

# Internet Famous! Using Social Media as a Tool for Music Education Advocacy

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## Abstract

*Social media has overtaken the world as the leading communication platform between individuals. How does this help music educators to advocate for their high school music programs in a setting where music is optional? Advocacy – the public support of a particular cause – is integral to the success of a high school music program. In the high school curriculum, music is an elective course that is not always required for graduation. Music educators need to constantly advocate for the existence and importance of their programs to promote and maintain support from stakeholders such as school boards, community members, parents, and students to ensure there are resources, opportunities and interests to give the program the ability to persist and thrive. With the world being in its peak digital age, how can music educators utilize social media to advocate for resources, student involvement, and open the door to opportunity for their programs? While there is plenty of history and research regarding the importance of advocacy, there is little on how to do it in the digital setting. Through the usage of the oral history methodology, I interviewed music educators with backgrounds in upper-level programs that have utilized social media to advocate for their department to gain insight on their experiences. I used this methodology to gather the authentic experiences of teachers using social media and how it has worked for them and their programs. My preliminary findings suggest that the key to successful usage of the digital platforms goes beyond advertising upcoming events, but also showcases the hard work students are doing in rehearsals and class time, and the successes, challenges, and opportunities they face as a part of the program. The usage of social media to provide such insight to the stake-holding followers will highlight the unique importance of upper-level music education to the students involved. This helps music educators create an unbreakable level of support from the students, parents, school board, and community by making the presence of their high school program permanent.*

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## Background

Imagine being fifteen years into a high school choral director position, having deep connections to loyal student members and alumni, and building a legacy out of your program. Then picture this: your

district needs to make budget cuts. “In an age of increased accountability and educational standardization accompanied by tighter budgets and fewer funds, core subjects, such as math and reading, receive more funding and instructional time in

public schools, while non-core subjects, like music, potentially face reductions or elimination in budgets, programs, and staffing” (Major, 2013, para. 2). How do music educators prevent this fate for their own programs? Advocacy. Advocacy is the act of gathering public support for a particular cause. By gathering support of the students, community, and school board, music departments can minimize the chances of being placed on the chopping block. With most of the world being placed on the digital stage, what better way to advocate than to promote music education at the public’s fingertips? Social media is one of the leading communication methods among humans today. Music educators can utilize these platforms to advocate for their departments and cater to current public interest, keeping their department at the forefront of the community's mind, creating opportunity and building support for the arts.

### **Methodology**

The goal of my project is to evaluate the real experiences of music educators that have utilized social media to promote and advocate for their departments, and how they went about doing so. To do this effectively, I used the oral history methodology. This methodology requires the interviewer to ask their narrator questions to get them to describe their experience with the topic at hand. As the interviewer, I asked my narrators about their views and experiences on music education, advocacy, and social media. I interviewed four narrators. I began with Noah Manno and Ruth Kowalski, newly graduated music education majors who utilized Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube to promote and advocate their college a cappella group, Chromatic. I then interviewed two seasoned music educators, Bill Kirsch and Erika Mckee, who currently run the music

program and corresponding social media accounts at South Western High School in Hanover, PA. With the participation of these narrators, I was able to accumulate a vast number of stories regarding their experiences with utilizing social media to advocate for a music program and how success can be found in doing so.

### **Findings**

Upon completion of the oral history interviews, three primary themes emerged regarding how to successfully advocate for a music program and the benefits that follow.

### **Behind the Scenes**

The primary definition of digital advocacy discussed involves showcasing the music program and everything it has to offer. This includes rehearsal, practice, performances, member/student personality and successes, and virtually anything else that immerses followers into what it’s like to be a part of the program. Such immersion draws the community, school administrators, and prospective students a crystal-clear picture as to what music can do for students. R. Kowalski discussed how “music serves function in a lot of different parts of the brain,” highlighting the motor, auditory, visual, and emotional-based regions of the mind. R. Kowalski says, “It’s something that teaches emotions... memory... teamwork,” and people who don’t value music as a core academic subject are “missing the point entirely”. She precedes to discuss a solution to this misunderstanding – social media: “I want to be able to show people what's going on in my classroom... and give people an inside look at ...what it actually looks like... what I'm teaching my students, and... how it's benefiting them. And I think a lot of that can come through social media.” E. Mckee talks about how her department has built a supportive community online; she says, “We have a good advertising system on social

media, they want to know what it's all about... so come and join us, but it's not just come and join us for concerts on social media, it's like pictures of kids in action, doing really great things.”

### **Community Support**

Social media essentially acts as a portfolio of evidence that proves the effectiveness of quality music education. With this proof, educators can provide an argument against any administrative adversity with the support of the community behind them. E. Mckee discussed how this building of community support benefits her department, “When you find yourself in a rut, or God forbid, [administration] would come to us and go, ‘you know what we're cutting music program’, I'm guaranteeing you I make one phone call to my booster president, everybody is showing up... The greater part of that is I'm not going to need too. And that's because we've done the advocacy piece in all different ways.” B. Kirsch gave insight about how the promotion of such information could benefit their program's digital community stating, “We are fortunate at South Western that we've been permitted to travel as a department each year. And so, one of the reasons that we started the Instagram account was to share pictures from the trip with parents... periodically during the trip... I would post and it was a way to engage parents to see some of the great things that were going on.” He goes on to talk about how streamlining this information for the purpose of the parents expands to the rest of the digital community as it showcases the things the department does without that as a target intention. The support of all facets of the school community is only the beginning of what digital advocacy can offer. The narrators also discussed the benefits that arise due to the showcasing of their program online, some of which include the opening

of performance opportunities and networking.

### **Fame and Networking**

A huge benefit to program promotion on social media is the potential to network and open performance and other related opportunities to the involved students. N. Manno talked about the opportunities that arose from the first viral Chromatic post on Facebook, “So during the pandemic, Chromatic... put out [a virtual performance] of Bridge Over Troubled Water... and we put it out for on our Facebook or Instagram, and also the Facebook of Millersville University posted it... And then from that ... we had the university reach out to us to make a video for graduation.” Opportunities of this nature get the program out into the community, building an even stronger reputation for reason of support. This goes hand in hand with networking, the more connections a program has, the more likely opportunities present themselves. Manno went on to discuss the networking that can be done because of Chromatic's social media presence, “We've been able to form some connections with some other acapella groups, and social media will always be a great way to reach out to those groups to, you know, put together joint performances, and... concerts.” These benefits coincide with the ability to utilize the platforms as a method of advocacy and are just another reason to exploit the positive effects social media can bring to a music program.

### **Conclusion**

The research suggests that advocacy through social media provides a music program with countless benefits. With narrator B. Kirsch, discussing hopes to expand their social media usage in the future because of the success they have found so far, “I wish that I had the time, and, you know, the ability to really share a lot more

about what's going on... I think utilizing, you know, Instagram is great... [the community] want[s] to see, you know, short little videos even a picture that tells... more about what's going on." Music educators should expand their view on advocacy to the digital setting in order to maximize effects. Implications for further research could involve determination of which platforms

are most effective for which goals in advocacy, and a more detailed description on how to effectively make posts and campaigns to provide further information on this new method of advocacy.

## References

Major, M. L. (2013). How They Decide: A Case Study Examining the Decision-Making Process for Keeping or Cutting Music in a K–12 Public School District. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 61(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429412474313>

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