

Queens College Choral Society: A Working Partnership between Community Chorus and College

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Abstract

The Queens College Choral Society, a singing organization of 140 singers, is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2001. Located in the most culturally diverse urban hub of America, the Queens borough of New York City, the chorus is an exemplary model of an American community chorus.

Since its founding in 1941, the Choral Society has been sponsored by Queens College, a four-year college in the City University of New York. The College provides the Choral Society with a home and rehearsal facility. Membership is open to all those with some experience in choral organizations, including the public, staff and students of the College.

The opportunity to perform major choral works with orchestra draws community members from ages 20 –75, a cross-generational membership. Additionally, undergraduate and graduate music majors in the College's Aaron Copland School of Music perform in the chorus and the orchestra. Besides presenting the standard masterworks by Western composers, the Choral Society premieres compositions written by the School of Music faculty, and choral works representing other cultures, recently, *Misa Criolla* by Argentina's Ariel Ramirez.

A 60-year continuous affiliation between the Choral Society and Queens College is commendable, although certainly not void of transition periods. Lessons can be gleaned from examination of the administration and leadership, the membership and musical expectations, financial resources, facilities, music library, equipment and other logistical needs, as well as changes in American society and the complex urban culture at large. Indeed, how a community chorus survives in a major metropolitan area already over-saturated with cultural events, music concerts, sporting events, and numerous educational opportunities is a lesson in itself.

The Queens College Choral Society is an effective model of an adult amateur chorus and an operational model of a working partnership between a community chorus and a higher education institution, one worthy of sharing with music colleagues interested in exploring a similar venue for community music activities. A presentation for the sub-theme *Community Music and Institutions for Music Education* would address the various issues that have contributed to the success and longevity of the Choral Society and the partnership with Queens College.

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Community Chorus Tradition in America

America has always been a singing nation, and throughout much of our country's history, singing has played a distinctive role in educational, social, religious, political, and community activities (Elliott, 1990). The singing school tradition of the 1700's and 1800's is the forerunner of the numerous community choirs and choral societies of the late 1900's. Many early choral societies were primarily gatherings of amateur singers that performed choral works in the local communities, as well as advocates of formal music training in the school curriculum (Mark and Gary, 1992).

Music educators have long recognized the value of community music, and its direct relationship to public school music education, especially group singing and assembly singing. Music education specialist Charles Elliott (1990) states that:

Historically, the music education profession has espoused the beliefs that music can contribute to the well-being of the community and that all of the members of our society should be able to participate in the musical life of their communities in one form or another. (p. 25)

Robert Shaw (1916-1999), one of the America's great choral conductors of the twentieth century, made a career of advancing the American choral tradition, and championing the standing of the amateur choirs. In his 1979 biography by Mussulman, Shaw is quoted on amateur choirs.

The wonderful thing about the amateur chorus is that nobody can buy its attendance at rehearsals, or the sweat, eyestrain and fatigue that go along with the glow; and nobody but the most purposive and creative of music minds - from Bach in both directions - can invite and sustain its devotion. (p. 124)

Adults sing in community choruses for a variety of reasons. As an expert on the growth of American choral singing during the 1900's, Harry Robert Wilson (1959) provides insight into reasons for which people join singing groups:

The person who joins a chorus is seeking, primarily, to satisfy through the medium of singing a longing for something beautiful and spiritual in his life. There may be social motives but the musical motive is invariably stronger. The most natural and at the same time the most universal medium for experiencing music is that of singing. The total physical and emotional responses in the act of singing make it the most personal musical activity. Singing also affects the entire body more directly and more intimately than any other musical experience. (p. v)

The current American community chorus traces its national roots to large urban centers on the East Coast. Boston, Philadelphia and New York established singing societies by the early 1800s (Mees, 1901), although performances of choral masterworks are reported for even earlier dates. Trinity Church in New York reportedly performed *Messiah* with organ accompaniment as early as 1770 (cited in Mees, 1901, p.199; Krehbiel, 1884, p.43).

As the cities expanded with immigrants coming from established European traditions of choral singing, so did the need and growth of community music groups. Today, Manhattan is brimming with community-based choruses composed of semi-professional and professional musicians – New York Choral Society, St. Cecilia Chorus, New York Choral Artists, Mendelssohn Glee Club, to name a few. But as the musical and performance quality of these choral groups matured, so did a fresh need for community choruses for the *amateur adult singer*.

