FROM UNDERGRADUATE DANCE MAJOR TO
PROFESSIONAL CONTEMPORARY DANCE ARTIST:
ALIGNING CURRENT PARADIGMS
FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

by

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education seek to prepare their students for the demands and realities of their chosen professions. This study endeavors to examine the alignment of undergraduate Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) dance programs with the demands and realities of the professional contemporary dance field. A review of the literature concerning the standard paradigm of dance in higher education and the contemporary dance field finds some notable sources, but the majority of these are over ten years old. Thus, this study contributes new knowledge to the dance field in the form of phenomenological accounts of the lived experiences of professional contemporary dance choreographers and recent BFA graduates. I contextualize this study within the extant literature to investigate accredited BFA dance programs and the expectations and actualities of the contemporary dance field. The following two research questions guide this study: What is the alignment between the standard paradigm of dance in higher education and the professional contemporary dance field today? How does this alignment support BFA graduates’ abilities to transition into professional careers within the contemporary dance field?

Scope

To address the research questions, I examine and analyze the data and literature in order to gain an understanding of the current alignment between the academy and the contemporary dance field. Through the data analysis, I distill emergent themes and theoretical and practical examples that could deepen understanding of how BFA dance programs prepare students for life in the professional contemporary dance field. I have narrowed the scope of this research to BFA dance programs accredited by the National
Association of Schools of Dance (NASD). I recognize NASD accreditation as the standard model of dance in higher education because it is applicable to a multitude of universities. Therefore, I engage the NASD model and investigate the research topic within its accreditation guidelines. While NASD offers a curricular structure for dance programs, a curriculum study is not my intent. Rather, I examine the present alignment between the academy and the contemporary dance field in order to illuminate larger ideas within dance scholarship and university dance programs that may be useful to future research on this topic.

Structure

I have organized this study into five main sections. Research Design explains how and why I use a phenomenological research design, namely interviewing two populations—recent BFA graduates and contemporary dance choreographers—to analyze their personal experiences. Dance and the Academy: A Brief History examines how the standard paradigm of dance in higher education evolved by presenting a brief history of how the study of dance entered the academy. National Association of Schools of Dance: Accrediting Bachelor of Fine Arts Dance Programs describes the current, standard accreditation model of BFA dance programs based on the requirements from the NASD Handbook. Emerging Themes for Examination within the Standard Paradigm of Dance in Higher Education presents new data about the current model of BFA programs and the demands and realities of the professional contemporary dance field from the perspectives of the study participants. Three themes, supported by theoretical and practical examples within BFA programs, emerged from the interview data and extant literature and address the issue of students’ transitioning into professional contemporary dance careers. Lastly,


*Going Forward: Implications for Research* proposes ways dance scholars might further develop the research in light of the results of this study.

**Research Design**

By engaging phenomenology as a mode of inquiry, I hope to further understand the function of dance in higher education as it relates to the contemporary dance field. There is limited existing research on this subject, and thus this study fills a gap in the literature. Because of difficulty obtaining current, scholarly source material, I decided to complement the limited existing literature by interviewing contemporary choreographers and recent BFA graduates who are pursuing dance and dance-related careers. By collecting and analyzing the participants’ personal experiences, I invest in a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the research topic.

Qualitative phenomenological research is a methodology that gathers descriptions of lived experiences of a certain phenomenon. While there exists a variety of nuanced approaches to phenomenology, research and evaluation scholar Michael Quinn Patton suggests that:

> [what they] share in common is a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. This requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest. (Patton 2002, 104)

Phenomenological analysis of dance practices allows for artistic depictions of and reflections on an experience. The researcher can then begin to examine thematic material
emerging from the data analysis in order to understand the essence of a particular phenomenon.

This thesis is not an ethnographic study, but it shares a characteristic with ethnography in that the descriptions and interpretations of the interviews—the individual narratives—validate the collective, social construction of the participants’ realities (Patton 2002, 104). However, this study did not use a defining characteristic of ethnography—describing and interpreting shared patterns of a “culture-sharing group” (Creswell 2013, 90)—because even though the participants belong to specific populations in dance culture, they are not located in the same place and do not have identical, mutual interactions.

Another important distinction between this phenomenological study and an ethnographic analysis is that I will bracket my personal experiences out of it as much as possible by engaging in the “epoche process” (Moustakas 1994). The “epoche process” renders the researcher distinct from the ethnographic researcher who takes on a participant-observer role in a studied population. Educational researcher Max van Manen best explains the reason to bracket personal experiences. He suggests, “It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay” (1990, 47). Following this reasoning, I recognize that my personal experiences—as a BFA graduate, professional contemporary dancer, and graduate student and instructor—inspired my interest in this research topic and affected my interpretations of the data since “interpretations of the data always incorporate the assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic” (Creswell 2013, 83).
Though I cannot entirely excise the influence of personal experiences on my study, I briefly outline my personal experiences above to inform my reader of my position as a researcher and engage the “epoche process.”

