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Spirited Away:

Gauging & Improving School Spirit in a Public High School

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Abstract

Improving school spirit and extracurricular involvement is a continuing concern at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ. Sixty-one students from across grade levels were surveyed in order to identify their perceived level of school spirit and their level of interest in attending a campus-wide activity fair designed to boost enrollment across clubs and organizations. The survey consisted of five demographic questions and twelve Likert-type items. Respondents demonstrated an overall high level of school spirit, but only little to average interest in having an activity fair. The survey should be re-administered to a larger sample size consisting of younger students who may stand to benefit more directly from such an event.

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Spirited Away: Gauging & Improving School Spirit in a Public High School

The phrase “school spirit” often brings to mind 1950s-era teens clad in letterman's jackets and pom-poms, cheering on their school at the big football game. Today, many may associate school spirit with the Afro-wigged, body-painted cheering section at any number of high school or college sporting events. While the look of “being true to your school” has changed in the last half-century, the feelings of community, togetherness, and unity of purpose that it engenders have not. While not explicitly academic in nature, school spirit is almost universally recognized among educators as a vital component of the educational process. School spirit is not easily definable, and can be displayed in many forms. For the purpose of the present study, however, we will focus on the aspect of school spirit that requires the most dedication and commitment from the student body: active participation in extracurricular activities.

Debate continues, especially in post-No Child Left Behind [NCLB] America, about the validity of extracurricular activities and the associated cost of maintaining these programs. Money previously allocated to artistic or athletic endeavors is frequently re-routed toward meeting basic curricular needs. Thornton Township High School District 205 is one such example; a failed 2004 referendum forced three schools in the district, including one that has produced several NFL and NBA players, to eliminate 80% of their athletic and after-school programs and related personnel (Gutierrez, 2004). Extracurricular activities have also been slashed at Clemson (OH) Northeastern Middle School, where over 100 of the 1,900 students left in the 2003-2004 school year as a direct result of these program cuts (Vance, 2004).

Such financial decisions seem to fly in the face of an established body of research that suggests that extracurricular programs serve many valuable functions in schools. Indeed, several studies have drawn a strong positive correlation between student participation in extracurricular activities and high

rates of academic performance (American Sports Institute, 1996; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Silliker & Quirk, 1997; National Council on Educational Statistics, 1995; McCarthy, 2000). Additional benefits attributed to extracurricular participation includes higher SAT scores (Everson & Millsap, 2005) and lower dropout rates (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). There is also evidence to support that extracurricular involvement strongly positively correlates to building positive social relationships and self-image, both within (Melnick, 1992) and across (Davis, 2007) cultural communities. One study even suggests that extracurricular involvement in high school is predictive of greater academic success at the undergraduate level (Rombokas, et al., 1995).

With so much evidence to support the value of school spirit in the form of extracurricular involvement, it seems to make sense that any school with the financial and human resources to promote its extracurricular programs should do so. In the current study, students at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ, were surveyed in order to gauge their perception of their own feelings of school spirit, determine their awareness of the myriad of extracurricular activities offered at their school, and assess the interest of the student body in having a campus-wide Activity Fair aimed at increasing extracurricular enrollment.

Method

Participants

The participants in the current study were students at Hunterdon Central Regional High School, a large suburban high school in Flemington, NJ. Hunterdon Central is classified by the NJ Department of Education as an "I" District Factor Group school, which means that the socioeconomic status of the students is among the highest in the state. This survey is timely in that Hunterdon Central has recently hired a Supervisor of Student Activities (SSA) with the intent of promoting school spirit and facilitating the development of extracurricular programs.