Even in 2002, with so many performing options available to singers, it is not easy to sustain an amateur-level community chorus in the shadow of Manhattan. But this is where the Queens College Choral Society, a 60-year community chorus of amateur adult singers, fills an important musical and social need in a city as large as New York. Located in the most culturally diverse urban hub of America, the Queens borough of New York City, the Queens College Choral Society is a commendable model of a modern American community chorus.

Queens College Choral Society: The First 60 Years 1941 – 2001

Brief Introduction to Queens College

The City University of NY (CUNY) is a sprawling higher education institution of 19 campuses, both two and four year schools, distributed throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Queens College, founded in 1937 in the Queens borough, is a four-year institution offering undergraduate programs in mathematics, science, social sciences, and arts and humanities. Queens College educates more teachers than any other college in New York City,¹ and at the graduate level, many students earn the Master of Science in Education. Today Queens College is primarily a commuter college reflecting a “global diversity”² with students from 120 different countries and who speak more than 66 native languages.

Since its inception, Queens College has always had an excellent Department of Music, committed to serving the community and its students. In 1981, the department was designated “School of Music” and named after American composer Aaron Copland. Currently, the music school has nearly 400 students, both undergraduate and graduate, with 24 fulltime faculty, and a beautiful music facility with views of the area bridges and Manhattan skyline.

The Founding Years: 1941-1969

In 1941, Queens College Professor of Music John Castellini founded the Queens College Choral Society. His purpose – at the dawn of America’s involvement in World War II - was to bring the new Queens campus and the community together through music. The collaboration would provide the adult amateur singer in Queens with a venue to sing the great choral masterworks of Bach, Brahms, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and others. Forty years later, Castellini reflected on the humble beginnings of the Choral Society:

In the first days of the college our thinking was governed by the mutual relationship of campus and community....To cement this relationship a number of professors went out regularly into the vast area of Queens to speak to small gatherings of citizens. It was with this thought in mind that <I was asked> to form a choral group that would be ‘a singing organization of and for the public and the students and staff of Queens College.’ The college was to provide it with a home and rehearsal facilities and membership was and still is open to anyone with some experience in choirs or choral organizations. That was in 1941....(cited in Zazula, 1986, p.3)

For a choral society born “during the war years,” early concerts added much morale to the community and were well-attended (*Queens College Choral Society, Twentieth Anniversary <hereinafter, QCCS>*, p.5). The Choral Society’s premiere performance of Handel’s *Messiah* on Friday, December 19, 1941, - twelve days after the attack on Pearl Harbor - was to a full house. The *Long Island Daily Press* reported the next day:

More than 150 Queens residents and Queens College students combined their talents last night to make the first joint college-borough musical production a success. Before 1200 in the auditorium of Jamaica High School they presented ‘The Messiah’...the soloists, all given hearty ovations, were recruited from the ranks of the operatic world. (cited in Zazula, 1986, p.4)

The overwhelming success of the 1941 *Messiah* led to its traditional inclusion in the annual fall concert. Within four years, the Choral Society was presenting sold-out concerts, with a ticket price of 25 cents (U.S.). A 1945 *Long Island Star-Journal* announced “College Chorus Sings for 1400,” and a 1948 *Long Island Daily Press* stated “‘Messiah’ – 3000 In All Hear College Oratorio.” By 1950, the membership numbered over 150 singers of community, students, staff and faculty. The popularity of the Choral Society for both singers and audience alike confirmed for the college the need for a successful community chorus.

The vision for the Queens College Choral Society was not that of a professional chorus, but a chorus of musical laymen. Early literature states that “regardless of musical training, race, religion or economic considerations, the Society welcomes everyone and anyone interested in the study and performance of choral masterpieces” (*QCCS*, p.4).

¹ For a detailed history of Queens College and CUNY: www.cuny.edu/topframe-abtcuny.html

² www.cuny.edu/topframe-colleges.html

However, the musical programming was demanding of the amateur singer, with concerts presented twice yearly – Fall (December) and Spring (May). Within the first 10 years of its existence, the Choral Society performed Haydn's *The Creation*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and Bach cantatas. In May 1949, it performed the American premiere of Vivaldi's *Gloria* – now a standard of the American church, high school and community chorus choral repertoire. To encourage collaborative ventures, the Choral Society premiered works by Queens College faculty composers, shared programming with the Queens College student choirs, and presented instrumental concertos featuring college faculty members as soloists. From the outset, the Queens College student orchestra accompanied the Choral Society, further cementing the relationship between student, college and community member.