Once I bracket my personal experiences out of the study as much as possible, I proceed with the analysis of the experiences of others. From this viewpoint, I have endeavored to organize and then interpret the data thematically by examining major aspects of the lived experiences of others. I then weave the interview data with the extant literature to examine essential aspects of the phenomenon under study (Creswell 2013, 227).

Although current literature on the subject of this study is not abundant, dance scholar Kathleen E. Klein does contribute to the field in *Career Readiness and Preparation Criteria in Undergraduate Dance Degree Programs* (2009). Klein researches principles and practices of college dance programs that claim to sufficiently prepare students for careers in dance by analyzing the lived experiences of eight female professors representing eight dance departments in the United States. Although the scope of this study is not exhaustive, it extends Klein’s research on post-secondary dance education; I research college dance from the perspectives of recent graduates of BFA programs and professionals from the contemporary dance field via interviews and surveys.

**Selection of Participants**

In a phenomenological study, “[participants] must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experience” (Creswell 2013, 150). For this study, I chose a small pool of participants based upon their
specialization and active roles in contemporary dance and sufficient availability to me within the required timeframe. The participants in the study consist of two, small groups: four BFA graduates and four professional contemporary choreographers. I gave the participants the option to be anonymous in the presentation of data, but all chose to remain eponymous within the study. Given the limited timeframe for this study, I approached potential study participants—all of whom share my training background in classical modern dance techniques—from my network of professional and collegiate contacts with plans to expand the participant pool in future studies. These realities shaped my research, interpretations, and inferences, which I carefully considered when collecting and analyzing the interview data.

The pool of BFA graduate study participants consists of four dance artists who graduated with BFAs in dance within the past seven years from different NASD-accredited universities: Tristian Griffin, Kelsey Rohr, Caroline Lloyd, and Robbie Priore. All of the BFA graduates now have dance-related jobs—most are members of

1 Tristian Griffin studied ballet, modern, and improvisation in college and graduated with a BFA in Ballet. He is currently a member of Garth Fagan Dance based in Rochester, New York.

2 Kelsey Rohr studied ballet, jazz, and classical modern (Graham technique) in college and graduated with a BFA in Dance Performance. She is currently dancing for Dark Circles Contemporary Dance in Dallas, Texas.

3 Caroline Lloyd studied ballet, post-modern and contemporary dance styles, release technique, and improvisation in college and graduated with a BFA in Modern Dance, Departmental Honors with a minor in Arts Administration. She is currently the Accounts Assistant at Gibney Dance Center, Housing Administrator at Joffrey Ballet School, and a freelance performer in New York City, New York.

4 Robbie Priore studied ballet, classical modern (Graham and Taylor), release technique, and jazz (Luigi) in college and graduated with a BFA in Dance. He is currently the Choreographer and Artist in Residence for City Dance Conservatory and a company member with Company E based in Washington, D.C.
professional contemporary dance companies. The pool of choreographer study participants consists of four contemporary dance choreographers with ballet and modern dance training who are based in California, New York, Texas, and Denmark: Mike Esperanza, Amy Marshall, Joshua L. Peugh, and Fabio Liberti.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, I gathered data primarily through individual interviews. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at TCU and written consent from

5 Mike Esperanza is the Artistic Director and Choreographer of BARE Dance Company based in Los Angeles, California and New York City, New York. He graduated from California State University with a BFA in Graphic Design. He has worked exclusively as a choreographer for contemporary companies around the United States.

6 Amy Marshall is the Artistic Director and Choreographer of the Amy Marshall Dance Company (AMDC) based in New York City, New York. Marshall graduated from Goucher College with a double major in dance and theatre. She was a member of Parsons Dance and Paul Taylor Dance Company 2, H.T. Chen and Dancers, and Cortez and Company before founding AMDC in 2000.

7 Joshua L. Peugh graduated with a BFA in Dance Performance from Southern Methodist University and danced professionally with Universal Ballet in Seoul, South Korea before founding Dark Circles Contemporary Dance based in Dallas, Texas—where he is the Artistic Director and Choreographer.

8 Although this study focuses on college dance in the United States, because of the increasing international aspect of contemporary dance, I reference European contemporary choreographer, Fabio Liberti. Liberti, a contemporary dancer and freelance choreographer based in Copenhagen, Denmark, graduated with a BA from Codarts, Rotterdam Dance Academy, Netherlands. He has most recently danced with the Danish Dance Theatre. He travels the globe creating and setting work for contemporary dance companies. Because of his experience choreographing all over the world, Liberti is cognizant of the challenges of pursuing careers in the contemporary dance field. His responses align with the other choreographers, which suggests that European choreographers may look for and value similar qualities and skills of dancers as their American counterparts.
participants before engaging in the interview process. I corresponded with participants, sent interview questions, and gathered individual responses via e-mail.

A potential problem with written online correspondence is the discussion loses the benefit of tangential questions and responses, which often lead to observations from the interviewee that were not contemplated in the original question, yet are insightful to the research topic. Even so, I encouraged participants to answer conversationally in hopes that they did not feel constrained by the format of online correspondence. The questions I posed invited the participants to share their experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about undergraduate dance training and career readiness in the context of the highly competitive, evolving field of contemporary dance.