In an attempt to obtain as random a sample as possible, an e-mail was sent to teachers at Hunterdon Central on November 25, 2007, asking for volunteers to administer the survey in their classes. Four teachers responded; therefore, participants were selected based on the willingness of their teachers to administer the survey. The participants in the current study were 61 students from grades 9-12; 34 participants were male, and 27 were female. They were distributed among the four grade levels with 7 freshmen, 23 sophomores, 22 juniors, and 9 seniors. The 61-respondent sample size represents 2% of Hunterdon Central's 3,020-member student body.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed to participating teachers on November 26-27, 2007, and were asked to be administered and returned to the author by Thursday, November 29. A cover letter (Appendix A) was attached to each survey to inform respondents of both the purpose and anonymous nature of the survey. The survey also contained a disclaimer that this information was being collected and analyzed as part of a graduate degree program at Rider University. Since Hunterdon Central polls its students at least two to three times a year on a variety of topics, this could easily have been mistaken for a school-sponsored survey. The disclaimer was added in bold text, separate from any other paragraph in the letter to maximize visibility.

Throughout the survey development process, feedback was sought in the form of peer critique. The only suggestion of note was to reverse some of the items, which was implemented in items 3, 4, 6, 9, and 11 of the survey (Appendix B). Other than that, this instrument was developed solely by the author.

The ethics of collecting data from minors were strongly considered throughout this process. One existing procedural safeguard already in place was Hunterdon Central's survey opt-out policy, which is mailed home to parents each August. Instead of collecting explicit permission from parents of each of the 3,000-plus students who attend, parents are notified that they may opt their students out of

surveys by completing a form. Otherwise, students are considered eligible to participate. Additionally, the cover letter was explicit in stating that completing the survey was optional, and that students were not required to participate. No students were reported as having refused to participate.

Survey administration was not supervised by the author; however, teachers were instructed to read the cover letter aloud prior to administration. Students circled their response choices with pen or pencil on the survey; no ScanTron or alternate forms of data collection were used. Teachers collected surveys from students and either hand-delivered them to the author or left them in a pre-determined, secure location to be picked up by the author.

Instrumentation

The idea for this survey came amidst a strong push at Hunterdon Central on the part of administration to boost school spirit. With a high school as large as this, it is very easy for students and faculty to feel fragmented and isolated from their peers, and to get lost in the crowd. The administrators wished to combat these feelings by implementing several programs over the course of the last two years, including hiring a full-time Supervisor of Student Activities, an administrative-level position with the responsibility of coordinating, overseeing, and promoting all extracurricular activities at the school. This survey was designed with three objectives in mind: 1) to determine current level of extracurricular club/sport involvement; 2) to determine student perception of their involvement in school community and level of school spirit; and 3) to determine student interest in a campuswide activity fair.

The survey (Appendix B) took the form of a 12-item questionnaire (plus demographic information). Each respondent was asked to provide his or her gender, grade level, current cumulative GPA, number of extracurricular activities in which he or she is participating this year, and to categorize those activities by focus (e.g., sports, arts, etc.). In addition to demographic information, students were provided with 12 Likert-type items which they were asked to respond SD (Strongly Disagree), D

(Disagree), Agree (A), or SA (Strongly Agree) (the traditional N (Neutral) option was eliminated in order to force a positive or negative response).

All items were scored on a scale of 1-4. Responses of SD to positively-phrased items (1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12) earned a score of 1; D, 2; A, 3; SA, 4. Scoring of negatively-phrased items (3, 4, 6, 9, 11) was reversed (i.e., SD = 4, D = 3, etc.). Items were scored by hand and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for disaggregation and analysis. Means and standard deviations were calculated not only for each individual item, but also for each objective to which items were aligned. Items were aligned to one of the three aforementioned objectives prior to survey administration to ensure instrument validity.

Results

My initial hypothesis was that there exists a fair amount of school spirit at Hunterdon Central, and that students would be interested in holding an Activity Fair, if for no other reason than that many clubs seem under-promoted and under-enrolled, while a minority of popular activities (e.g., football, drama club) dominate the morning announcements, the primary promotional vehicle for school activities.