The Choral Society rehearsed on the college campus in various open spaces, including the old gymnasium and, at one time, a student lounge. There was no charge for use of space, or for membership dues from the singers. By establishing the Choral Society as a credit-bearing course at the college, it became part of the conductor's teaching load, eliminating the need to separately pay a director. The Choral Society also served as a lab setting for future choral directors, as undergraduate and graduate music majors directed weekly sectional leaders, honing conducting skills and efficient rehearsal techniques. Initially, the college provided financial support for the Choral Society, and ticket sale revenue provided discretionary funds.

Almost immediately, the Choral Society reciprocated the college's generosity by establishing a series of gifts from its funds to the School of Music and its Music Library. By 1961, at its 20th anniversary, the Choral Society had purchased and donated to the Music Library multiple copies of more than 20 major choral works, including Bach *B Minor Mass* (194 copies), Handel *Messiah* (150 copies), Haydn *Creation* (167 copies), and Mozart *Requiem* (174 copies), plus single copies of 25 other choral works. Full scores and orchestral parts were contributed for another 20 choral works, and numerous musicological books and monuments, such as *Barenreiter Edition of Bach's Complete Works*, 20 volumes of *Williams Byrd: the Collected Works*, 36 volumes of the *English Madrigal School*, and other multiple volumes of essential musical reference books and scores. The Choral Society's contributions to the college extended to compositional awards for music students, commissions for program cover artwork and new choral works, scholarships for students, and purchasing of various equipment for the music school, in addition to 50 new choir gowns for the student choir (QCCS, p.24).

So successful was the Queens College Choral Society as a community group that it became evident in the 1950s that a major concert hall was needed in Queens. (Up to this time, Choral Society concerts were performed in area high school auditoriums, as Queens College did not have a large enough concert hall.) In 1961, Queens College built the Colden Center, a substantial performing arts facility "for the college and for the Long Island community" (20thp.11). After two decades of "rehearsals-at-home and show-on-the-road," the Queens College Choral Society began to enjoy its own auditorium for all performances (QCCS, p.11).

Transition and Financial Crisis: 1970-1978

In the 1970s, two issues challenged the survival of the Choral Society. First, a change of leadership: following his twenty-seventh performance of *Messiah* in December 1969, founder John Castellini retired. Queens music faculty member Carl Eberl, who had been serving as the associate conductor, took the helm.

Eberl envisioned a new image for the Choral Society as a semi-professional chorus, a "Queen's counterpart of the New York Choral Society" (Zazula, 1986, p.13). New auditions were held, members unable to demonstrate music reading skills were released, and a more select group of singers was sought from the Queens community. The annual fall *Messiah* performance was replaced with different repertoire, such as Poulenc's *Gloria*, Bach's *Magnificat*, and Mozart's *Vespers*. The Choral Society shifted towards performing contemporary music for the spring concerts, by composers such as Honegger, Hovhaness, Kodaly, and Ives, shorter choral pieces as opposed to major works, and operatic highlights of Puccini, Verdi and Strauss. Many long-time singers were unhappy with both the repertoire changes and the shift in the mission of the chorus from the amateur singer to semi-professional singer. Combined with Conductor Eberl's imposed membership cap, the membership decreased to 70 singers.

Compounding the issue were the effects of New York City's bankruptcy in the mid-1970s. Heavy budget cuts trickled through the City University system and college funding disappeared for the Choral Society. Eberl later stated:

In 1975, New York City was broke, and funds for such peripheral activities as the Choral Society were totally dried up. I had, fortunately, foreseen that situation - - and in the meantime had been encouraged by the New York State Council On The Arts³ to go independent. (cited in Zazula, 1986, p.12)

In a move that would entitle the Choral Society to outside funding, the Queens College Choral Society changed its name in 1976 to the *Queens Choral Society*, thereby detaching itself from the Queens College name. But the far-reaching effect of New York City's fiscal crisis extended to state-wide arts organizations, and the anticipated funding did not materialize. Extra concerts, special appeals, and private support from donors and businesses kept the Choral Society afloat through the 1970s. Nevertheless, membership dropped to 44 singers by the Spring 1978 concert, and Eberl passed the baton, leading to another change in the Choral Society's leadership.