For the contemporary choreographers, I developed a list of questions and asked them to describe their experiences working with dancers who have BFA degrees. I also asked them to describe the qualifications of dancers they seek to hire given the current climate of the contemporary dance field—from their points of view. For the recent BFA graduates, I developed a list of questions and asked them to describe their undergraduate dance training, and how their experiences in BFA dance programs prepared them for careers in contemporary dance.

Once I collected all responses, I synthesized the interview data by creating a system of visual organization of the information, specifically representing the data in tabular form (Creswell 2013, 187). I printed out the participants’ answers, used scissors to separate and group them under each pertaining question, and organized the data onto a

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9 See Appendix A

10 See Appendix B
large piece of butcher paper. On the data table, I labeled dominant themes within individual responses. I then compared the themes and noted correlating and overlapping ideas. I then organized these ideas into collective, emerging themes, which allowed me to contextualize the participants’ responses within the extant literature.

**Dance and the Academy: A Brief History**

Dance emerged at the college level in the early 1900s in physical education departments through the work of three pioneering women, Gertrude Colby, Bird Larson, and Margaret H’Doubler. Dance scholar Thomas K. Hagood, in *A History of Dance in American Higher Education: Dance and the American University*, notes that these women made individual contributions to the conceptual framework for dance as an academic discipline (103). By the 1930s, the legitimization of dance studies in liberal arts colleges made it possible for Bennington College to institute the Bennington College School of Dance—the first department model for dance in higher education (Hagood 2000, 120).

At Bennington, modern dance professionals, most significantly Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm, presented their work and developed their techniques through both teaching and choreographing (Hagood 2000, 120). The Bennington program raised consciousness among university administrators and demonstrated that dance was an art form worthy of inclusion in academia as a discrete discipline and not a subdivision of physical education (Klein 2009, 35). Following World War II, in the 1940s and 1950s, dance programs expanded, but dance educators struggled

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11 See Appendix C for image of data table
to disassociate their programs from the objectives of physical education (Hagood 2000, 168-172).

By the 1960s, dance departments finally began breaking free from the affiliation with physical education and shifted into the fine arts. As a consequence, Hagood notes that dance writers and professional dancers began scrutinizing university programs more closely. Their viewpoints were mixed about the merits of studying dance in college. For some dance writers representing the academy, studying dance in college was a unique opportunity for students to prepare for professional careers. In 1964, *Dance Magazine* began a series of articles on dance in higher education titled “College or Career for Dancers?” wherein authors featured a particular university and illustrated the distinct characteristics of its dance program (Hagood 2000, 197). Through such articles, many of these writers praised studying dance in college and helped shape the perception of dance as a discipline in higher education that served dance educators’ goals of providing professional preparation.

For other dance writers, especially in the professional field, disdain for studying dance in the academy was prevalent. Choreographer Agnes de Mille called college dance “largely fraudulent” and stated that “dance programs were not training dancers as much as they were training ‘dilettantes’” (Hagood 2000, 198). Another professional modern dancer anonymously voiced concerns about dance moving into the fine arts in a 1966 report on the University of California Irvine’s dance program describing “college dance majors who leave campus with romantic ideas about dance . . . [and who] come off campus starry eyed, seeking careers with dance troupes, totally unprepared for the realities of the field” (199). Hagood cites a tone of “aggressive anti-intellectualism” in the
1960s when some in the field believed that “‘dance should be done, not thought about.’” and that “‘dancers in college aren’t prepared to dance, they’re only prepared to talk about dance’” (198). The 1960s professional perspective of studying dance in the academy often seemed to dismiss college dance as viable career preparation.

The mixed comments that framed the discourse on studying dance in higher education in the 1960s shaped the discussions in the 1970s. Since the 1960s, according to Klein, “a schism developed between the academic dance world and the professional field, reflecting a deep divergence of values centering on the question of whether one is trying to train the dancer or educate the person” (39). Conversations about addressing a lack of technical training in the academy and clarifying institutional standards became necessary in order to maintain the integrity of college dance programs and the employability of students in the professional dance field (39). These discussions subsequently inspired new developments towards improving professional standards of dance in higher education.

In light of the controversies and discussions during the 1960s and 1970s, in 1981, representatives of educational dance programs formed the National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD) in order to establish accreditation criteria for institutions and improve professional standards in dance education. The United States Department of Education recognized the NASD as the accreditation agency for dance, which served to define the curricula of a dance major. Institutions sought NASD accreditation to boost their programs’ reputations and continue to do so to this day.

During the 1990s and 2000s, dance in higher education faced a new set of challenges associated with technological advances, access to information on a global
level, and the variety of job opportunities in the professional dance field. Echoing sentiments voiced in the 1960s, Klein, in *Career Readiness and Preparation Criteria in Undergraduate Dance Degree Programs* (2009), notes that some professionals debated whether a BFA was a useful qualification for a professional career. In the academy, some dance departments sought to expand their function and provide students with more resources and course offerings to encourage interdisciplinary opportunities in order to prepare students for non-performance careers in dance such as dance therapy, teaching, and arts management (41-43).

