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# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BEGINNING INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC RECRUITMENT MATERIALS: COMPARING ELEMENTARY AND ADULT LEARNER CONTEXTS

**Josef Hanson**

## **Introduction**

Instrumental music educators prioritize recruiting—attracting and retaining students. Longitudinal examinations of student retention reveal that upwards of 80% of beginning band and orchestra participants in some areas of the United States drop out by their senior year of high school (Duke & Byo, 2009). Flagging enrollment and school funding cuts have resulted in the reduction or elimination of music programs in many states, especially in impoverished school districts (Hambek, 2016; Pellegrinelli, 2012; Tan, 2013; Van Hecke, 2013). To be sure, many factors contribute to low music participation and retention, including organizational and societal problems not easily solved in the classroom or rehearsal hall. Nonetheless, stakeholders often judge the vibrancy of music programs based on enrollment, so music educators of every specialty seek efficacious methods for recruiting new students.

As early as 1921, school music supervisors recognized the problems of optionalizing music study, as enrollment in American high school music programs declined after school boards across the country reduced music course requirements (Mark & Gary, 2007). The band movement that accompanied and followed World War II bolstered instrumental music enrollments in America throughout the 1950s, but the challenges of student recruitment and attrition eventually reappeared in the 1960s (Edwards, 1968) and have persisted since in varying degrees of criticality. Thus, most undergraduate-level instrumental pedagogy texts include a list of recommended recruiting strategies: cultivating congenial relationships with principals, teachers, and students (Middleton, Haines & Garner, 1998), coordinating instrument demonstrations and recruiting concerts for prospective students (Feldman & Contzius, 2011), assessing students' music aptitude and timbre preferences (Grunow, Gordon & Azzara, 2001), and evaluating students' physical characteristics for the purposes of instrument selection (Mills 2007).

Perhaps due in part to instrumental music's elective status in public schooling, music education practitioners and scholars have developed new paradigms for learning to play an instrument. One prominent example is the growth of ensemble programs for older adults, most notably the *New Horizons* model. Initiated in 1991 by Dr. Roy Ernst at the Eastman School of Music, *New Horizons* provides ensemble music-making opportunities for adults with any amount of musical expertise. Despite the rapid proliferation of *New Horizons* organizations across North America and around the world, many adults feel tentative about commencing instrumental study later in life, especially if they lack musical experience (Dabback, 2005; Freiberg, 2006). Therefore, nearly all *New Horizons* organizations assertively recruit new participants through print and electronic messaging. The most recognizable manifestation of these recruiting efforts is the unofficial *New Horizons* motto: "Your best is good enough" (*New Horizons* International

Music Association, 2016).

### Related Literature

The extent to which beginning instrumental music programs in elementary schools attract and retain students depends on a combination of factors: demographic variables such as students' socioeconomic background (Elpus & Abril, 2011; Kinney, 2010), use of experiential recruiting techniques (Nierman and Veak, 1997), consideration of students' instrument timbre preferences (Gordon, 1991; Kuhlman, 2005), emphasis on intrinsic motivation for music (Dray, 2014; Mitchum, 2007), and social-contextual factors (Baker, 2009; Hurley, 1995) including the teacher's personality and approach (Cutietta & McAllister, 1997; Miksza, Roeder, & Biggs, 2010). In research by Albert (2005), unusually high instrumental music participation in financially-challenged schools resulted from teacher proactivity, the availability of culturally relevant ensembles, and parental, administrative, and community support. Instrumental music education texts spanning nearly 90 years provide practical recommendations for effective recruiting (Froseth, 1974; Hindsley, 1940; Vandercook, 1926). Common recommendations include hosting demonstration concerts, distributing recruiting materials, and cultivating positive relationships with parents, administrators, and music vendors (Fishburn, 2008; Kerstetter, 2011). Several researchers report that students departing instrumental programs cite "loss of interest" as their primary reason for leaving (Brown, 1996; Mitchum, 2007; Sandene, 1994). Recognized attrition factors include student distaste for practicing (Gamin, 2005), poor communication between educators and parents (Fischer & Hamburg, 2001), and systemic issues within schools (e.g., budget cuts, high-stakes testing) (Music Achievement Council, 2006). To sum, in order to comport with these research findings, elementary instrumental recruitment messaging would need to highlight music's intrinsic value and the joys of performing, provide experiential points of entry, honor students' autonomy regarding instrument preference, and emphasize the prosocial and support-dependent context of school-based instrumental study.