Rebuilding: 1978-2001

Lawrence Eisman began his association with the Choral Society in 1951, when, as an undergraduate music student at Queens College, he played trombone in the college orchestra that accompanied the annual *Messiah*. In 1978, twenty six years later, Eisman was a faculty member at Queens College, teaching music education. A conductor with both orchestral and choral experience, he was tapped to lead the Choral Society, a position he held for 23 years, until 2001.

The immediate concerns for the ensemble were non-musical. Membership was at its lowest ebb. Arriving at the first rehearsal in the fall of 1978, Conductor Eisman found only three singers (Zazula, 1986, p.14). Secondly, funding was crucial to the survival of the chorus. After numerous phone calls and pleas, long-time members returned to rebuild the chorus. Even as the group reclaimed its former identity as the Queens College Choral Society, the college, still reeling from budget cuts, was unable to allot any substantial funding to the Choral Society. To augment its funds, membership dues began to be collected (Zazula, 1986, p.14). Even so, within three years, membership climbed to 140, and has remained consistently over 100 singers for the past twenty years.

Although support from local charities, alumni and private benefactors has provided the group with enough funds to function, two major college changes since the late 1970s have continued to challenge the Choral Society financially. First, the student orchestra, under new leadership at the music school, embarked on an ambitious concert schedule of its own. While the student orchestra continued to perform for the spring concert, the Choral Society now needed to hire a professional orchestra for the annual *Messiah* performance (Zazula, 1986, p.16).

Secondly, Colden Center became a self-supporting performing arts center, and charged the Choral Society for use of the performing hall. Resourceful letter campaigns, anonymous benefactors, required selling of tickets by members, and general enthusiasm by singing members, has kept the Choral Society alive to its 60th anniversary concert in 2001. For Conductor Eisman's final bow in May 2001, 170 singers performed Mozart's *Requiem*, a splendid evening celebrating six decades of community performances.

Vision for the Future: 2002

Changes in American society and the complex urban culture at large threaten many community organizations. In the 1990s, the Queens College Orchestral Society, a symphonic organization of community and college members, presented its last concert after nearly 40 years of performances. Yet the Queens College Choral Society thrives in a major metropolitan area already over-saturated with cultural events, music concerts, sporting events, and numerous educational opportunities.

³Organizations such as the New York State Council On The Arts provide financial support for non-profit community arts projects. They do not, however, fund any endeavors affiliated with institutions of higher education.

Attendance at concerts of the Choral Society no longer fills the 2100 seat Colden Center. For the Fall Concert 2000, *Messiah* drew an audience of 1100. Decrease in attendance (but not enthusiasm) can be attributed to trends in American society identified in research published by the National Endowment of the Arts: (a) a general decline in attendance at live performances of classical music; (b) as each generation matures, a decrease in arts participation that is unrelated to education or income; and (c) younger people substituting alternative forms of arts participation (television, CDs, videotapes) for live arts participation (cited in Jellison, 2000, p. 118).

In the greater New York area, other emerging issues effect attendance: (a) multiple performances of *Messiah* and other choral works, providing a myriad of musical choices for audiences; and (b) the growth of Queens into an extremely culturally diverse urban setting, where smaller communities of ethnic groups sponsor culturally-specific activities.

Despite the competing activities, these community members enjoy singing, and sustain the Choral Society. For some, it is the 60 year tradition in the community. For others, it is the personality of the conductor. Other newer members are looking for a fresh place to sing, and recent Queens College music graduates enjoy "staying in touch" with other singing friends.⁴

An interim conductor led the Choral Society for 2001-2002, but in Fall 2002, James John is taking the baton. Like Conductor Eisman before him, he is part of the Queens family: Conductor John completed his Masters degree in Conducting at Queens College in 1991. Under his capable guidance, the Choral Society will maintain its affiliation with Queens College and continue to be a valuable performing ensemble within the Queens community.

