HARMONIZING WELLNESS: HOW COLLEGIATE MARCHING BAND PARTICIPATION SHAPES STUDENT WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT

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This qualitative study explores the experiences of collegiate marching band students, with particular attention to how participation influences their emotional well-being and cocurricular engagement. Using a phenomenological approach, the research examines how students perceive the emotional impact of marching band participation, including the stressors, supports, and structural barriers that shape their mental health. Ten students from multiple institutions participated in semi-structured interviews, with three major themes emerging: the emotional highs and lows of participation, the role of community and belonging, and challenges accessing mental health resources. Findings suggest that targeted support strategies, enhanced training for band staff, and improved access to campus resources can strengthen student well-being and developmental outcomes in collegiate marching band settings. The study offers actionable insights for campus activity professionals and music program leaders seeking to foster healthier, more supportive cocurricular environments.

College students can engage in various extracurricular activities, with marching band being a popular option during football season, when band members perform weekly and face high expectations. These students endure intense physical and competitive demands, often practicing for hours to perfect music and field shows (Giardina, 2016; Matthews, 2017). Still, they are frequently overlooked in conversations about student development, well-being, and the impact of cocurricular participation. Marching requires significant physical exertion, relying on both cardiovascular stamina and muscular strength to carry instruments and perform on the field (Granata & Benardot, 2009; Washington III, 2019). Band members often report fatigue, heat-related illness, and muscle soreness, and their physical demands rival those of student-athletes, placing them at risk for dehydration and other health concerns (Moffit et al., 2015).

Beyond physical demands, marching band also requires sustained mental focus to memorize music, marching techniques, and routines while maintaining tempo and performance precision (Washington III, 2019). However, research on how these demands affect the emotional well-being of collegiate marching band students remains limited, especially compared with the extensive literature on student-athletes. This gap is particularly concerning given the similarities in time

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commitment, physical strain, and performance expectations. This lack of research is especially pressing in light of broader trends in higher education, where emotional and mental well-being concerns among college students have become increasingly common.

Emotional and mental health concerns are on the rise among college students, with more than 60% reporting at least one mental health issue during their academic journey (Flannery, 2023). National data also show a sharp increase in the severity and frequency of these concerns over the past decade (Lipson et al., 2022). In response, 87.3% of college counseling center directors have expressed alarm about the growing demand for services and the escalation of serious psychological issues on campus (Levine et al., 2020). These challenges can interfere with students' academic performance, relationships, and participation in extracurricular activities. As collegiate marching bands take on a central role in campus life and events, students are investing substantial time and energy to meet the demands of participation. As a result, many may lack the time or capacity to seek out and utilize campus mental health resources. These circumstances raise important questions about how marching band involvement shapes student emotional well-being and mental health and what institutions can do to better support this population.

This study explored the experiences of band students who participate in collegiate marching bands and the perceived impact of such participation on band students' emotional well-being and mental health. The purpose of this research was to give voice to an understudied student population and contribute to conversations about how high-intensity collegiate activities shape student development and well-being.

This study was guided by the following three questions:

1. How do collegiate marching band students describe their lived experiences participating in a marching band?

2. How do students perceive the effects of marching band participation on their emotional well-being and mental health?

3. What contextual or structural factors do students identify as influencing their emotional well-being and mental health during the high-intensity times in a marching band?

Literature Review

Emotional Well-being and Mental Health

Emotional well-being and mental health concerns among college students have increased significantly over the past decade (Lipson et al., 2022). Common issues include depression, anxiety, and suicidality, which can impact academic performance and engagement in campus activities (Abrams, 2022). Access to campus counseling services has been shown to help students manage stress and develop coping strategies, making them a critical support for students

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navigating mental health challenges (Vidourek et al., 2014). These trends illustrate the importance of understanding how specific student groups, such as collegiate marching band members, experience and navigate the intensive demands of cocurricular participation.

Several risk factors trigger emotional well-being and mental health issues among college students, including the pressure to succeed, homesickness, financial difficulties, and competition for job and internship opportunities (Woof et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of socialization associated with the pandemic further added to the array of factors that impact college students' emotional well-being (Chenneville et al., 2023). As marching band students often face time constraints and social isolation similar to those exacerbated during the pandemic, this population may be especially vulnerable to compounding mental health stressors.