Beginning instrumental music programs for adult learners, while similar in some ways to elementary programs, have different goals and constraints that likely inform unique approaches to attracting membership. Recruitment rationales and practices in *New Horizons* ensembles have not received direct attention from music education researchers, but have been addressed indirectly by authors studying related aspects of amateur adult music-making. Klueppelholz's work in this area (1989) revealed that elderly people seek beginning instrumental study to remain active, experience enjoyment, and "let off steam," among other reasons. Other research indicates that adult music learners especially value achievement and development of performance skill (Jutras, 2011), the relatedness or connectedness cultivated in ensemble settings (Cavitt, 2005; Coffman & Adamek, 1999), non-authoritative or low-pressure teaching styles (Dabback, 2005; Rohwer, 2009), and music's intrinsic qualities (King, 2009; Kruse, 2008). Commitment to individual practice, rehearsal attendance, and musical progress typically runs strong among *New Horizons* participants (Coffman, 2009a; Coffman, 2009b). Examinations of *New Horizons* participants' musical behaviors also helps to contextualize recruitment of adult music learners. Griffith (2006) conducted a survey of *New Horizons* band members across North America

and discovered that members primarily desire instruction in different musical styles, musical terminology, refined tone production, and performance technique. Members did not enjoy rehearsal techniques that required them to sing or play alone, but expressed willingness to play in small groups, move, and clap patterns. Taken together, these findings suggest that successful recruitment messaging for older adult instrumental music learners should emphasize musical skill development, music's intrinsic qualities, social enjoyment, and participants' musical goal striving while avoiding stress or pressure.

Recruiting participants for instrumental music study at all levels is important to the short- and long-term viability of performance-based music education. Yet, the above review of literature revealed a lack of rigorous scholarship exploring how practitioners recruit students, what is communicated in recruitment messaging, and which methods work best to attract to retain students in ways that do not undermine educators' philosophical beliefs regarding music learning. To the extent that the music education community understands how the attributes and goals of instrumental teaching and learning are communicated in both K-12 and adult learning contexts, it will benefit from improved recruitment and retention. Practically speaking, this will enable music educators to develop highly-effective recruiting strategies that reflect their philosophical stances and teaching contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore and compare messages conveyed via the recruiting materials of elementary (grades 4-6) and adult (*New Horizons*) instrumental music educators. The following research questions framed the study:

- 1) What commonalities exist in the recruitment messaging of elementary- and adult-level instrumental music educators?
- 2) What areas of divergence exist in the recruitment messaging of elementary- and adult-level instrumental music educators?
- 3) How do these commonalities and areas of divergence synthesize to inform our understanding of the current state of instrumental music recruitment?

### **Method**

To analyze beginning instrumental music recruitment communications in both elementary and *New Horizons* settings, the researcher performed internet searches for promotional materials intended to attract new participants. The Google search engine was used to obtain results for the following search term queries: "beginning band recruiting/recruitment," "instrumental music recruiting/recruitment," "4th/5th/6th grade band parent letter," "join 4th/5th/6th grade band," "*New Horizons* band," "join *New Horizons* band," and "*New Horizons* beginner." While each query produced over 300,000 results, the first 100 results for each search term in Google's "web" and "images" categories were reviewed. Relevance sampling (Krippendorff, 2012), also known as purposive sampling, was used to create the final data corpus. In this non-randomized process,

the researcher examines search results and systematically selects only those units that contribute to answering the stated research questions. The process continues until the researcher achieves data saturation (Morse, 2004)—the point where continuing to collect data only yields redundant or irrelevant information. As Krippendorff explains, “the resulting units of text are not meant to be representative of a population of texts; rather, they are the population of relevant texts, excluding the textual units that do not possess relevant information” (p. 120). This sampling technique proved to be the most efficient means of ensuring the validity of internet query data. Occasionally, the strength and relevance of search results compelled continuation of this review beyond 100 results, and in those cases, review continued until the point of data saturation.