Queens College Choral Society in 2002: Lessons From 60 Years

Administration and Leadership

Of particular significance to the longevity of a community chorus is a collaborative and supportive relationship between conductor and chorus administration. The Queens College Choral Society has always separated its administration from its musical leadership. With both an Advisory Board and slate of Officers to accomplish the daily chores of promotion and publicity, ticket sales, fund-raising, program printing, attendance, dues, and social activities, the conductor may concentrate on musical decisions. Most important to the continued presence of the Choral Society in Queens is the belief by the Advisory Board and Officers in the founding tradition of the group: a chorus of "musical laymen" serving the community, accepting as many as possible without creating an adverse effect on the group.⁵

Financial Resources

Financial support is the primary concern today of community ensembles. For the Choral Society in 2002, several large expense items exhaust the funds: rental of performing hall (Colden Center), payment to soloists and "ringers" (hired singers to supplement the chorus, particularly tenors), cost of professional orchestra for *Messiah*, program printing and advertising. Compounded by the lack of monetary support from the college or university, the Queens College Choral Society drifts precariously close to financial ruin. Ticket sales, dues from members, fundraising letter campaigns to arts-friendly supporters, and annual funds generated by interest-bearing accounts invested by anonymous benefactors over the years provide the ensemble with just enough finances to remain solvent.

Facilities, Logistics and Equipment

One vital area in which a higher education institution can assist a community chorus is in use of facilities and equipment. A music school that has two or three ensemble rooms for the collegiate band, orchestra and

⁴Interviews with Lawrence Eisman, September 2001; May 2002.

⁵Ibid.

choir can share these large, open rehearsal spaces with a community music group. At its peak, the Queens College Choral Society numbered over 200 singers, calling for a sizeable rehearsal room equipped with chairs. Additionally, smaller, classroom size spaces are useful for sectionals.

For many community choirs, the rehearsal facility is different from the performance facility. College campuses can provide an auditorium with a stage area sufficient for 150 singers and orchestra, plus ample risers, music stands and chairs. In the case of the Choral Society, which predates many of the buildings on the Queens College campus, the group performed in area high schools auditoriums until an appropriate size facility was built.

Rehearsing a choral masterwork demands a good keyboard, as the keyboard represents the orchestral reduction and must support 100+ voices singing *forte*. Music schools have quality keyboard instruments which are regularly tuned and maintained in a performance-ready state. Often a good quality piano cannot be found in the town hall or other rehearsal setting.

Although it is possible to perform choral masterworks with keyboard, founding Conductor Castellini believed in providing the amateur singer with the exhilarating experience of singing with orchestra. Furthermore, large non-portable orchestral instruments such as harp, harpsichord, celeste, organ, and various percussion (timpani, bass drum, snare, toms, gong, chimes, xylophone, etc.) are commonplace items in a music school and are necessary for performances of masterworks. Queens College and most music schools have “captive ensembles” in the form of the college student orchestra, which can eliminate the community chorus’ expenditure for paid musicians. Incorporating the performance of a major choral masterpiece into the orchestra’s concert schedule also exposes the instrumental student to additional repertoire.

Music Library

Over the years, the Queens College Music Library has greatly benefited from the Choral Society’s extreme generosity. In return, musical scores are maintained by the music library, providing a means of accounting and storage space. Today, these scores are available to other choral organizations on a loan basis, benefiting both student choral ensembles and smaller community choirs. Of late, Choral Society members purchase their own choral scores and folders. The singer takes responsibility for his/her own music, writes individual musical markings, and keeps the score for future performances.

Membership and Musical Expectations

Reflecting the Choral Society’s focus on the adult amateur singer, musical expectations are deemed less important than a willing attitude and desire to sing. Either the ability to “carry a tune,” demonstrate a “good ear” by singing intervals and melodic patterns of increasing difficulty, or some previous experience in choral singing are desired. Music reading skills are not a requirement for membership, although most singers can follow the “ups and downs” of melodies.⁶ While singers come to the chorus with varying musical abilities and experience, the group experience offers the opportunity to learn and grow musically.

The membership in 2002 remains predominately community members, both full-time working people and retired senior citizens. Faculty, staff and students account for approximately 10% of the chorus. Many music school alumni continue singing beyond graduation from the college, as the Choral Society provides them with a sense of “musical family” and continued social interaction with friends. Recently, undergraduate student participation has increased, because student work schedules conflict with daytime collegiate rehearsals. Non-traditional students (adult continuing education) seeking a music course credit can fulfill a course requirement by singing in the Choral Society “for credit.”