Diathesis-Stress Model

This study is grounded in the diathesis-stress model, which posits that mental disorders result from the interaction between a predispositional vulnerability (diathesis) and environmental stressors (Monroe & Simons, 1991). Social and cognitive predispositions can also be associated with diathesis (Heeringen, 2012). Psychopathology, or the study of abnormal mental states, is brought on by stress, and negative events precipitate disorders that can impact an individual's mental health without biological and psychological components (Heeringen, 2012). In this context, diathesis is referred to as an internal predisposition to a disorder. Stress is the emotional and mental response to a difficult situation (National Institute on Mental Health [NIMH], 2023). An individual experiencing diathesis responds to external stimuli abnormally, which can indicate mental health concerns (Heeringen, 2012).

According to Patton (2013), an individual who has experienced childhood adversity is at risk of developing a mental health disorder as an adult due to additional stressors that the individual may deal with in addition to past trauma. A broader perspective has been adopted by Swearer and Hymel (2015), who argued that stressful life events can trigger the onset of anxiety, depression, and other trauma-related mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Other factors, such as personality traits and situational stressors, may be considered diathesis, hence possibly giving rise to different responses to emotional distress. Starting college is a major transition for many college students, which may trigger high-stress levels. Stress and mental health concerns are not separate from one another and tend to exist together as conditions that impact college students' overall well-being (Levine et al., 2020).

Marching Band as a College Activity

Marching band is one of the most popular extracurricular activities for students (Heath, 2017). Many students can begin participation in marching band as early as the sixth grade. Research documents a positive correlation between high school marching band participation and the continuation of such involvement at the collegiate level (Heath, 2017). This phenomenon has been

attributed to the students' intrinsic enjoyment of participating in marching band activities, as marching band participants feel like they receive a sense of notoriety comparable to that of student-athletes. Marching band students also benefit socially by feeling connected to other band members, by being a part of a team, and working with a group (Cumberledge, 2017).

Existing research suggests that marching band participation fosters both musical growth and social-emotional development. Students often continue from high school to college marching band due to the intrinsic enjoyment and sense of connection they experience (Heath, 2017). Marching band involvement was also found to support students' self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills (Carver, 2019). Because band members spend significant time together, strong interpersonal bonds often form, creating a sense of community and emotional support, factors shown to positively influence student well-being. These social-emotional benefits highlight the dual nature of marching band participation, as both a protective factor and a potential source of stress, making it a relevant context for studying college students' emotional well-being and mental health.

Collegiate Marching Band Members' Health

Marching band students endure physical demands, injuries, and other health risks like collegiate student-athletes. Many NCAA Division I institutions participate in the Power Five conferences, whose games are televised and must remain on a strict schedule (Emerson et al., 2021). Games, practices, and other performances are often held during hot times of the day, which can contribute to the risk of heat-related illnesses among the band members. Emerson et al. (2021) examined collegiate marching band students' core body temperatures and their risk of heat-related illness and found that it was heightened by fixed performance times for games, parades, and other events. Such environmental and scheduling constraints are important to consider when examining how the physical demands of band participation intersect with emotional and mental health outcomes.

Prior research has also focused on the biomechanical demands of collegiate marching band students. These students are exposed to various weather conditions, increased noise levels, and sometimes long travel times to games and performances, which can result in muscle and joint pain. Additionally, they may experience shortness of breath, chest pain, musculoskeletal pain, and exhaustion, which are all associated with holding and playing instruments and marching and moving in various ways (Hathway & Chesky, 2013). Collegiate marching band students were also found to experience high levels of musculoskeletal pain (Hatheway & Chesky, 2013). These physical stressors, when combined with academic responsibilities and performance expectations, may elevate emotional strain among band students.

There is a scarcity of literature regarding college band students and student emotional and mental health well-being. The numerous activities that collegiate marching band students are involved in, such as learning field shows and music, pep rallies, parades, field shows and stadium stand performances, increase the possibility of burnout and mental strain (Cumberledge, 2017). Hazing

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behaviors, such as degrading and verbal humiliation, further impact college band students' mental health (Matthews, 2017). Despite these documented concerns, limited research has qualitatively explored how collegiate marching band students experience and interpret the mental health impacts of their participation - an area this study aims to address.