The data corpus comprised initial messaging targeting prospective members of instrumental music programs in the form of recruitment letters, brochures, posters, and web site entry pages (often titled “Welcome,” “About Us,” “Join Us,” or “FAQs”). Once located, the researcher further scrutinized the data for suitability. Decisions to include or exclude documents in the final data corpus were based on the following criteria: (a) origination from a beginning instrumental program in either a public school or active *New Horizons* organization, (b) recency (use for recruiting within the past year), and (c) presence of a clear recruiting message targeting new students. Once approved for inclusion in the data corpus, each artifact was saved in either Word or PDF format and uploaded into Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)) for storage, coding, and analysis.

Following Lindlof and Taylor (2011), data analysis began with inductive open coding. All codes were derived directly from documents in the data corpus in what Charmaz (2014) describes as an “emergent” process. After initial coding, axial codes were generated that represented connections among initial codes, resulting in broader data categories. The process of open/axial coding and inductive categorical development was modeled after similar methods from previous music education content analyses (Alsobrook, 2013; Whitaker, Orman & Yarbrough, 2014). Descriptive quantitative data in the form of coding counts (see Table 1) supplemented qualitative analysis to lend objective credence to the findings. To gauge the trustworthiness of analysis, the researcher arranged for member validation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). An outside panel was formed consisting of an instrumental music educator with extensive recruiting experience, a graduate student in trombone performance who works part-time as a *New Horizons* instructor, and a *New Horizons* band participant. The coding schema and initial analyses were shared with each member of the panel separately, generating unanimous agreement that the methods and tentative findings seemed reasonable and in accord with their instrumental music recruiting experiences.

## Results

### Descriptives

In total, 212 letters, fliers, brochures, and web page excerpts pertaining to instrumental

recruitment in public schools (grades 4-6) and *New Horizons* programs were collected. Of the 212 documents, 50 originated from *New Horizons* organizations in the U.S. and Canada, and 162 originated from U.S. public schools, for a coverage area encompassing 46 U.S. states and six regions of Canada. Therefore, the current sample includes 28% (50 of a possible 179) of *New Horizons* instrumental organizations, but only a small percentage of American public elementary schools. Documents ranged in length from 35 to 2,327 words. Within the entire data corpus, some of the most frequently occurring words comprising five or more letters were “opportunity,” “practice,” “learn,” and “experience.” Within just the subset of *New Horizons* documents, frequently occurring phrases comprising four or more words were “never played an instrument before,” “it’s never too late,” “the opportunity to learn,” and “share the joy of music.” The same analysis of just the elementary subset yielded “will have the opportunity to,” “during the school day,” “to play a musical instrument,” “students are expected to,” and “if you have any questions.”

### **Research Question One: Commonalities**

Instrumental recruitment messages in elementary and *New Horizons* contexts shared structural and thematic elements. Pragmatic logistical information pervaded: who can join, what materials are required, when and where informational meetings and rehearsals are held, and how much it costs to participate. Recruiters described instrumental music study as an opportunity, a special chance to try something new:

Every child should have the opportunity to learn, participate in, understand, and appreciate instrumental music. We hope that you will afford your child this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Welcome to the *New Horizons* Band, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing seniors an exciting and educational opportunity to make music, regardless of ability or experience.