With singers ranging in age from 20 –75, the Queens College Choral Society is a cross-generational membership (Table A). The current singers are college educated (Table B), working community residents, who have a dedicated record of choral performance (Table C) (Bell, 2000). Although the make-up of the group remains predominately white, the Choral Society is becoming more reflective of Queens College and

⁶ Ibid.

the borough. The 60th anniversary program includes many surnames representative of Asian and Hispanic cultures, and also Polish, Irish, Russian, Italian, and German origin. With such diversity in its membership, the chorus is willing to extend beyond the standard masterworks by Western composers to choral works representing other cultures, such as the 2001 performance of *Misa Criolla* by Argentina's Ariel Ramirez. In rehearsing and performing music of other cultures and traditions, the Choral Society offers its members a unique learning opportunity for musical and cultural knowledge.

Applications to New Venues

The community chorus, in its various manifestations, remains a vital avenue for singing by amateur adults. Although the information presented about the Queens College Choral Society represents the viewpoint of a large urban university system in a major United States city, the lessons can be applied to other settings. Institutions for music education can contribute musical leadership, appropriate facilities and necessary equipment to foster effective community–college relationships via performing musical ensembles. Furthermore, community music groups, when supported by collegiate music schools, can further advance performances of musical works that extend beyond the common practice period of Western music.

Many essential issues of a community–college relationship are an integral part of a community performing ensemble. For the musical institution, there is community visibility and prestige of sponsoring its own community-based ensemble. For the chorus, there is the reputation in association with the college name. For the community citizen, there is a social and musical setting that provides lifelong musical learning and performance opportunities for the adult removed from an educational setting. Institutions seeking to explore or establish similar community-college performing ensembles should examine the 60-year relationship between Queens College and its Choral Society to study an operational model of a working partnership between a community chorus and a higher education institution.

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Table A

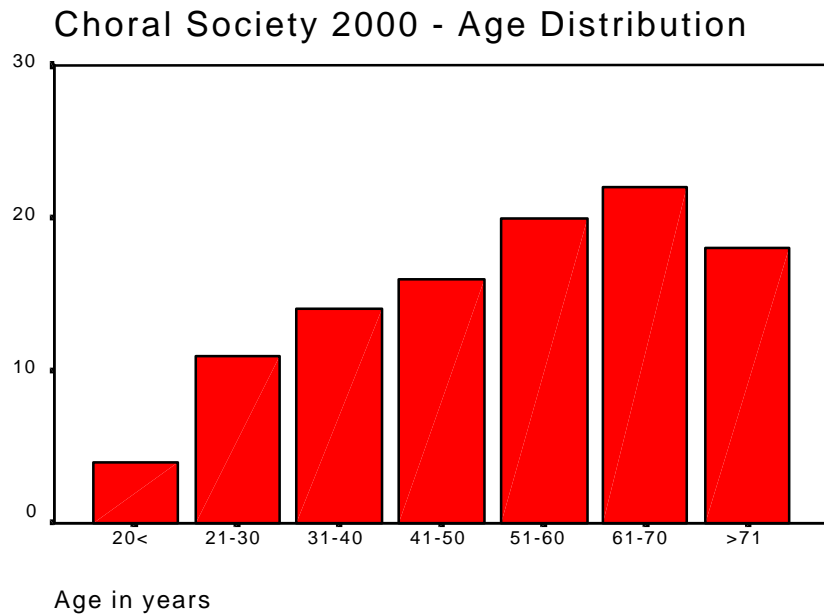


Table B

Choral Society: Educational Background

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
high school diploma	4	3.8	3.8
business or trade school	3	2.9	6.7
some college, but no degree	18	17.1	23.8
2 year college	7	6.7	30.5
4 year college	30	28.6	59.0
graduate or professional school	43	41.0	100.0
Total	105	100.0	