Methodology

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of collegiate marching band students and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences. Rooted in the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1970) and advanced by Clark Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by focusing on participants' experiences while encouraging researchers to engage in reflexivity and bracket their own assumptions. This approach was especially suited for understanding the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assigned to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). Given the limited research on collegiate marching band students' emotional well-being and mental health, a transcendental phenomenological design was well suited to explore how students perceived and made meaning of these experiences. This design allowed us to center students' voices and generate a rich, experience-based understanding of a unique student population rarely addressed in mental health research.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study were collegiate marching band students recruited from two sources. The first was a medium-sized university in the Southeastern United States, where the marching band includes nearly 300 students and performs throughout the academic year, especially during football season. This institution was selected based on accessibility and an existing professional connection between the researchers and the marching band director. This connection aided direct recruitment and convenience sampling at this site, by having access to a large, engaged group of student participants in a high-intensity collegiate marching band environment.

To expand the sample and enhance participant diversity, additional students were recruited nationally using purposeful sampling. The researchers distributed the recruitment flyer via open-access social media groups on Facebook and LinkedIn that are frequented by collegiate marching band students and related communities. This dual recruitment strategy supported a broad perspective on students' experiences with collegiate marching band participation.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at their affiliated institution. All participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the study. Interested students could scan a QR code on the flyers to complete a brief

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screening questionnaire to confirm eligibility. The inclusion criteria required that they be currently enrolled college students, at least 18 years old, and actively participating in a collegiate marching band. Eligible participants were invited to sign up for an individual interview.

The interview protocol for semi-structured interviews consisted of 13 questions that asked about participants' experiences of collegiate marching band participation, general knowledge about emotional well-being and mental health, and specific emotional and mental health concerns, such as anxiety and stress. The remaining questions were designed to address the study's three research questions, which focused on students' experiences in collegiate marching band, their emotional and mental well-being while participating, and the contextual or structural factors that contribute to the impact of marching band on their emotional well-being and mental health. The full interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

The data were collected in the fall of 2024. Because participants were geographically dispersed, all interviews took place via Zoom with one of the researchers. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription feature. The transcripts were then reviewed and edited for accuracy and clarity.

Positionality

The research team brought complementary perspectives to this study. The primary researcher is a former collegiate marching band member. Her lived experiences with the physical, emotional, and social demands of collegiate marching band informed her interest in exploring the emotional well-being and mental health of marching band students. At the same time, she engaged in ongoing reflexivity and bracketing (epoché) throughout data collection and analysis, consciously examining and setting aside personal assumptions to focus on participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To strengthen the rigor of the study, she collaborated with a second researcher who had no prior experience with collegiate marching band but has extensive expertise in research mentoring, qualitative research, and data analysis. The second researcher provided a critical review of the study and data analysis and helped challenge any assumptions that could arise from the primary researcher's lived experience.

Data Analysis

This study used thematic data analysis, following a phenomenological approach. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method in qualitative research for analyzing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the study's emphasis on students' lived experiences and meaning-making related to their emotional well-being, mental health, and participation in collegiate marching band, thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework for organizing participants' narratives.

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A phenomenological orientation was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure the findings reflected participants' own perspectives and subjective realities (Moustakas, 1994). The primary researcher read transcripts multiple times to achieve immersion in the data and identify meaningful units of text. The primary researcher developed initial codes manually based on recurring ideas and patterns identified across the transcripts. These codes were then compared, refined, and grouped into broader themes that aligned with the study's research questions. These included mental and emotional experiences, peer and institutional support, and barriers to emotional and mental health resource access.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the second researcher reviewed the coding framework, theme development, and supporting participant excerpts. During this process, the second researcher independently evaluated whether the codes and themes accurately reflected the interview data and provided feedback on their organization and interpretation. The researchers compared their interpretations, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus on the final themes. Participants were also offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to verify their accuracy. No participants requested corrections or identified discrepancies in their transcripts. This approach enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the analysis by ensuring that the findings faithfully represented participants' narratives and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Ten collegiate marching band students volunteered for an interview. All participants were full-time, actively enrolled college students and members of their university marching bands. Six were recruited from the primary recruitment institution, and four from other universities nationwide. Participants represented a range of demographics, including varied academic classifications (freshman through senior), instrumental sections (woodwind, brass, percussion), racial identities, and gender identities. Table 1 provides a summary of participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

