Dame football (Gems, 2018; Massa, 1999), but also manifest in a variety of other less-visible Catholic educational contexts.

In her book *O God of Players* discussing that Immaculata College basketball program Byrne (2003), for example, argues that the distinctive success of Catholic schools sports teams was related to the fact that “Catholicism was different from other U.S. faiths because of its populous numbers, diverse composition, institutional strength, separate schools, and antagonism against Protestant Christianity” (Byrne, 2003, p.5). Similarly, in describing the importance of sports and extracurriculars for Catholic high schools in early 20th century Chicago, Gems (1996) has argued that the growth of interscholastic sports coincided with church hierarchy efforts to “unify American Catholicism and assimilate it with the mainstream secular culture” (Gems, 1996, p.284). Sports were both an “effective means of promoting Catholic identity” (p. 284) and “a major avenue of cultural interchange ... where Catholic communalism encountered Protestant individualism” (p. 286). In other words, the unique combination of being both separate from and aspirational towards the American mainstream made school activities an important proving ground for Catholic schools.

The Extracurriculum and the Mission of Catholic Schools

While there seems to be less scholarly literature on the history of extracurricular activities aside from sports in Catholic education, activities such as arts and community service programs fit well with the historical mission of Catholic schools. As part of a 1991 series on Catholic schools for the 21st century, for example, Heft argued that

Catholic schools should excel in art, speech, and drama. We grow spiritually within a tradition of word and sacrament. Besides our understanding of history, we Catholics should develop more fully our sense of ritual and symbol, those ways of knowing and understanding that rely on intuition and wonder, on the power of story and on the beauty of the fine arts. (Heft, 1991,

p.12)

Heft & Reck (1991) also make the case for emphasizing service at Catholic schools, as do other scholars writing about the particular character of Catholic education. Engebretson (2009), for example, cites Pope Benedict XVI in arguing that the “call to holiness” in Catholic schools fits well with a priority on activities involving community service and social justice. Similarly, Grace (2013) argues that for Catholic social teaching to infuse Catholic secondary schools, students must be provided opportunities to “be involved in Catholic social action projects in their communities and beyond” (Grace, 2013, p.105). Youniss et al. (1999) provide a more empirical perspective, finding that Catholic school students are more likely than public school students to participate in community service activities. They explain “The Catholic versus public school differential in service is most likely due to the fact that many Catholic schools mandate service as part of the religious curriculum. This requirement is based on a coupling of religion with the ethic of social justice that is directed to helping others in disadvantaged conditions” (Youniss, et al, 1999, p. 258).

The religious dimension of service activities at Catholic schools has been emphasized by scholars arguing that the very nature of religious education in Catholic schools has shifted since the Second Vatican Council—moving from “the old catechism method” to finding “ways of making religion ‘live’ for students and of meeting young people’s needs” (Rossiter, 1988, p. 264). Similarly, Heft (2011) suggests that enhancing religious education while also encouraging rituals and practices, including high school plays and leadership training, can build a school culture connecting “intellectual and moral formation” (Heft, 2011, p.164) in a way that meets a critical need in contemporary American education.

This emphasis on activities as a way to shape school culture also highlights the related mission function of helping to build a sense of community. The oft-cited book *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Bryk et al., 1993) argues that the success of Catholic high schools depends in large part upon a more communal ethos than that in public schools or non-Catholic private schools, and one part of that communal ethos is extracurricular activity. According to Bryk et al.’s data, for example, Catholic teachers are more involved with activities and spend more time with students outside of class than other school teachers (Bryk et al., 1993, p.136). This emphasis, and the broader sharing of curricular, extracurricular, and religious activities, is then cited in work offering school leaders help in “designing and building Catholic culture in Catholic schools” as one of four key features making Catholic schools communal organizations.