Lack of school spirit is definitely not a problem at Hunterdon Central, if the results of this survey are representative of the community as a whole. 86% of respondents ($n=53$) gave a positive response (A or SA) to the statement, "I am proud to be a student at Hunterdon Central." There were no remarkable statistics about the eight respondents who disagreed; they were evenly divided by gender, grade level, and extracurricular involvement (either 0 or 1 activity this year). Interestingly, 26% of students ($n=16$) responded negatively to the statement, "My friends and classmates are proud to be Hunterdon Central students."

When asked to respond directly to the statement, "I would be interested in attending a campus-wide Activity Fair and seeing what clubs HC has to offer", 52% of respondents ($n=32$) responded in the negative. An analysis of all items aligned with the objective of determining interest in an activity fair

yields similar results, with a mean score of 2.01, a 50% favorable response rate.

One possible reason for this disinterest in an activity fair may lie in the demographic of the sample population. Of the 61 respondents, 72% ($n=44$) report participating in at least one extracurricular activity this year, leaving only 18% ($n=17$) currently uninvolved. Because so many respondents are already involved in extracurricular activities, they may already feel well-informed about extracurricular options (or stretched too thin to participate any more: 44% ($n=27$) reported involvement in two or more activities this school year).

Disaggregation by gender and grade level (see Figs. 1 & 2, Appendix C) provided no further insight. Of the four grade levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), only the sophomore respondents had a majority in favor of an activity fair (57%, $n=13$). The remaining three classes were very consistent, with the freshmen ($n=7$), juniors ($n=22$), and seniors ($n=9$) coming in at only 43%, 41%, and 44%, respectively, in favor of an activity fair. Positive and negative responses were evenly split among freshman respondents. Sophomore and senior females were both in favor of an activity fair by a ratio of 2:1. Junior and senior males, however, were overwhelmingly against the idea by ratios of 5:2 and 3:0, respectively.

The most significant limitation of this survey is its sample size. Given the inherent time constraints of the graduate school academic calendar and the logistics involved in polling and analyzing results from a greater sample size, it was just not feasible to do so. While school spirit seems to be at an acceptable level, moving forward with the activity fair is not recommended at this time; however, the issue should be revisited toward the end of the school year with a different audience. Polling rising freshmen, sophomores, and juniors (the current eighth, ninth, and tenth graders) would target the stakeholders and beneficiaries of such an event more so than polling seniors who stand to gain nothing from it. A larger sample size should also be considered in the re-administration of this survey, in order to gain a more representative view of what the student body believes.

Appendix A

Dear HCRHS Students,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information about your involvement in extracurricular activities and your perception of school spirit at Hunterdon Central Regional High School. School spirit is an important part of the high school experience, especially at a high school as large as Hunterdon Central, and I am interested in exploring new ways to increase that sense of spirit and community.

This questionnaire is short, and will likely take less than 10 minutes. Your responses will be **anonymous**, so please **do not** put any identifying information on this sheet. Response sheets will be destroyed after the results are tallied. You are NOT required to complete this survey; if you choose not to take it, please sit quietly and occupy yourself while your classmates respond.

If you are interested in seeing the results of this survey, they will be posted to my website, <http://www.bariexca.net>, within four weeks. Once posted, the results will remain online for two weeks.

Please note: I am conducting this survey as a requirement for my graduate degree. I am not gathering information on behalf of Hunterdon Central. If you have any questions about this survey, please see me during Block 5 in Room 804. Thank you very much for your participation and your time.

Sincerely,



Mr. Damian N. Bariexca
English Department

Portfolio

Appendix B

Extracurricular Involvement Questionnaire

| | | | | | |
|--|---|-----------|---|------|----|
| 1. Gender: | M | F | | | |
| 2. Grade Level: | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| 3. Estimated Overall GPA: | 0 – 1.9 | 2.0 - 2.9 | 3.0 - 3.9 | 4.0+ | |
| 4. Number of Extracurricular Activities I'm Involved In This Year: | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4+ |
| 5. Type of Extracurricular Activities I'm Involved In (Circle all that apply): | Sports (all levels) | | Music Performance | | |
| | Theater Productions | | Competitive Clubs (e.g., Chemistry Olympics, Debate) | | |
| | Community Service Group (e.g., Interact) | | Advocacy Groups (e.g. PULSE, Amnesty) | | |
| | Honor Societies (e.g., NHS, Mu Alpha Theta) | | General Special Interest (e.g., Bookworms, Social Studies Club) | | |

Directions: For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A), or Strongly Agree (SA).