	Gender	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	College/ University	Instrument Type	Classification
Participant 1	Non-Binary	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior
Participant 2	Female	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior
Participant 3	Female	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Freshman
Participant 4	Female	20-22	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior

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Participant 5	Male	18-20	Black	University 1	Brass	Freshman
Participant 6	Female	20-22	Black	University 2	Woodwind	Senior
Participant 7	Male	18-20	White	University 3	Brass	Freshman
Participant 8	Female	18-20	Black	University 2	Woodwind	Sophomore
Participant 9	Female	18-20	White	University 4	Brass	Freshman
Participant 10	Male	18-20	Black	University 1	Percussion	Sophomore

Thematic Results

Three major themes emerged from the data, capturing the mental and emotional complexities of marching band participation: 1) mental and emotional impact of band participation, 2) community, belonging, and support in the band environment, and 3) barriers and support structures for emotional well-being and mental health resource access. The following sections provide an overview of each theme, supported by participants' reflections and examples that illustrate the varied ways collegiate marching band participation influences emotional well-being and mental health.

Theme 1: Mental and Emotional Impact of Band Participation

The first identified theme was students' mental and emotional experiences while participating in a collegiate marching band and the perceived impact of these experiences on their mental health. Anxious and stressful periods were prevalent at different times during the marching band season, including band camp. Many students recalled being physically and mentally exhausted during band camp. As Participant 2 noted: "It was definitely a shell shock. We had to get our bodies acclimated to the schedule and the amount of physical exertion. Field shows are no joke. Marching in [the stadium] is no joke."

Participant 1 echoed this sentiment by stating that physical training during band camp takes not only a physical toll on their bodies but also a mental toll. Participant 8 supported this stance by stating that band camp was very intense because of the tight schedule, the large amount of musical content, marching style, dances, and field show that had to be learned within a couple of weeks.

In addition to the challenges of band camp, students described how these stressors continued and evolved throughout the marching band season. Participant 7 shared that factors like finding time to complete academic assignments, spending several hours in marching band rehearsals, and learning and practicing music can overwhelm a marching band student.

Performance anxiety emerged as another frequent concern, particularly related to the pressure of field shows and the fear of making mistakes. Participants reported feeling anxious and, as a result,

experiencing negative thoughts about their ability to play the music well and perform well during field shows without stepping off on the wrong foot or going to the wrong spot. Participant 9 recalled that one of her marching band peers got confused about where to go during a halftime performance, which contributed to another member getting injured. Because of this experience, she developed anxiety and a fear of causing someone else to get hurt.

Participants also noted that these mental and emotional pressures were especially acute for newcomers to collegiate marching bands. They all shared that heightened stress and anxiety are most common during a student's first year in collegiate marching band, particularly for newcomers transitioning from high school band, regardless of their academic classification. Participants also noted various times when anxiety and stress increased, such as weeks when rivalry games took place or large performances such as Battle of the Bands. These experiences of anxiety, stress, and depression throughout this marching band season were often associated with the difficulty of compartmentalizing outside stressors.

This was especially evident in the experiences shared by participants who described visible signs of emotional distress during their interviews. Participant 6's mood and affect appeared sad and dysphoric throughout the interview. Her eye contact and posture changed noticeably when discussing her mental health and collegiate marching band participation. Similarly, Participant 3's eye contact decreased, and her affect was more labile while expounding on her experience during the marching band/football season. Participant 3 expressed how she experienced a panic attack during her first performance with the band:

> I remember just standing at attention, panicking during our first performance. Our section leader had to take me to a private location to help me calm down. I ended up having to take a little week break after that, but the band staff were understanding and gave me time to get myself together so that I could come back to the marching band.