Musical growth or progress prevailed as a shared priority of both elementary and *New Horizons* recruiters, although elementary recruiters tended to portray progress as a means to measurable outcomes while *New Horizons* recruiters portrayed progress as inherently valuable on its own. Similarly, recruiters extolled the extrinsic benefits of musical participation over intrinsic rationales, though more frequently in elementary materials. In both settings, recruiters assertively promoted teamwork and friendship as prominent extrinsic virtues.

Performance was another common point of emphasis. In elementary recruiting, references to performance occurred towards the end of documents, often as a list or description of obligatory concerts. Recruiters rarely used positive descriptors when referencing elementary concerts; more often, they discussed performances objectively and with little regard for the musical and social significance of these events. Elementary recruiters reserved their enthusiasm for descriptions of the future secondary-level performance opportunities that might become



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available to students after many years of sustained effort:

This program is important because, as an integral part of the K–12 music curriculum, it is the foundation of the award-winning middle school and high school band and orchestral programs.

*New Horizons* recruiters tended to address performance reassuringly in order to minimize performance anxiety and promote learning processes over outcomes:

This musical ensemble emphasizes...learning and enjoyment of music above the rigors and pressures of performance. Although musical comprehension and appreciation are of the highest priorities, the band also performs regularly.

A final point of concordance between elementary and *New Horizons* recruitment was the importance of student needs fulfillment, particularly support of student autonomy. Recruiters coupled this with an emphasis on personal goal striving and the tenacity and persistence required to attain musical goals.

### **Research Question Two: Areas of Divergence**

***Elementary recruiting.*** A striking difference between elementary and *New Horizons* recruitment was the prominence of achievement in elementary messaging. The desire to be “successful,” “high-achieving,” or otherwise meritorious at the elementary level stood out:

You may be familiar with our outstanding band program...band students are usually the best and brightest in their grades.

Last year, several 6th grade students won “Outstanding Soloist” awards after they competed against students from other schools.

The citation of instrumental music’s extrinsic benefits underscores the importance elementary recruiters, parents, and school leaders placed on achievement:

National research proves that students in school band programs average higher grades in all subjects and develop faster academically than other students.

Instrument choice appeared as a frequent theme in elementary recruiting. Recruiters portrayed the instrument itself as the path to musicianship and success; therefore, selection of the “right” instrument received priority. Conversely, *New Horizons* organizations tended to minimize instrument choice in initial recruiting attempts.

Commitment and support, two additional points of emphasis in elementary instrumental recruiting, rarely appeared in *New Horizons* recruitment materials. Recruiters cautioned parents and students to consider the obligations of elementary instrumental music before proceeding

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with enrollment. This focus on commitment extended to rather sobering discussions of practice expectations, scheduling, and, again, selecting the right instrument. Parental support of elementary instrument learners appeared prominently in elementary recruitment messaging. Recruiters portrayed parents as key determinants of student success in music:

Parents, we need your help in supporting your child. Let them know how important band is and help them develop a regular practice routine.

Children love to please and need your support in new endeavors. If your child knows that you believe learning a musical instrument is important, he/she will believe it, too!

*New Horizons* recruiting materials did not generally reference practice expectations or support systems required for musical growth.

***New Horizons recruiting.*** The recruitment messaging of *New Horizons* organization focused on dreams, diversity, challenge, and relatedness. Recruiters cast *New Horizons* as a vehicle for the realization of musical dreams and desires:

Have you ever dreamed of playing a musical instrument? Is there a dusty instrument in your closet that you've been thinking about playing? We can provide you with the opportunity to live those dreams!

While elementary beginners may also dream of acquiring proficiency on a musical instrument, none of the elementary recruiting materials under review referenced musical dreams or wishes. Another pronounced feature of *New Horizons* recruitment messaging was the musical diversity of its members. Recruiters aimed to evoke a low pressure, welcoming community of diverse musicians. While schools today are more diverse than ever, elementary recruiting messaging did not prioritize cultural and musical diversity.