Today, dance in higher education continues to build respect and recognition as a distinct, important academic discipline. Studying dance in college is a valid choice for many students who want to pursue careers as contemporary dance artists or obtain a liberal arts degree while continuing their dance training. The current model of college dance programs endeavors to bridge the academic world with the professional world and provide students the preparation needed for success in the field. The model of NASD-accreditation is standard in dance education, and many reputable schools follow this paradigm. Therefore, I engage the NASD model of BFA programs as the standard model of dance in higher education.

**National Association of Schools of Dance: Accrediting Bachelor of Fine Arts Dance Programs**

In this section, I outline the current, standard model of NASD-accredited BFA dance programs. NASD has maintained the same aims and objectives established in 1981, as expressed in its following statements of purpose:
• To establish a national forum to stimulate the understanding and acceptance of the educational disciplines inherent in the creative arts in higher education in the United States
• To establish reasonable standards centered on the knowledge and skills necessary to develop academic and professional competence at various program levels
• To foster the development of instruction of the highest quality while simultaneously encouraging varied and experimental approaches to the teaching of dance
• To evaluate, through the processes of voluntary accreditation, schools of dance and programs of dance instruction in terms of their quality and the results they achieve, as judged by experienced examiners
• To assure students and parents that accredited dance programs provide competent teachers, adequate plant and equipment, and sound curricula, and are capable of attaining their stated objectives
• To counsel and assist schools in developing their programs and to encourage self-evaluation and continuing studies toward improvement
• To invite and encourage the cooperation of professional dance groups and individuals of reputation in the field of dance in the formulation of appropriate curricula and standards
• To establish a national voice to be heard in matters pertaining to dance, particularly as they would affect member institutions and their stated objectives. (NASD 2016)

Three types of undergraduate dance degrees, which seek to implement higher, professional standards, employ these aims and objectives. The three undergraduate degrees in dance are the Bachelor of Arts (BA), the Bachelor of Science (BS), and the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA). In its handbook, NASD designates the BA and the BS in dance as “liberal arts undergraduate degrees,” and the BFA as a “professional degree” (2015, 85). For the purpose of this study, I focus on the BFA degree in dance, which “focuses on intensive work in dance supported by a program in general studies [with] the intent to prepare for professional practice” (86). NASD emphasizes performance and choreography as the major components of the BFA in dance.

The NASD Handbook 2015-16 outlines the minimum requirements of the BFA—four (4) years of performance, which include studies in technique, two (2) years of
coursework in choreography, an unspecified amount of theoretical and historical studies, and one (1) course of teaching (96-99). Although these minimum requirements are firm, NASD also indicates recommendations for professional development in their handbook:

**Recommendations.** Other goals for the professional undergraduate degree are strongly recommended:

1. Student orientation to the nature of professional work in their major field. Examples are organizational structures and working patterns; artistic, intellectual, educational, economic, technological, and political contexts; development potential; and career development.
2. Student experience with broadly based examples of excellence in various dance professions.
3. Opportunities for students to explore areas of individual interest related to dance in general or to the major. A few examples are dance bibliography, notations, aesthetics, performance practices, pedagogy, and specialized topics in history and analysis.
4. Opportunities for students to explore multi-disciplinary issues that include dance.
5. Opportunities for students to practice synthesis of a broad range of dance knowledge and skills, particularly through independent study that involves a minimum of faculty guidance, where the emphasis is on evaluation at completion (see Standards III.G.). (2015, 99)

These recommendations for professional development apply to the BFA degree and suggest objectives for augmenting the undergraduate dance experience with opportunities that individual programs can develop and provide.

**Emerging Themes for Examination**

**within the Standard Paradigm of Dance in Higher Education**

I engage the NASD model, the standard paradigm of dance in higher education, as the basis for my analysis of both existing literature and viewpoints from study participants. The analysis of extant literature and interview data revealed three themes that are related to BFA training that pertain to the professional contemporary dance field: experiences in non-performance careers; foundational training in contemporary dance
techniques for stylistic range; and BFA degree structure as professional preparation.

“Experiences in non-performance careers” examines implementing broad and deep non-performance coursework in accredited BFA programs to balance NASD’s emphasis on performance and choreography courses with the recognition that many professional dance artists supplement their incomes with non-performance careers. “Foundational training in contemporary dance techniques for stylistic range” presents the difficult choice accredited BFA programs face when deciding which contemporary dance techniques or styles to offer as part of students’ training in an effort to train a versatile artist. “BFA degree structure as professional preparation” addresses the challenge of implementing a degree structure that balances providing a liberal arts education and a vocational education in an effort to support students’ academic, artistic, and personal growth. All three themes reflect the unique challenges that accredited BFA programs encounter when preparing students to successfully transition from life in academia to life in the professional dance field.