Participant 8 appeared anxious while explaining the pressure she felt trying to manage personal concerns and marching band participation. Participant 1 disclosed mental health concerns they experienced prior to becoming a member of a collegiate marching band and revealed practicing self-regulating tactics to manage those concerns.

Despite these challenges, participants also reflected on moments of joy, pride, and emotional uplift throughout their marching band experience. Although they experienced negative mental and emotional health concerns, they also shared meaningful positive moments that contributed to their overall emotional well-being. As Participant 4 explained:

> It is rewarding to see that we are actually impacting somebody. I love seeing the high school students cheer for us. They will turn up every time we play. They will have their hands out on the sidelines or in the stands, and we give them high-fives and fist bumps.

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Participant 2 was very excited as she shared their experience of traveling to cities she thought would never have the opportunity to visit and being afforded opportunities to meet celebrities. Overall, participants reported feeling happy and excited while in various collegiate marching band spaces, including rehearsals, football games, and performances within their campuses' communities.

This sense of enjoyment was closely tied to how students viewed marching band spaces as supportive environments. They described marching band spaces, such as rehearsals, football games, and other performance locations, as safe spaces, temporary escapes, and stress relievers. As Participant 2 explained:

> Participating in the marching band helps me to dedicate my energy and focus on what I have a passion for - playing music. Rehearsals are where I can perfect my craft, and the performances are where I can play my heart out.

These findings, reflected in this theme, align with the first and second research questions by illustrating how students describe their lived experiences in marching band and perceive its impact on their mental health and emotional well-being. Overall, this theme highlighted the emotional highs and lows students experience as members of collegiate marching bands. Participants described stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue, particularly during high-pressure events like band camp and performances, as well as moments of pride, joy, and emotional fulfillment.

Theme 2: Community, Belonging, and Support in the Band Environment

The second theme generated from the data was positive connections made while participating in collegiate marching band, leading to a sense of belonging and feeling supported. Participants agreed that they developed meaningful connections with others in their marching bands and were grateful to be members because these settings fostered a supportive environment. All participants attributed this feeling to the time they spent with their marching band peers. Participant 5 stated:

> The traveling and memories made are some of the most rewarding things that make my marching band experience exciting. The jokes, the laughter… it is so fun, and it makes me so happy to be a part of this band. We were forced to become friends with our brothers and sisters in our section because we spent so much time together.

In a similar fashion, Participant 7 described how traveling out of state with the marching band and spending a lot of time in marching band spaces, such as rehearsals and performances, led to building strong positive connections with marching band peers. He recalled hanging out with his marching band peers on band trips and having the most fun he ever had. Participant 10 shared spending most of his day throughout the week with his percussion peers because several of them had the same classes. This ultimately led to developing close relationships.

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Nine participants reported that collegiate marching band participation facilitated their first significant friendships in college, contributing to their social integration and sense of belonging. Participant 2 shared that she likely would not have made such close friends in college if she had not joined the marching band. Comparably, Participants 6 and 9 spoke about their fear of making friends when first starting college but were able to develop and maintain friendships with their current roommates, who are also part of their collegiate marching band. Participant 7 shared that he formed friendships with members of other collegiate marching bands in the same conference, citing shared experiences and a mutual passion for music as the foundation of those connections.

Building on these meaningful connections, a strong sense of belonging emerged as a central factor that most participants valued and identified as contributing to their continued participation in collegiate marching band. As Participant 1 explained:

> I feel safe. This is a safe space for you to come in and be accepted. They don't look at me differently. They don't treat me any different. They don't treat me as less than a human being. Aside from my [non-binary] identity, the band has always accepted how I show up as a person, and it makes me feel so good because at home, I didn't have that space. I feel free. I feel loved, and it is such a great thing. It is amazing. The band is so accepting. The band staff and my peers will make sure they get my pronouns right. The band is very inclusive. Very inclusive.

Several participants described their collegiate marching bands as family to them. As shared by Participant 4: "When you're down, your siblings pick you up. They [band staff] are really big on us forming relationships so that we can have them to lean on." Participant 9 also compared the close bond among the band members with having a family. The common denominator in this type of family, as she described, is their love for playing music. A particularly interesting detail came from Participant 1, who shared that their band even established a mentorship program to support freshman and transfer marching band members. They further shared that the program has been especially helpful to new band members.