Unlike elementary recruiters who focused on students' commitment to instrumental study, *New Horizons* recruiters emphasized the challenge of instrumental study—the satisfaction of musical growth through persistence. While both domains of recruiting promoted extrinsic rationales for participation over music's intrinsic value, *New Horizons* heavily favored relatedness and other social justifications. Friendship and connection to others appeared frequently. Additionally, *New Horizons* messaging stressed affiliation. References to *New Horizons*' network of hundreds of bands, thousands of members, and opportunities to share concerts and connect at summer music camps conveyed a sense of belonging to something vast and important:

Our band, and the hundreds of *New Horizons* Band groups across the U.S. and abroad, are full of people who doubted whether they could ever learn to play an instrument. Yet they are all doing it, and having the time of their lives.



**Conspicuous omissions.** Very few recruiters in either domain included a thorough explanation of the intrinsic value of music in their documentation. Instead, mostly extrinsic justifications intermingled with nebulous statements about “the joy” or “lifelong appreciation” of music. More striking was an almost universal neglect of the creative aspects of music. In fact, recruiters often relegated the word “creativity” to the list of purported extrinsic outcomes of music, alongside “critical thinking,” “self-discipline,” and “confidence,” to name a few. Expressiveness, the creation of new music via improvisation or composition, and other inherently musical qualities and behaviors rarely appeared in the documents examined.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and compare messages conveyed via the recruiting materials of elementary (grades 4-6) and adult (*New Horizons*) instrumental music educators. Obviously, these two populations vary in terms of age, life experience, and physical and cognitive factors. Nonetheless, these groups exhibit more similarities than differences—foremost among them, a desire to develop skill and perform music cooperatively. Businesslike descriptions of membership logistics, instrument selection procedures, and costs of participation predominated; 78% of all recruiting materials reviewed devoted considerable text to this purpose. The largest disparity appeared in messaging regarding instrument choice. Raw count data indicated that elementary recruiters commented on instrument choice 234 times, sometimes multiple times within the same document. Conversely, *New Horizons* recruiters mentioned it only 16 times. Whether this simply reflects elementary teachers’ conscientiousness or points to a deeper theme is subject to speculation and requires further exploration.

Research Question Three posed the following: How do the commonalities and areas of divergence identified above synthesize to inform our understanding of the current state of instrumental music recruitment? The *New Horizons* recruiting materials analyzed generally aligned with the needs and preferences cited by adult learners in previous studies. That is, *New Horizons* messaging emphasized musical skill development, blended intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, and promoted musical goal attainment in a low-pressure environment. However, *New Horizons* recruiters provided little insight into support structures for adult beginners. According to Albert (2005), encouragement and guidance during individual practice is important for adult beginners, just as it is for school-age beginners. The sample of elementary materials analyzed in this study addressed many but not all of the retention and attrition factors cited in previous studies. A major departure from the recruitment literature concerns the elevation of purported extrinsic benefits of music study over music’s intrinsic value. Past research indicates that students persist in instrumental study when they feel intrinsically motivated by music (Dray, 2014; Mitchum, 2007). Intrinsic aspects of music include aesthetic sensitivity, personal expression, cultural understanding, and the unique and ineffable feelings and understandings that come with being a musical person. Overreliance on extrinsic, even utilitarian justifications for involvement in instrumental music has been identified as problematic (Elpus, 2007); recruiters at all levels of music education might consider more balanced messaging that attracts students

without undermining the philosophical foundations of music education.