The Extracurriculum in Comparative Perspective and in the Marketplace

The communal function of extracurricular activities may have become particularly important in recent decades as Catholic schools increasingly draw from populations well beyond their local parish. In fact, when comparing public and private high schools using data from 1980 Coleman &

Hoffer (1987) found that Catholic high schools had about the same general levels of extracurricular participation as public high schools—which was significantly less than high performance private high schools. Some of this was because Catholic high schools in the sample tended to be bigger than other private high schools, but Coleman and Hoffer also speculated that

Most extracurricular activities are designed to enhance the social integration of students, and the need for such integration reflects the lack of alternative bases of attachment. In this light, one would expect the Catholic schools to show lower rates of extracurricular participation, for if our argument is correct, the Catholic schools, of the three types of schools, are most closely linked to the communities they serve. (1987, p. 51)

And while Coleman and Hoffer did find slightly lower rates of extracurricular participation in 1980, ongoing shifts in the demographics of Catholic high schools have greatly increased the need to foster social integration, potentially serving as a motivation for many Catholic schools to broaden their extracurricular offerings.

In fact, data from the nationally representative Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002) suggest that activity participation rates in Catholic high schools were much more comparable to those of other private schools than the significantly lower participation rates in public high schools (which may also relate to cuts towards public education).¹ In preliminary analyses of that data, Catholic high schools also had the highest participation rates for community service activities—which may further reflect the distinctive social history of Catholic education. This also fits with other researching using ELS:2002 data finding higher rates of “all round” participation in a variety of extracurricular activities at Catholic high schools compared with public schools (Nelson & Gastic, 2009), and finding that higher levels of extracurricular participation (compared with all but suburban and rural public high schools) helped Catholic high school students in college applications (Lee et al., 2017).

In the contemporary education marketplace the role of activities in helping with college applications also hints at an additional way the extracurriculum may relate to a hypothetical Catholic advantage: by providing a market niche. There are deep and real roots to the Catholic school emphasis on valuing ‘entertainments,’ on educating the whole person, on making religion ‘live,’ and on creating a sense of community. There were also points in the 20th century where the broader popularity of extracurricular activities provided Catholic schools an opportunity to shed

¹ In this unpublished analysis, about 48% of public high school students reported playing sports, while 70% of Catholic high school students and 76% of private high school students reported the same. Likewise about 42% of public high school students reported participating in non-sports extracurricular activities, in contrast to 52% of Catholic high school students and 63% of private high school students. Finally, about 11% of public high school students reported participating in school-based community service activities, in contrast to 23% of Catholic high school students and 16% of private high school students.

a history of social marginalization through direct competition in forums such as interscholastic sports. But in the 21st century a major challenge for Catholic schools is being able to draw and attract students with diverse talents from diverse community types in a competitive educational marketplace. In some cases, this has led to a popular discourse around high school activities that offers a simple explanation for a potential ‘Catholic advantage’ in the extracurriculum: recruiting. While claims of ‘recruiting’ are controversial, it is certainly true that being able to enroll students without the boundary restrictions of public schools offers an advantage in many activity types.

It is also true, however, that any impetus to ‘recruit’ for extracurricular talent still must come from somewhere. So, while serving a market function is a very real part of a contemporary educational climate that makes economic viability a major concern, the argument here is that this too derives—at least in part—from the particular social history of Catholic education. If, however, that social history does help explain the philosophical and historical forces that make extracurricular activities important to Catholic education, it also raises the question of how those forces shape 21st century educational experiences in Catholic schools.

The Extracurriculum and Youth Development Research in Contemporary Contexts

While the quantity and character of activities varies across school contexts, the general palette of extracurricular activities at any 21st century American secondary school (Catholic and otherwise) is relatively consistent. Sports continue to hold a prominent place in most school communities, while arts programs, academic clubs, along with service and leadership activities also garner significant rates of participation. There is, however, increasing evidence that social context matters to both the quantity and quality of extracurricular opportunities, with a trend for upper-middle-class students to become increasingly active while working-class student participation has declined (Snellman et al., 2015). This section first provides a brief overview of the general scholarly literature on extracurricular participation to emphasize the importance of school context, followed by examples from field work at the two Catholic high schools mentioned previously. The argument here is that if the social history of Catholic education has interacted with the emphasis on extracurricular activities in American education to create a Catholic advantage, that advantage still depends upon ongoing attention to the social contexts that ultimately determine the educational value of participation.