Table C

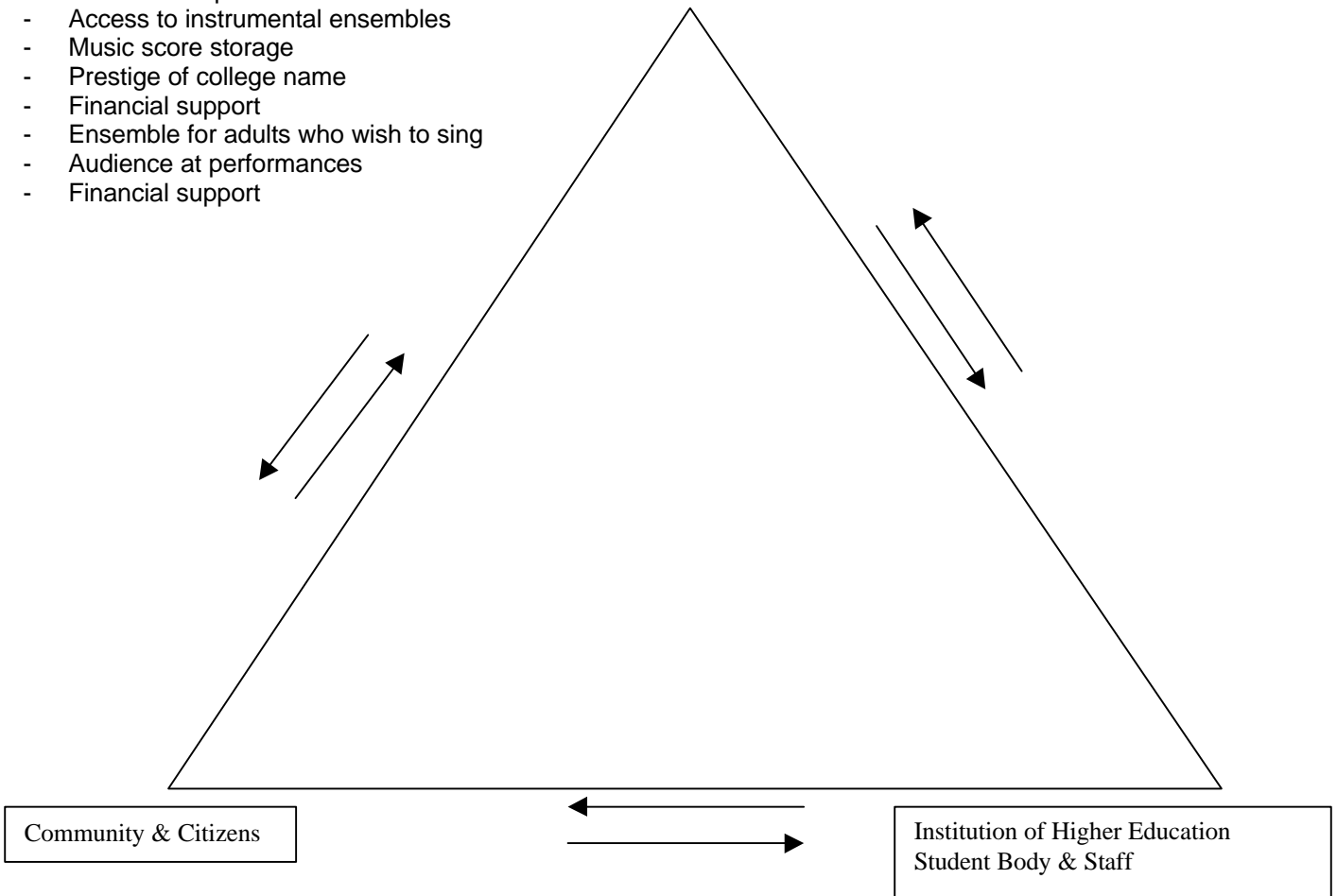
Comparison of Age of Singer vs. Number of Years Singing with Choral Society

Count		Number of Years Singing with Choral Society								Total
		1 year	2-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	21-25 years	26-30 years	31-40 years	
Age of Singer	20<	1	3							4
	21-30	3	7	1						11
	31-40	3	7	3		1				14
	41-50	3	3	7	2	1				16
	51-60	3	5	3	4	3	2			20
	61-70	2	6	4	4	2	2	1	1	22
	>71		6	2	6	2	1		1	18
Total		15	37	20	16	9	5	1	2	105

Benefits to the Community Chorus:

- Faculty conductor
- Rehearsal & performance facilities
- Access to instrumental ensembles
- Music score storage
- Prestige of college name
- Financial support
- Ensemble for adults who wish to sing
- Audience at performances
- Financial support

Community Chorus



Benefits to the Community & Citizens

- Opportunity to perform masterworks
- Social & musical setting for adults, removed from higher education setting
- Lifelong musical learning opportunities for adults
- Access to adult continuing education
- Community event for gathering works
- Melding of "town and gown" residents

Benefits to the College, Student Body and Staff

- community visibility & prestige
- its own community-based ensemble
- library acquisitions
- scholarship money
- opportunity to premiere faculty
- students assist in rehearsal