All participants shared the common sentiment regarding the support they received from their band directors and staff. Although the band directors and staff expected hard work, dedication, and commitment to the marching band programs, they also encouraged their members to take care of themselves. As Participant 4 stated: "Our band staff, especially this year, have had talks with us about mental health and what it means to take care of ourselves when we have the opportunity to do so."

Participants 1 and 10 expressed how their band directors discussed the importance of mental health during their auditions, band camp, and throughout the marching band/football season. Participants 3 and 5 mentioned that their band directors ended rehearsals early some nights so that the members could take a mental break and rest. Participant 5 also noted that his band directors showed empathy, especially during the weeks of the rivalry games when collegiate marching band participation is

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mentally and physically taxing. Participant 6 shared that her marching band staff were available when the members needed to vent about their personal concerns. Overall, all participants expressed their appreciation for their band directors and staff for recognizing the importance of mental health and supporting their members' well-being.

These findings align with the second and third research questions, demonstrating how supportive community structures influence emotional well-being and mental health. This theme illustrated how the structure and culture of collegiate marching bands, such as mentorship programs, rehearsal dynamics, and leadership practices, serve as contextual factors that influence students' sense of belonging. Participants emphasized how the social connections formed within the marching band community helped create a sense of support and inclusion. Many described the band as a family and credited peers and staff with helping them navigate college life.

Theme 3: Barriers and Supports for Accessing Resources

The third theme reflects participants' awareness of emotional well-being and mental health resources, as well as the supports and barriers that influenced their ability to access those resources. All participants were knowledgeable about the emotional well-being and mental health resources available at their universities. Most reported learning about these resources through proactive efforts by their band directors and staff, who invited representatives from campus counseling and wellness centers to speak during band camp or early in the marching band season. As Participant 6 explained:

> Panel speakers from the counseling center and wellness center came to talk to us about wellness resources during band camp. Our band directors and section leaders kept telling us about the mental health resources on campus during marching band season.

These efforts demonstrated that emotional well-being and mental health were openly acknowledged within many marching band programs rather than treated as taboo.

Participants further emphasized that learning to prioritize self-care and resource utilization is an important developmental skill for managing the demands of collegiate marching band participation. Participant 9 mentioned that band directors informed all members about the counseling services available on campus, encouraged them to utilize them if needed, and excused their tardiness or absence from rehearsals for these purposes. Participants also reported using the emotional well-being and mental health resources and services offered by their counseling and wellness centers during normal business hours, as their band directors and section leaders approved them arriving late to rehearsals. Participant 3 shared: "I went to the counseling center on campus and got help. It helped me to get myself together so that I could get back in the marching band after taking a brief break." Participants also described band directors as helping normalize help-seeking. Participant 8 explained that one band director openly shared their own experience of

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seeking counseling while participating in marching band, reinforcing that accessing mental health services was both acceptable and encouraged.

Despite these supportive efforts, however, participants consistently described structural barriers that limited their ability to access mental health resources. The combination of demanding rehearsal schedules, academic responsibilities, and counseling center hours often made it difficult to seek support when it was most needed. Participant 6 explained, "It was hard to balance being in band and going to get help for my mental health, especially during band camp because we were in rehearsal for like 16 hours a day for two to three weeks." Similarly, Participant 4 shared, "Between class and rehearsal start time at 4:00 pm, we really don't have time to go to counseling, but mental health resources are available."

These accounts illustrate that although resources were available and encouraged by band leadership, scheduling conflicts remained a persistent obstacle for many students. Some participants also described institutional efforts to improve access. For example, Participant 9 noted that their counseling center extended its hours during marching band season, making it easier for students with demanding rehearsal schedules to seek support.

This theme contributes to the third research question by identifying contextual and structural factors, such as rehearsal schedules and counseling center availability, that shape students' ability to prioritize and access emotional and mental health support. Students reported being aware of campus resources but described barriers such as rehearsal conflicts and limited availability that affected their ability to use these services. Some participants were able to prioritize their emotional well-being and mental health with the support of band staff, but others struggled to make time for self-care.