Popular and Scholarly Discourses Around Extracurricular Participation

The growing attention to extracurricular activities as part of youth development tends to reinforce the idea that social context matters (Mahoney et al., 2009). This may, in fact, explain the way popular discourses around activities tend to be curiously bipolar. For many proponents, extracurricular activities directly transmit positive values: sports teach life skills, the arts foster

creativity, service cultivates civic responsibility. For many detractors, however, activities reproduce our worst social ills: sports glorify anti-academic values, the arts foster aimless indulgence, service becomes a coercive and superficial obligation. But the very existence of such opposite claims demonstrates that activities themselves do little other than provide developmental and educational contexts that can be healthy, problematic, or some combination thereof.

In fact, as the quantity of relevant scholarly work has increased, particularly given increasing interest in the area of “positive youth development” (Deutsch, 2017), major reviews of research on the value of extracurricular participation have become increasingly cautious. A 1987 review of how activities contribute to youth development (Holland & Andre), for example, was overwhelmingly positive, whereas a 2012 review based on a significantly larger body of more recent research could only find “mixed picture of the relationship between activity participation and ... adolescent developmental outcomes” (Farb & Matjasko, p. 1). There are at least two relevant explanations for findings suggesting mixed overall effects of extracurricular activities. One is that any particular experience with activities has the potential to include both positive and negative effects: learning initiative and feeling overwhelmed with stress, for example, are not mutually exclusive processes. The second is that educational experiences with activities are less about the simple fact of participation and more about quality. The same sport or drama production can be a good experience, a bad experience, or a neutral experience depending on available resources, cultural climate, peer groups, activity leaders, and other elements of the social context.

One crucial contextual dimension for extracurricular activities is the socioeconomic status of the communities in which participation takes place. There is growing concern, along with empirical evidence, that participation rates for high school activities have diverged in recent decades as activities have become more structured and expensive (Snellman et al., 2015). Youth in higher income communities are participating in more activities, while youth in lower income communities are participating less. While much of this difference is accounted for by practical resources such as money and time, some of the difference also seems to relate to differing cultural orientations around activities – which are more likely to be oriented towards the intentional cultivation of developmental and educational opportunities in higher income communities (Weininger et al., 2015).

The relevance of context to the value of extracurricular activities is thus worth considering in relation to the contemporary realities of Catholic education. In the broader scholarly literature on the ‘Catholic school advantage’ there is a long and ongoing debate about how much of the success of Catholic education depends upon selection effects – educating students who are relatively advantaged socio-economically and in regard to family support (Altonji et al., 2005; Bryk et al., 1993; Evans & Schwab, 1995). Scholars of contemporary Catholic education also wrestle with the ways class and race shape experiences in Catholic schools and opportunities for

students (e.g., Burke & Gilbert, 2016). Given that little of this existing work attends specifically to extracurricular activities, experiences from Catholic high schools serving different socio-economic status communities offer insight into how those particular contexts might matter to a hypothetical Catholic advantage in the extracurriculum.

School Level Case Studies of Extracurricular Experiences at Two Catholic High Schools

A year of field research at the two schools here called SHS and UHS was designed to explore broad questions of how social context does, and does not, shape adolescent developmental and educational experiences with school-based sports, arts, and service programs. SHS and UHS offered a useful contrast because they served different community types and offered examples of the range of Catholic secondary schools. SHS has an expansive campus in a large suburban area, and served a generally high achieving 1,100 students from relatively homogeneous and advantaged backgrounds (in surveys for this research 79% identified as Catholic, 86% identified as White or Asian, and 84% reported having a mother with a college degree). Further, 94% of SHS students reported participation in school sponsored activities and 77% participated in additional activities outside of school. UHS was a smaller school (with 250 students) in an urban part of the same region with the explicit mission of serving students from low-income families who would not otherwise have access to private education. The UHS student body was significantly more diverse than the SHS student body, with 37% identifying as Catholic, 45% as White or Asian, and 26% having a mother with a college degree. Activity participation, however, was also high at UHS, with 79% reporting participation in school-sponsored activities and 77% reporting participation outside of school.

