

## Student Perceptions of the Academic Value of Arts Education

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The Center for Integrated Arts Education works with state and arts advocacy agencies to promote the “core” value of the arts and arts education. It was determined important to investigate the unbiased perceptions of students concerning the role of arts study within their broader education. A preliminary study was conducted in the spring of 2009.

The study, funded in part by a grant from the National Art Education Association, was guided by the following research questions: Do students in grades 6–12 perceive the arts as important as other subject matters for their education? Do they see the arts classes contributing to a continuing body of knowledge or skill? Do art classes contribute to perceptions of academic success? Furthermore, do these perceptions differ amongst students who are involved in arts classes, compared to those who are not?

Subjects were students ( $N = 821$ ) of four local secondary schools (two middle schools and two high schools) that had recently agreed to participate in an arts education partnership with the university from which this research was conducted. As this partnership is now in its earliest stages, results from the study might be considered to be broadly generalizable. By virtue of their responses on the survey instrument, about half of the students ( $n = 421$ ) were designated as “arts students,” having been both currently and previously enrolled in arts classes (i.e., drama, music, or visual arts); the rest ( $n = 400$ ) were designated as “nonarts students.”

The survey instrument consisted of nine questions. Eight of the questions solicited students’ opinions (via their responses on Likert-type scales) about typical school course offerings, including Drama/theatre, English, Mathematics, Music, “P.E.” (physical education), Science, Social studies, Visual arts, and World languages. No indication was given on the survey instrument that the information was being sought by arts-affiliated researchers, nor that this was an “arts survey” of any kind. Questions included what classes among the listed disciplines they would like to continue to take; their beliefs about the importance of each of these disciplines to their education; their sense of “connectivity” between sequential courses in the same discipline; relationships between success in each discipline and perceived success in school; and their sense of interest and curiosity in the discipline. The final question solicited a free-response answer regarding student suggestions for school reform.

Principal components analysis (PCA) supported grouping of arts classes (drama, music, visual arts) and nonarts classes (all others, excluding P.E.). Students' responses on the Likert-type scales demonstrated numerous statistically significant differences between "arts students" and "nonarts students," and between each student groups' perceptions of arts classes and nonarts classes. Particularly notable results include the finding that arts students valued both arts classes *and nonarts classes* as being important to their education more so than nonarts students; also, arts students considered nonarts classes to be more related to their overall scholastic success than arts classes, and more so than nonarts students. Analysis of the answers to the free-response question showed a conspicuous absence of arts-related comments among both student groups, but also a persistent theme of desiring greater student engagement via instructional methods and curricular offerings.

These results suggest a certain congruence of arts involvement with broader academic affinity among students. Rather than being distracting to traditional "core" subject matters, arts classes (and students' success in them) seem to be complementary to academic interest and overall scholastic success. Positive perceptions of both arts and nonarts classes are most pronounced among students with arts experience. Although this study does not establish causal relationships among these variables, nor between these variables and demonstrated academic achievement, it seems plausible that arts involvement may (at least) not detrimentally affect student performance or student attitudes toward other subject matters. Such involvement may function positively for student perceptions of school climate.