Experiences in Non-Performance Careers

In “What Becomes of Undergraduate Dance Majors?,” dance scholars Sarah S. Montgomery and Michael D. Robinson claim that many dance majors who enter the field of professional dance pursue a multitude of career paths in order to supplement their income post-graduation (2003, 58). Undergraduate experiences may enhance a dance major’s ability to begin a variety of dance-related careers on her way towards establishing herself as a professional dancer or choreographer. Montgomery and Robinson conducted a quantitative study to examine earnings, work patterns, and work histories of graduates of the Five College Dance Departments (FCDD): Amherst,
Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts. Montgomery and Robinson concluded that since jobs are scarce in the dance market and monetary returns are low, working dance professionals often find employment in non-performance jobs to support themselves (58). Choreographers Joshua L. Peugh and Amy Marshall, affirm Montgomery and Robinson’s findings. Peugh advises, “Now dancers need to be prepared to supplement their income” (2016). And Marshall observes, “It is harder and harder for [graduates] to find [dance] jobs, and [they] need to find something to supplement themselves . . . and make money while still dancing” (2016). If dance majors must supplement their income with other work post-graduation, they might benefit from dance-related jobs in non-performance areas. Thus, per NASD requirements, accredited BFA programs implement non-performance coursework in a variety of ways in an effort to prepare undergraduate students for dance-related, non-performance career goals.

**Breadth versus Depth**

NASD explicitly defines the BFA as a “professional degree” and emphasizes the performance and choreography components. NASD also requires accredited dance departments to offer a variety of non-performance courses such as dance history, dance theory, dance for camera, lighting design, technical direction, and teaching. BFA programs have the ability to decide how to implement NASD’s requirements for non-performance coursework. Generally, BFA programs offer a breadth of non-performance experiences via semester-long survey courses or offer a more intensive study via multi-course experiences in one area or a closely mentored independent studies course. Due to finite credit hours required for the degree, BFA programs often must choose which subjects to cover broadly or with more depth in their non-performance courses. Thus,
BFA programs face the bind of balancing performance and choreographic rigor while preparing students—hopeful professional dance artists—with skills applicable to non-performance career paths that can supplement their incomes.

Dance scholar Klein found that the university dance programs she researched exposed dance students to some aspects of non-performance career paths such as dance therapy, technical theatre, dance management, dance notation, sports medicine, arts management, dance writing and research, dance videography, and music for dance (2009, 90). However, because these were survey courses, the aim was not to provide sufficient preparation to immediately begin a job in these careers (90). While survey courses provide students with a variety of non-performance career experiences, according to Klein, the breadth of these experiences is insufficient; students are not competitive enough to begin non-performance careers right away post-graduation. Klein mentions that the present practices of including broad experiences for training in a variety of non-performance career paths is not responsive to today’s job market (90-91). Klein’s research suggests that students may benefit from shopping around based on their interests in learning about non-performance careers and whether they prefer a focused study or a more varied exposure.

The survey course as a model was established in the mid-to-late twentieth century and is widespread and common in college dance programs. A student may seek survey courses that cover a broad range of knowledge in a multitude of non-performance careers. For example, in one semester, a course in dance notation may cover elementary level dance notation and provide students with introductory skills and experiences. A course in dance history may cover four hundred years of history in only sixteen weeks.
Introductory experiences in survey courses may provide the student with a broad range of knowledge and experiences that may be beneficial as she considers her career possibilities and goals. For the student who is less certain of her interests, survey courses may benefit her because the wide variety of non-performance experiences may spark curiosity in a particular career and thereby broaden her horizons.

Survey courses in non-performance careers are common in many BFA programs, but what seems unique is the alternative approach—intensive non-performance coursework; thus, it is worth examining in greater detail. A student who is certain of her interests may benefit from a more concentrated study of a specified non-performance career path rather than a general overview in a survey course. As an example, a student curious about lighting design may gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject if she has, for instance, a practical experience designing the lighting for a dance as an assignment in a specialized course. Some ways that universities implement non-performance coursework that individually emphasize particular subjects are through supplemental certification options and closely mentored independent study courses.

Supplemental Certification Options

In their article, “A Survey of Teaching Artists in Dance and Theater: Implications for Preparation, Curriculum, and Professional Degree Programs,” (2012) dance educators and scholars Mary Elizabeth Anderson and Doug Risner weigh in on Klein’s suggestion that universities offer intense courses in non-performance careers. Anderson and Risner encourage BFA programs to develop a teaching certification option as a mode of profound non-performance career preparation (2012, 13). They point out that many BFA programs, following NASD guidelines, only require one course of pedagogy, which they
believe insufficiently prepares students for likely jobs as teachers (2012, 10). While Anderson and Risner criticize the guidelines set for accredited BFA programs by commenting on NASD course requirements, they also present solutions. They suggest that implementing certification options in different non-performance careers may be one way of enhancing a BFA program that is interested in deepening student professional preparation.

Some NASD-accredited BFA programs are managing to offer non-performance certification options to their BFA students. For example, Rutgers University’s dance department offers somatic teaching training programs to their students (not included in tuition)—Polestar Pilates Teacher Training Program and Summer Vinyasa Teacher Training Program. Rutgers also offers a five-year dual BFA/EdM track, which prepares students for PK-12 dance teaching careers. Other accredited universities, University of Georgia, Towson, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and University of Texas at Austin, also offer PK-12 Teacher Certifications in Dance Education for BFA students. University of Florida (UF) offers an Undergraduate Certificate in Dance in Medicine, wherein the UF Center for the Arts in Medicine in conjunction with the School of Theatre and Dance prepares students for careers in Dance Science and other jobs that use movement to enhance health. Such programs find ways to address the challenge of implementing intensive non-performance coursework while maintaining the emphasis on performance and choreography as required by NASD.