More details about this research are available elsewhere (Guest, 2018). A combination of participant-observation, surveys, interviews, and individual case studies combined to create a picture of extracurricular programs that enhanced a broader educational mission: sports teams challenged students to learn about taking initiative, arts programs cultivated creativity and community, while service programs challenged students to reflect on their values. But there were also multiple ways in which the extracurriculum existed in some tension with the philosophical underpinnings of each Catholic high school: talented athletes prioritized sports over academics, drama productions created undue anxiety and status cliques, while community service sometimes subtly reinforced economic inequalities.²

² As just one example of the societal tensions confronted by school-based extracurriculars, during a year spent studying extracurriculars at SHS activity leaders were regularly confronting the reality that talented students are now specializing at earlier and earlier ages—particularly in sports, but also in some of the performing arts. This early specialization was at odds with the school's philosophy of broad participation, but many students were simply disengaging from school teams and programs in favor of private clubs and programs that encouraged early specialization. Thus, while the school seemed to genuinely encourage broad participation across diverse activity types

This mix of potential developmental experiences in the extracurriculum was reflected in results for one of the surveys administered to participants in activity programs at each school. The Youth Experiences Survey (YES) (Hansen & Larson, 2005) builds on reviews of scholarly literature and consultations with youth development programs and experts to assess both positive and negative effects of activity participation (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006). The YES includes six broad categories of positive developmental experiences associated with activity participation: identity work, initiative, emotional regulation, teamwork and social skills, positive relationships, and forming adult networks and social capital. The YES also identifies five categories of negative experiences: stress, inappropriate adult behavior, negative peer influences, social exclusion, and negative group dynamics. Research with the YES has found a general trend for youth to report more positive developmental experiences in activities compared with regular school classes (Larson et al., 2006), and to rate positive experiences as more likely than negative experiences. But there are also variations by activity, such as higher levels of stress in sports activities causing interference in other domains of life, which reinforces the range of potential experiences with activities.

In surveys of 360 SHS students and 104 UHS students participating sports, arts, and service programs reported elsewhere (Guest, 2018), activity participants at these two Catholic high schools also reported generally positive experiences when surveyed with the YES. In fact, students at both UHS and SHS indicated significantly more positive experiences than the YES instrument norming sample—and only reported more negative experiences in the case of UHS activity participants reporting higher than usual stress. It is also worth noting, given that one potentially important contextual variable at Catholic high schools of an emphasis on community-building, that the YES results suggested particularly positive experiences related to building social networks through relationships with peers and through connections to adult networks and social capital.

These generally positive and reasonably similar perceptions of activities are also noteworthy, however, because of what appeared to be dramatic structural differences between activity participation at each school. SHS was broadly identified with its ongoing success in extracurricular activities and the school, along with families attending the school, invested heavily in those activities both philosophically and financially. The school had almost 100 coaches, nearly half of whom also worked as teachers or professional staff. It had multiple gymnasiums, training rooms, outdoor fields with both grass and all-weather turf surfaces, free practice and game equipment from a sponsor, full-time drama teachers, full-time professional staff responsible for community service experiences, multiple theaters and performance spaces, and multiple opportunities for community service across the country and around the world. UHS, in contrast, had very few coaches who also worked as teachers or professional staff, it had one under-sized gym that doubled as a cafeteria along with one shared auditorium, no full-time staff devoted exclusively to service and leadership, and no

as part of a holistic education, that very encouragement sometimes risked losing the most talented students.

community service opportunities beyond the region. While some of this was a function of its smaller size, UHS administrators also choose to focus their limited resources on a core curricular mission they believed would help prepare low-income students for college. At UHS extracurriculars were valued for fun, distraction, and engagement, but were also seen as supplemental to (rather than integrated with) the core academic mission.

It is worth emphasizing here that both UHS and SHS seemed to make the best of whatever resources and opportunities were available for activity programs at each school and each school encouraged broad participation—the rates of participation at each school were so high that in a survey portion of the field research there was no meaningful comparison group of students who were uninvolved. On average, thanks to the philosophical support of each school, the engaging nature of activities, the efforts of activity leaders, and the adaptability of adolescents, the significant structural differences did not seem to have as much psychological impact as one might assume. But in observations it seemed that students generally positive perceptions of their activity participation could obscure meaningful contextual differences evident in examples of student experiences with activities.