To borrow from Plato's theory of the "tripartite soul" (from *The Republic*), recruitment messaging in both elementary and *New Horizons* contexts attempted to blend the appetitive (pleasure-seeking) and spirited (goal-oriented) domains of the human psyche to inform a rational decision to participate in instrumental music. An imbalance among these domains emerged in both recruitment contexts. Generally, elementary-level recruitment messaging focused chiefly on the spirited elements—achievement and "success"—which overshadowed the passionate and joyous aspects of music-making. *New Horizons* recruitment messaging tended to highlight the appetitive or pleasurable, and often obscured the commitment and resources required for participation. A simple rebalancing of recruitment messaging in both domains might better enable potential participants to make informed membership decisions. On the other hand, perhaps an imbalance of a certain degree should be expected. Adults know from experience that success requires persistence, so why not emphasize the pleasurable aspects of instrumental music in *New Horizons* messaging and save the more dispassionate communications for younger students and their parents? Additionally, creativity—a stated objective of music study—does not easily fit into this tripartite framework. It cannot be ascribed solely to either the appetitive or spirited category. Perhaps not coincidentally, recruiters seldom integrated creativity throughout the sample of recruitment materials explored. Creativity, improvisation and composition were noticeably absent in both types of recruiting materials; yet, researchers recommend them as meaningful components of instrumental music at every level of learning (Grunow, Gordon & Azzara, 2001).

Given the relevance sampling procedure employed and the potential of sampling bias, generalizing findings to all *New Horizons* organizations and elementary instrumental music programs is not recommended. Findings were limited by the availability of recruiting materials online, and by subjective analytical and interpretative choices throughout the research process. However, essences of these findings likely transfer to a variety of instrumental teaching situations. Additional inquiry will help determine the effectiveness and ramifications of various recruiting messages. In particular, researchers might investigate the pervasive use of extrinsic and utilitarian rationales for attracting participants to instrumental programs, since the effectiveness of these often misleading messages is not known. Future investigations of recruiting practices in other instrumental learning scenarios (e.g., middle/high school level, strings, and/or ensembles specializing in alternative or commercial styles) and in choirs and other elective musical endeavors would provide a basis of comparison and the opportunity to develop best practices. This study also carries implications for instrumental music educators at all levels. Instrument choice, while important, need not overshadow the development of musicianship that transcends specific instrumental and ensemble contexts. Recruitment narratives based around participants' experiences—testimonials, performance footage, and success stories featuring real people—might prove more effective than the hypothetical conjuring present in current messaging. Practitioners should consider developing recruitment rhetoric that emphasizes creativity and the uniquely musical features of participation, highlights diversity and inclusiveness, and that

decentralizes instrument choice and deemphasizes the encumbrances of membership.

Table 1. Thematic categories found at least once in instrumental recruiting materials, with case counts and percentages

Category	Description of Category	Elementary (n = 162)		New Horizons (n = 50)	
		#	%	#	%
Logistics/cost	Pragmatic information: who, what, when, where, etc.	132	81.5%	39	78.0%
Opportunity	Learning an instrument is a special chance to try something new	45	27.8%	50	100.0%
Growth/progress	Making progress towards musical, social, and/or extramusical goals	55	34.0%	27	54.0%
Extrinsic benefits	Teamwork, determination, higher test scores, improved health, etc.	49	30.2%	15	30.0%
Intrinsic benefits	The positive, uniquely musical aspects of instrumental study	16	9.9%	14	28.0%
Performance	Descriptions of performing on an instrument, either solo or as part of an ensemble	56	34.6%	28	56.0%
Needs fulfillment	Satisfaction of psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, etc.	38	23.5%	23	46.0%
Achievement	Recognition for attaining goals or excelling in comparison to others	35	21.6%	2	4.0%
Instrument choice	Emphasis on choosing the “right” instrument	78	48.1%	12	24.0%
Commitment/support	Consideration of the obligations of participation and interpersonal support required to make progress	57	35.2%	3	6.0%
Dreams	Wishes or desires that learning an instrument might help realize	0	0.0%	13	26.0%
Diversity	Emphasizing the diversity of participants (demographics, musical background and experience, etc.)	5	3.1%	31	62.0%
Affiliation	Connection to a larger network of music learners and organizations	4	2.5%	20	40.0%

\*Case count figures do not reflect instances where a coding category was found multiple times within a single recruiting document. Analysis of such data (raw code counts) supported the results presented herein. Categories are listed in order of presentation in the “Results” section.

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