Discussion

This study explored the intersection of collegiate marching band participation and student emotional well-being and mental health, offering new insight into how participation in this cocurricular activity shapes emotional experiences, peer support, and student development. Using a phenomenological approach, the study captured the complex realities experienced by collegiate marching band students as they balanced academic demands, physical rigor, emotional well-being, and limited access to institutional resources. The findings shed light on both the stressors and supports that shape marching band members' mental health, revealing patterns of struggle and resilience.

Participants described both positive and negative impacts of collegiate marching band participation on their emotional well-being and mental health. This finding aligns with the diathesis-stress model that served as the framework for this study, as well as the prior research showing that the onset of mental abnormality is triggered by stressful events and experiences (Heeringen, 2012; Monroe & Simons, 1991). Participants with pre-existing mental health concerns described heightened

vulnerability during stressful periods, while others without prior concerns tended to report fewer negative outcomes, consistent with the diathesis-stress model (Heeringen, 2012; Monroe & Simons, 1991).

This research revealed several factors that contributed to the negative and positive impacts of collegiate marching band participation on participants' emotional and mental health. First, the pressure of learning numerous musical selections, marching styles, dances, and field shows during band camp, football season, and competitions triggered stress and anxiety for some participants while intensifying stress and anxiety for others. This accords with the findings of Washington III (2019), who indicated that a significant amount of mental energy is necessary for the tasks mentioned above. At the same time, participants noted the opportunities that participation in collegiate marching band afforded them, including traveling across the country to cities, participating in mainstage performances with celebrities, and engaging in nationally broadcast events, making them feel recognized in ways comparable to student-athletes – a sentiment that aligns with the work of Heath (2017).

A significant factor influencing participants' well-being was the availability and use of campus support services. While some participants reported that access to emotional and mental health services helped them manage stress and remain in the marching band, others noted that limited hours of operation and conflicts with rehearsals and classes prevented them from seeking needed support. This aligns with Vidourek et al. (2014), who found that counseling services help students manage stress and build coping skills. However, this study highlights that institutional constraints, particularly inflexible service hours, can create structural barriers to care. Several participants advocated for extended hours of the wellness and counseling center to better meet the needs of students engaged in high-demand extracurricular commitments. These findings reinforce the need for policy changes and institutional responsiveness to ensure that relevant resources are accessible and prioritized for all student populations.

This study also extends prior research by deepening the understanding of how collegiate marching band environments function as high-impact cocurricular settings that foster both performance excellence and supportive peer communities. While Cumberledge (2017) and Carver (2019) emphasized the social-emotional benefits of marching band participation, such as relationship-building and emotional growth, the current study advances these findings by illustrating how those same settings can also intensify anxiety, especially during high-stakes events like rivalry games and band camp. Additionally, Hatheway and Chesky (2013) identified elevated stress levels among marching band students but did not explore how students coped with these stressors or accessed mental health resources. By incorporating student narratives about both institutional barriers and informal support systems, this study contributes new insight into how access, advocacy, and structural limitations interact with individual emotional and mental health needs.

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What sets this study apart is its focus on emotional and mental health among collegiate marching band students – a topic that remains underexplored in existing literature, which has traditionally emphasized physical demands or performance-related outcomes (Emerson et al., 2021; Hathway & Chesky, 2013). While prior studies have touched on stress or social aspects of participation, few have examined emotional and mental health holistically and from students' perspectives. By using a phenomenological approach, this study provided a deeper, more personal understanding of the emotional realities and institutional constraints that shape the emotional and mental health of this unique student population.

Implications

These findings offer important insights for student affairs professionals, campus activity staff, and music program leaders seeking to enhance student well-being through cocurricular engagement. Understanding how high-demand cocurricular activities such as marching band influence student development can inform more responsive and inclusive practice. First, institutions should increase access to services, promote utilization through proactive outreach and peer support, and equip staff with tools to recognize and respond to the emotional and mental health needs of marching band students.

Institutions must improve access to emotional wellness and mental health services to ensure students can use them, especially during high-stress periods such as band camp and football season. While it may be ideal for institutions to dedicate full-time professionals to support this student population, such staffing expansions could be unrealistic. Rather than creating entirely new positions, music department leadership and marching band staff could collaborate more closely with existing campus wellness and counseling centers to designate liaisons or develop targeted outreach efforts tailored to student performers. As an alternative solution, colleges could invest in 24/7 online mental health services tailored to student performers. Staff should support students in accessing both in-person and online services, including during rehearsal times or performance days when needed.