BFA dance programs might also benefit from collaboration with other university departments to offer certification or concentration opportunities. For example, a certification or concentration in dance photography could involve an interdisciplinary
partnership between a university’s dance department and visual arts department. In this instance, a student could work with faculty and collaborate with students in both departments, thus studying dance photography in a more specialized manner and perhaps preparing a student to pursue dance photography immediately after graduation. The same might be said of a partnership between a dance department and a journalism department to offer a course in dance journalism. Of course, these concentrations alone do not guarantee a career, but they may provide students with skills that give them the competitive edge in the job market.

Independent Study Courses

While offering non-performance certification options aligns with Klein’s, as well as Anderson and Risner’s recommendations, independent study courses may also offer BFA students a more specialized experience in non-performance career paths. Recent graduate Caroline Lloyd observes, “I’ve come to realize that choice in [u]niversity [program] and independent study while in school is key to a full dance education” (2016). Lloyd’s statement suggests that opportunities for independent study enhance a college education and also supports the implication that students might benefit from exploring BFA programs that offer the scope of non-performance coursework that best meets their needs.

Considering Lloyd’s perspective and NASD’s recommendations for professional development, offering opportunities for independent study may provide students with concentrated non-performance experiences. Through designing their own study, students take initiative in their pursuits outside the studio, which, for theatre scholars Peter Zazzali and Jeanne Klein, exemplifies “an entrepreneurial approach to learning” (2015, 269).
Although their article, “Toward Revising Undergraduate Theatre Education,” (2015) speaks to theatre education, their scholarship is also applicable to dance. They write, “The fact remains that jobs are scarce and the system is stacked against [students] insofar as maintaining any sense of agency. An entrepreneurial approach can afford [students] the skills, confidence and values needed to shape their artistic identities and emerging careers by creating a context for them to practice, develop, and distribute their work” (2015, 269). Zazzali and Klein’s advice provides students with autonomy and power to self-direct their education in non-performance careers. Considering that most professionals supplement their performance or choreography incomes with non-performance jobs, having opportunities for independent study in non-performance specializations during undergraduate years may help students be proactive and strategic in their pursuits post-graduation. This approach allows both innovation and initiative within a student-driven learning process.

A possibility for implementing an independent study opportunity within the framework of an entrepreneurial approach to learning is a closely mentored internship course in dance. In “Research, Design, and Implementation of an Internship Course in Dance: Turning Student Knowledge into Professional Know-How,” Doug Risner, professor in the theatre and dance department at the NASD-accredited Wayne State University addresses college internship programs within an undergraduate BS in dance professions (2015). Risner speaks to the BS degree, however his research applies to the BFA degree as both undergraduate degrees encourage independent study opportunities for students. Although the BS in dance professions does not have the exact NASD degree requirements as the BFA, the value of the independent study internship experience to a
student’s education is similarly beneficial. If BFA programs were to implement Risner’s internship course, being off-campus might be a challenge for students who must continue their studies in performance and choreography. Perhaps, to fulfill NASD requirements, BFA students could negotiate local, part-time internships that allow time to accomplish the necessary amount of in-studio work on-campus.

Risner’s internship course design states that seniors investigate (based on a “survey of professions” course in the sophomore year), identify, and complete an internship off-campus for which they receive credit (2015, 60). The students arrange online meetings with their faculty mentors throughout the semester and eventually use the internship data to bolster their capstone semester. Risner’s internship proposal could have major benefits for BFA students. In seeking out and designing their experiences in the field, students learn the skills and develop the confidence to be proactive and entrepreneurial in their career pursuits. Within the internship experience, students work directly with the community and engage with dance professionals and businesses off-campus, strengthen their networking skills, widen their connections to the field, and boost their hiring chances post-graduation. As a result, students obtain professional level experiences in the non-performance careers they are interested in while pursuing their BFA degree, and they may be better prepared to begin a job in a non-performance career immediately after graduating.

For students pursuing employment as performers or choreographers, supplementing income with non-performance jobs is common. What seems noteworthy is that while NASD requires BFA programs to offer coursework in non-performance careers, BFA programs determine the breadth and depth of that coursework—while
maintaining their emphases on performance and choreography. It is difficult to imagine an undergraduate program that serves the needs and career aspirations of all students, and it thus seems consistent that how non-performance coursework is implemented—to what extent—is the decision of each accredited BFA program.

Foundational Training in Contemporary Dance Techniques for Stylistic Range

College dance departments select which contemporary dance techniques to incorporate in their degree programs as part of NASD’s required performance component. While an extensive study of every contemporary dance technique might be useful for some students, to accomplish this within the limitations of a normal four-year degree, liberal arts program is probably an unattainable goal. Writer Erika Kinetz quotes Lawrence Rhodes, director of The Juilliard School’s dance division: “‘There aren't enough hours in the day to do all the kinds of disciplines and techniques and forms of dance[.] . . . The variety of what is expected of students has expanded hugely’” (Kinetz 2005). While Rhodes is frustrated with daily time restrictions, it is also the case that BFA programs have a limited number of credit hours in which they can teach all varieties of contemporary dance. With the time constraints and the ever-increasing styles of contemporary dance—each one being perhaps uniquely beneficial to some students and not others—BFA programs choose which dance techniques to offer and which to exclude.