Individual Case Studies of Extracurricular Experiences at Two Catholic High Schools

The field research involved a version of exemplar methodology (Bronk, 2012), having administrators at both SHS and UHS nominated several students seen as exemplary in different types of activity participation. These students were then interviewed, as were their parents and coaches or activity leaders. As would be expected of exemplars, they all gained much from their extracurricular activities and represented values important to their schools. But at SHS these students approached their activities as quasi-professional endeavors that allowed them to build on strengths and create opportunities for further participation and education. At UHS, in contrast, the exemplar students often enjoyed their participation as simply being fun engagements keeping them busy in prosocial activities that kept them away from perceived “trouble.”

Charles, for example, is a pseudonym for a student who was a junior at SHS, where he had recently been part of a state championship basketball team. Though he was nearly 6’4” and had the broad shoulders of a football lineman, he played as a graceful point guard specializing in passing and defense. Charles had a serious look and dressed in a way that might have made him easy to stereotype as a “dumb jock” if not for his impeccable politeness and the sole adornment of a subtle Christian cross necklace. His family had a relatively extensive background with Catholic education, and his parents were successful local businesspeople who supported Charles talents and interests with the assumption of opportunities to continue in college. When interviewed, Charles was clear that basketball was his priority; if he was not playing for his high school, he was playing for an elite Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) team in tournaments around the country to ensure his best chance

of being recruited by college basketball coaches. But he also expressed a quiet pride in his 3.5 GPA, and became brightly enthusiastic when discussing his experiences with art and community service.

For Charles, art and community service started as school requirements—everyone had to do some of both, and the school was able to offer extensive options and support staff thanks to the relative affluence of the families who sent their children to SHS. Over time, however, endeavors like trying to improve his artistic ability through immersing himself in painting and studio arts became an engaging challenge for Charles and a different kind of competition from those he faced on the basketball court. Likewise, being assigned to work with developmentally disabled children in a summer camp gave him a chance to reflect on his own blessings and the value of doing service work. At the end of a semi-formal research interview when asked vaguely if there was anything else to know about his experiences with activities in his school community—an opportunity many adolescent interviewees dismiss gratefully in hopes the interview is about to end—Charles emphasized “the biggest thing is just that sports don’t define who we are or who I am. We all need to be open to growth and try new things, like I did with art, and that in return has given me more than I expected.” That idea of being ‘open to growth’ was an SHS motto that the school intentionally enacted through a broad palette of activities outside of conventional classroom settings, and that helped instill in students such as Charles an impressive mix of curiosity, achievement, and ambition.

A similar mix was evident with Tina, a pseudonym for a UHS student whose family was stable and supportive, but of decidedly modest means. Her father worked in retail, her mother had stayed home with their children due partly to never having found other meaningful employment, and they were skeptical that college would be a wise investment (her older brother had skipped college, eventually ending up in the military). When interviewed, however, Tina had become interested in the possibility of attending a small regional college known for its arts programs. Tina seemed to have the personality of a natural showperson, her bright eyes and curly hair bursting with enthusiasm, but she had only discovered her passion for theater in a recent school production of a classic American play. It was the school’s first effort to put on a major drama production in recent years, driven largely by the zeal of a youngish English teacher and a small group of motivated students that included Tina.

Tina was also involved with a wide variety of other activities at UHS, ranging from soccer to service programs to an Earth club that she had helped to start. Though soccer had been her most long-standing activity, she was clear that she (and the rest of the team) only played because they thought it was good fun—they had no ideas of leveraging their sports participation into college opportunities or even into building life skills. As she explained in an interview:

I always played soccer for fun, not because I thought I would like, get a college scholarship or like go be an amazing soccer player on the world – I just did it because it was fun, so I never

saw the need to go join a professional, or not a professional but like a select team.