Encouraging the utilization of services is equally important. Music department leaders and marching band staff can establish mental health committees to strategize awareness campaigns and normalize help-seeking behavior. Involving student leaders in these efforts could help ensure the messaging is relatable and widely accepted. Additionally, small peer-led groups or buddy systems can foster safe spaces for students to talk about emotional and mental health concerns and coping strategies. These groups could also facilitate structured discussions on stressors specific to the marching band environment.

Training staff is another key implication. Marching band staff and music department leadership should be trained to identify early signs of distress and understand how marching band culture intersects with mental health challenges. Training such as Mental Health First Aid and trauma-informed care could be facilitated on a semester basis. University counseling staff or newly hired

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mental health professionals could provide ongoing in-service workshops to ensure consistency of knowledge and skill development. Finally, institutions should implement mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts and inform ongoing improvement. These could include initiatives such as tracking service utilization, student satisfaction, and retention within the band program.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers important insights into the mental health experiences of collegiate marching band students, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. Although participants were recruited from multiple universities, the sample included a limited number of institutions, and the majority of participants were from one institution. This limits regional or institutional diversity and may reduce the transferability of findings to students from other geographic regions, institutional types, or marching band cultures. Further, the sample was largely female, with only two males and one non-binary participant. This gender imbalance may limit the study's ability to explore potential gender-based differences in mental health experiences.

With respect to recommendations for future research, an ideal progression of this research would be to explore targeted interventions for collegiate marching band students' emotional and mental health needs. Specifically, focusing on the stress diathesis model, which this research was rooted in, would help examine the predispositions that interact with the unique stressors experienced by collegiate marching band members. A deeper exploration of unique stressors identified in this study, such as time constraints and performance anxiety, is also needed in further research and could assist with developing targeted interventions for this population. A longitudinal study could be conducted to learn about how stressors and coping strategies evolve throughout the duration of band students' participation in collegiate marching band. This would help marching band directors and staff know how to pivot or develop specific programming as their marching band members' mental health needs shift. Furthermore, longitudinal research could also help understand how a sense of belonging and peer connections impact collegiate marching band students' emotional and mental health. Studies focusing on these components could guide collegiate marching band staff in fostering resilience and supporting the long-term emotional and mental well-being of their members.

Conclusion

This study explored how collegiate marching band participation influences student well-being, offering insights for campus professionals working with student organizations and cocurricular programs. Through participants' narratives, it became evident that while marching band participation can be a source of pride, connection, and personal growth, it can also bring about intense stress and anxiety, particularly during demanding periods such as band camp and football season. The findings emphasized both individual and structural factors that shape students' well-being, from personal coping mechanisms to the accessibility of campus mental health resources.

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By amplifying student voices, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the challenges and supports within the collegiate marching band environment. As colleges and universities continue to prioritize student emotional well-being and mental health, this study calls attention to the unique needs of marching band students and offers actionable recommendations for creating more responsive and supportive systems.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What marching band program are you currently a member of?
2. Why did you want to become a member of the marching band?
3. What do you enjoy most about participating in the marching band?
4. How would you describe your experience during band camp?
5. How would you define the concepts of mental health and emotional well-being?
6. How would you define stress and anxiety?
7. How would you describe your general experience in the marching band?
8. Have you experienced any stress and anxiety since participating in the marching band? If so, can you explain?

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9. Do you think that marching band participation can help distract a member from worrying about stressors outside of band? (Prompts: Why not? How so?)

10. Have you been able to develop friendships and connections with other students while participating in the marching band? (Prompts: Why not? How so?)

11. Are mental health and emotional well-being discussed among the marching band members and staff? If so, how often? (Prompt: Which ones?)

12. Are you aware of any support resources available to marching band students who may experience mental health or emotional well-being concerns? (Prompts: Which ones?)

13. How can mental health and emotional well-being of marching band participants be improved? Do you have any practical recommendations?

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