I am proud to be a student at Hunterdon Central.

SD D A SA



My friends and classmates are proud to be Hunterdon Central students.

SD D A SA
* * *

Hunterdon Central sporting events are poorly attended by students.

SD D A SA
* * *

Joining extracurricular clubs during high school is not important.

SD D A SA
* * *

The student body is well-informed about ALL the extra-curricular clubs at Hunterdon Central.

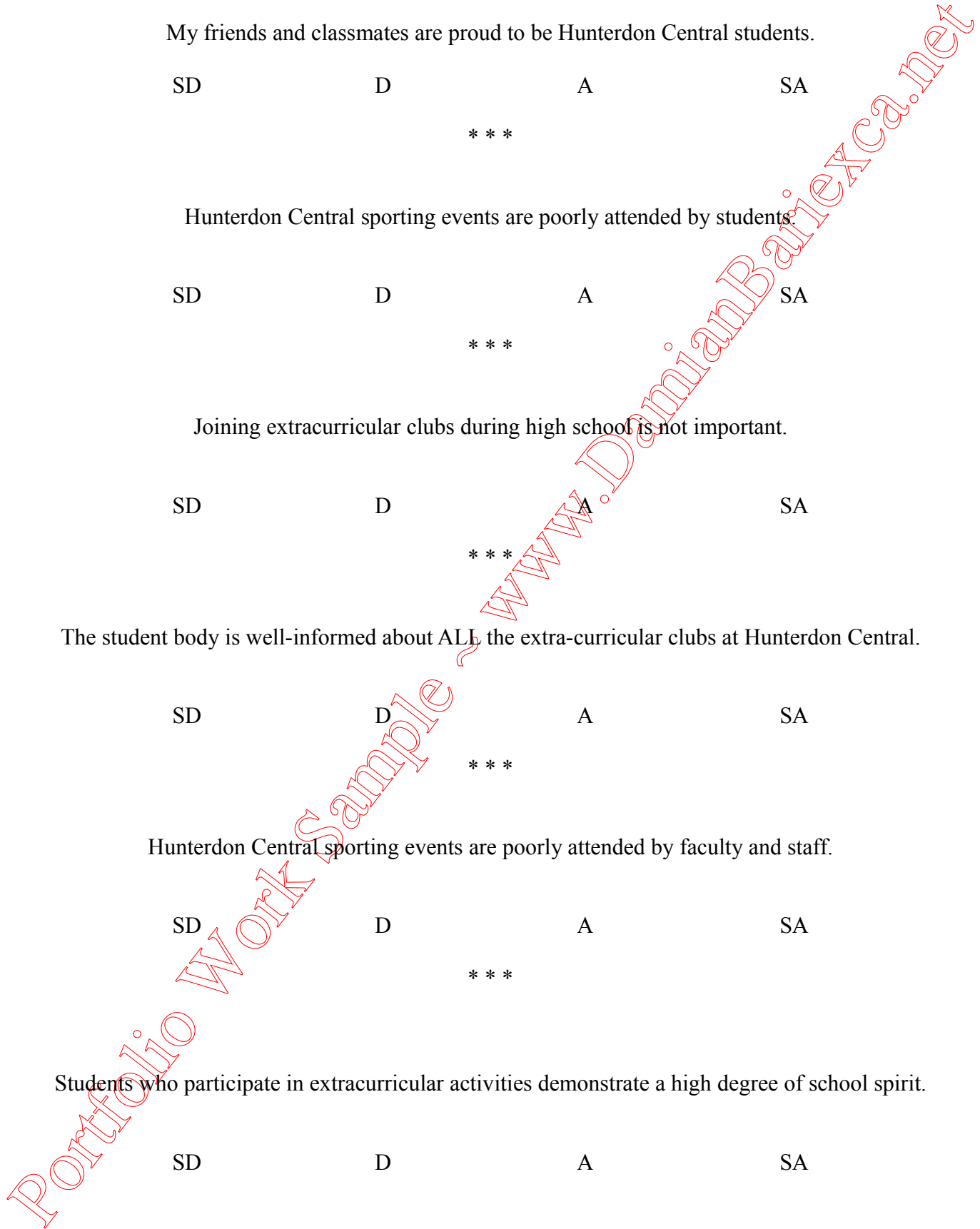
SD D A SA
* * *

Hunterdon Central sporting events are poorly attended by faculty and staff.

SD D A SA
* * *

Students who participate in extracurricular activities demonstrate a high degree of school spirit.

SD D A SA
* * *



I would be interested in attending a campus-wide Activity Fair and seeing what clubs HC has to offer.

SD D A SA

Only answer if you ARE CURRENTLY a member of any extracurricular activity:

I would NOT like to increase membership in my club/sport/activity.

SD D A SA

I would be willing to represent my club/sport/activity at an Activity Fair and speak with potential members.

SD D A SA

Only answer if you are NOT currently a member of any extracurricular activity:

I am NOT aware of many of the clubs/sports/activities that Hunterdon Central has to offer.

SD D A SA

I would be more likely to join an extracurricular club if I had a chance to meet members before I joined.