And when explicitly asked whether soccer might have been anything more than fun, she resisted: “it was just a chance to do something that wasn’t sitting down for a day. I never got any epiphanies or anything from playing soccer. I don’t know if I’m supposed to or not.”

The general discourse around activities at UHS often had a similar tone: they could be fun, and a healthy distraction. But, and in strong contrast to SHS, activities were not typically conceptualized as part of intentional formation towards future success. Ironically, the less intensive environment for activities at UHS did create some learning opportunities not available to students at SHS. Tina’s starting the school ‘Earth club,’ for example, came from her realization that while the school did not have broad extracurricular offerings, if one was motivated it was relatively easy to create new ones. As she explained when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the UHS approach to extracurricular activities,

I have to put in the initial work to - Like the Earth club was started two years ago, no, last year or something like that and the drama club was brought back after 5 years of not being here just this year and so it is a lot of like, I have to - if I want it, I have to get it there. And so that can be viewed as a very positive thing, like a great leadership experience but also it is more work. Like, why can’t I just join an already established something club?

Tina’s autonomy and focus on the intrinsic value of her experiences in sports, arts, and service programs was something of a contrast to Charles’s satisfaction with his competitive success and personal growth in the same general types of activities. Both had positive experiences, as did most students at UHS and SHS, that built on the long-tradition of Catholic high schools attending to the whole person and building community. But because of significant socioeconomic differences and resource differences in the two school communities, students like Charles at SHS were able to take better advantage of already robust opportunities for achievements that would translate well to college and beyond. At UHS, highly motivated students such as Tina found opportunities to create their own experiences and to learn about leadership through improvisation – but even the motivated students often seemed to be falling behind on creating opportunities beyond high school.

I have suggested elsewhere the possibility that these different extracurricular contexts might associate with different developmental and educational experiences in the same types of activities (Guest, 2018). Activities at schools such as UHS sometimes may operate with a ‘deficit’ orientation where low socio-economic status students must learn to overcome obstacles to create their own experiences. At schools such as SHS, in contrast, activities are more likely to operate with an ‘asset’ orientation where relatively high socio-economic status students learn to maximize their talents with the expectation of extensive resources and opportunities.

Overall, however, both schools drew upon a long tradition in Catholic education of encouraging

and creating opportunities for a broad range of extracurricular activities. These case studies suggest it is worth being wary of an assumption that this tradition manifests in uniform ways across school and community contexts. But the case studies also suggest the rich potential for activities to enhance the mission of Catholic schools when the social context allows. Effective school contexts for activities include both physical resources and philosophical support, but they also depend upon simply creating spaces where students can explore all parts of their selves and feel part of a community and tradition.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Catholic schools have a long tradition of using extracurricular activities to build an integral educational community, enact Catholic values, counter marginalization, and fill a market niche. That historical tradition, combined with a modern emphasis on the importance of organized activity participation during adolescence, contributes to high participation rates and positive experiences for many students at contemporary Catholic high schools. The generally positive nature of those experiences should not, however, obscure important differences by social context. There may be a broad Catholic advantage in the extracurriculum, but in an unequal educational landscape that advantage may be particularly pronounced in high resource schools serving more economically advantaged students. Thus, building off a tradition of valuing extracurricular activities requires an ongoing engagement with the pragmatic realities of American education.

The intention here is not to offer specific instructions for such engagement; instead, the hope is that considering the extracurriculum from historical and contemporary perspectives might allow constructive reflection on the ongoing role of extracurricular activities in Catholic education. Given findings in contemporary research on positive youth development suggesting that social context matters to the value of activity participation, Catholic schools may in fact be particularly useful sites for future research on the developmental and educational role of activities. How, for example, does the Catholic philosophical emphasis on building an educational community of shared values and norms beyond just academic content shape adolescent experiences with sports, arts, or service programs? These kinds of inquiries, in turn, could offer better understandings of the broader Catholic advantage and any prospective role of the extracurriculum therein. Ultimately, then, any hypothetical Catholic advantage in the extracurriculum requires simultaneously building on a long and vibrant tradition while engaging intentionally and reflexively with the experiences of contemporary youth.

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