BFA programs may offer training in a unique combination of contemporary dance techniques. As one example of many, a program could offer Horton, Cunningham, and Gaga techniques, as well as unique approaches that individual faculty develop—a
prevalent training option that introduces another layer of complexity in a BFA program’s
decision-making. The numerous possibilities of dance training present an issue wherein a
prospective student may not always have the ability to thoughtfully consider the
techniques offered at an institution and decide whether those styles encourage her
strengths and address her weaknesses before enrollment—especially because knowledge
of the distinctions among contemporary dance techniques, particularly at the high school
level, is scarce. BFA programs have the unenviable task of making their unique
arrangement of contemporary dance techniques useful to students who may not know
what is best for them.

Choreographer Perspectives

What seems to be consistent in the data and the literature is having technique
classes—a major component of the NASD degree requirements—that provide
foundational dance skills, which are applicable to multiple styles of contemporary dance,
is key to a dancer’s ability to meet the needs of choreographers and directors in the field.
Opinions vary as to what contemporary dance techniques are most useful in college
dance classes and many programs reflect the pedagogies of their faculty. As Rhodes
mentions, the professional dance field expects dancers to adapt to many different
contemporary dance styles. From the small data sample of choreographer responses—all
of whom I have worked with on a professional level because of our similar dance
backgrounds—two kinds of contemporary dance techniques emerged as significant to a
dancer’s training: classical modern dance and improvisation.

Classical modern dance consists of a variety of approaches such as Graham,
Horton, Dunham, and Limón techniques that were developed by individual artists rather
than by tradition such as ballet. Classical codified approaches, like the ones mentioned, emerged in the early-to-middle twentieth century, and while each has a unique movement vocabulary, they all utilize a systematized methodology for training a dancer. For instance, Graham technique has a set series of seated and standing exercises and sequences that move across the floor, all of which comprise the progression of a class. Each codified classical modern dance technique has a specific, standard syllabus of movements and exercises that students repeat each class, sometimes with variation or more complexity, in order to focus on individual principles of the distinctive technique.

In contrast, improvisation focuses on the process of spontaneously creating movement and compositions. There is no official codified movement vocabulary, and the emphasis is on freeing the body from certain movement habits—sometimes facilitated within a creative framework or score. The growing importance of improvisation emerged from the post-modern dance movement in the latter half of the twentieth century, which influenced the choreographic processes of Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and Trisha Brown, to name a few. For the choreographers I interviewed, training in classical modern dance and improvisation is one way that may enable a dancer to build a strong technical foundation that is both stylistically transferable and marketable in the professional field.

Classical Modern Dance

For Joshua L. Peugh and Amy Marshall, training in classical modern dance is one method that a dancer can engage to refine the technical components of her skill. Peugh believes that such training provides a strong understanding of form because it emphasizes body-awareness in the spine and pelvis (2016). He observes that students who clearly
embody characteristics of classical modern dance radiate movement outwards from a deep-rooted center, which is situated in the base of the pelvis (2016). Similarly, Marshall looks for dancers “with classical modern training who understand what it is to move from a lower center of gravity” (2016). Though other choreographers might suggest other pathways to these results, for Peugh and Marshall, understandings of movements of the spine and pelvis from classical modern dance training help students better coordinate the torso, arms, and legs, which deepens technical skill and mastery—“accomplishing things that a normal human body without training could not accomplish” (Peugh 2016).

Marshall and Peugh’s comments speak to their desire for dancers who have a keen sense of center and a strong connection to the floor, as they understand it through the study of classical modern dance techniques. Peugh also seems to suggest that a strong centerline of the body serves a dancer’s ability to perform or “radiate movement outwards” (2016) in such a way that exudes physical power. Having the physical strength and knowledge derived from the various idiosyncratic approaches of classical modern dance may be a foundational piece in a student’s dance training and may provide fundamental skills—such as a strong sense of center—that Peugh and Marshall see as transferable to other contemporary dance styles. For these two choreographers, honing distinctive features of classical modern dance seems to strengthen a dancer’s proficiency and could be one method for training a student in contemporary dance in BFA programs.

Improvisation

According to Fabio Liberti and Peugh, studying improvisation is another contemporary dance technique that could be useful for building a strong technical foundation that would support students’ abilities to perform a range of styles. More
specifically, studying improvisation may be a mode for students to improve their personal movement qualities. Both choreographers address the significance of a dancer’s ability to engage her individual movement idiosyncrasies in order to participate in their creative processes.