SD D A SA

Appendix C

Figure 1

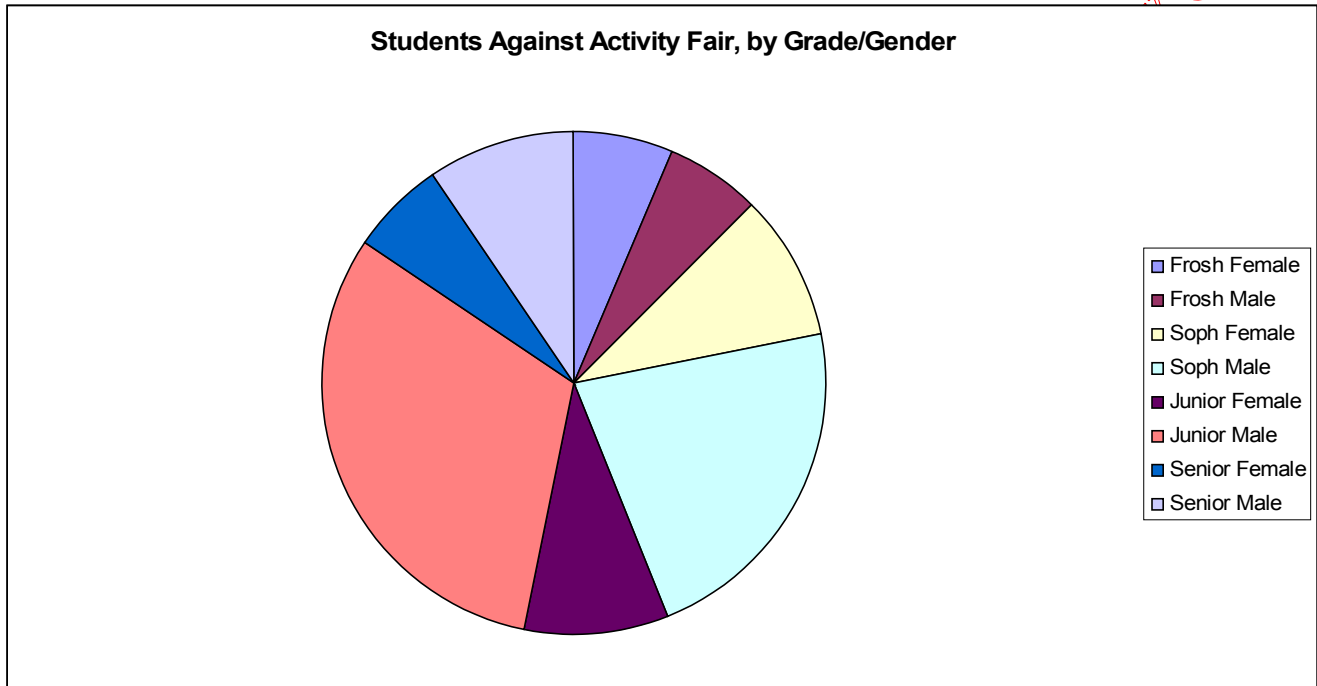
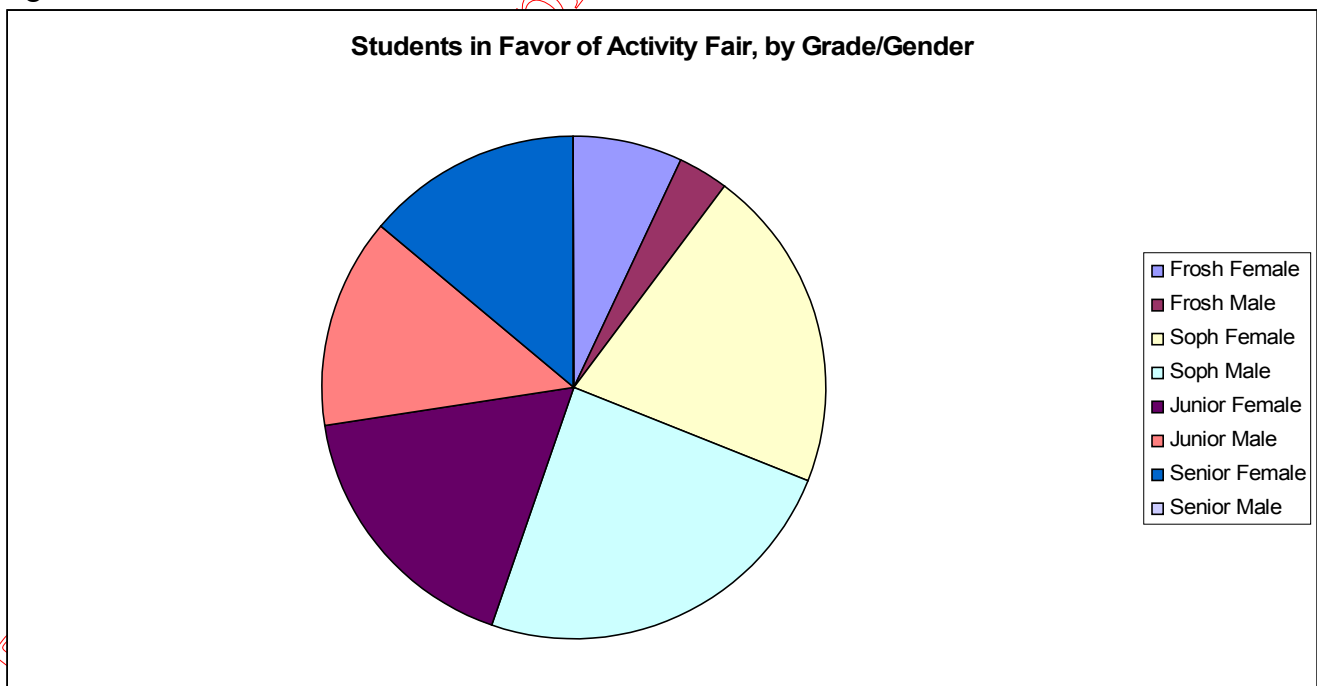


Figure 2



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