Peugh states, “Improvisation is hugely important to choreographers working in the field right now. I don't know any who don't use improvisation in their creative process” (2016). Similarly, Liberti considers improvisation necessary in the creative process because many choreographers get inspiration from the dancers they work with. He comments:

[1]Improvisation technique and composition [are] very important elements of a dance education. These would help to develop the dancer’s own artistic personality. . . . In most contemporary dance companies, dancers . . . have to be able to not only repeat steps and adapt to different styles, but also create steps and bring their own personalities to the dance piece. (2016)

Liberti offers insight into the role of a dancer within many contemporary dance companies and the abilities needed to create a fruitful collaboration between dancer and choreographer. For Liberti, dancers must be skillful collaborators and possess unique movement styles in order to actively contribute to the creative process and not be passive vessels of the choreographer’s singular vision. His comments suggest that he values improvisation, at least in part, because it allows dancers to develop their ability to create and express their individuality through movement, which in turn, inspires his creations.

The perspectives of the small sample of choreographers may not suit some BFA programs, but they provide knowledge of two methods of training in contemporary dance that might provide students with a technical foundation useful in the professional field. From the interviewed choreographers’ viewpoints, strong classical modern dance and
improvisation skills are advantageous in the professional realm—especially considering a dancer’s collaborative role in many choreographers’ creative processes. Considering the responses from the interviewed choreographers, perhaps incorporating classical modern dance and improvisation in a BFA program would provide foundational training that is applicable to multiple contemporary dance styles. Again, their responses are only a narrow portion of the options available to BFA programs. Regardless of which specific contemporary techniques a BFA program chooses to offer, what seems consistent is the challenge BFA programs face to design a technique course structure that provides training in contemporary dance, which fosters foundational skills that are applicable to a growing variety of styles and serves a student’s ability to appeal to choreographers and directors in the contemporary dance field.

BFA Degree Structure as Professional Preparation

BFA programs provide an environment that supports students’ learning and development through a carefully planned progression through the degree curriculum while simultaneously preparing them for the professional world. For NASD-accredited programs, the BFA course of study varies from university to university as each institution follows and implements the NASD standards differently. Whatever the specific internal operations, the structure of a BFA program as defined by NASD intends to address both liberal arts and vocational education. These two tropes, sometimes conflicting and reminiscent of the 1960s discussions about whether the academy intends to coach the dance artist or educate the individual (Klein 2009, 39), are substantive to how accredited
schools construct their BFA degree structure within the NASD guidelines and support a period of growth that may prepare students for entry into professional life.

**BFA Degree Structure as Incubator: Preparation for Professional Life**

In the article “Curtain Up” from the March 2006 issue of *Dance Magazine*, Wendy Perron, dance scholar and Editor in Chief, remarks on the positive aspects of the collegiate dance experience. She writes:

> College dance departments are becoming virtual incubators of dance. . . . On a lively campus you learn not only from your teachers, but also your fellow students. Those four years are a precious period of discovery. . . . You train your mind as well as your body, finding connections between dance and literature, dance and psychology, dance and science. You learn to look at something from all sides, to weigh opposing viewpoints and develop independent thinking. The combination of dance productivity and intellectual debate hones you as a person and gives you more dimension as a performer. (10)

For Perron, college encourages students to explore how their art fits in the world by providing a liberal arts environment that supports intellectual rigor in combination with the physical demands of dance. In her description of college dance departments as “incubators,” (2006, 10) Perron claims that undergraduate dance programs are valuable because they encourage the growth of the whole person—developing physically, emotionally, intellectually, and artistically all while earning a BFA degree. A student grows in a space where dance studies collide, perhaps for the first time, with other disciplines in challenging ways that lead to personal discoveries and new understandings of dance. The ability to meet challenges with curiosity is invaluable to professional success and is something degree programs are capable of fostering in their students.

Dance scholars and educators Nancy Smith-Fichter and Timothy Wilson recognize how colleges’ unique environments support personal development—improving
self-awareness, identifying one’s potential, and building social skills. These scholars acknowledge that while institutions cannot guarantee students work as dance artists, the maturity gained in college—outside the development of dance technique—serves students’ professional endeavors. From 1994 to 1996, *Dance Magazine* published articles titled, “Dancers in Cap and Gown,” which discussed dance in higher education in the 1990s (Hagood 2000, 312). One of the questions dance educator Patty Phillips from Florida State University (FSU) asked was “What kinds of jobs are there for graduates of our programs? Are we preparing performers? Teachers?” (312). Nancy Smith-Fichter, chair of the Department of Dance at FSU, answered by saying that there is no job guarantee if someone chooses to pursue a life in the arts, but “what you can guarantee is that [students] will get an excellent education, both [as] professionally and humanistically as possible” (312). Timothy Wilson, chair of the Department of Dance at University of South Florida (USF), added, “One thing we can give them besides dance is a sense of self. They are investing their bodies and souls in this art, learning about who they are” (312). For Perron, Smith-Fichter, and Wilson, studying dance in college may not secure a dance job post-graduation, but the intellectual engagement of studying the art form—to reiterate Perron—within the incubator-environment, promotes self-awareness in that a student is able to engage with her surroundings, to make new discoveries, and to assert her personal ambitions.

In the article “Toward Revising Undergraduate Theater Education,” theatre scholars Peter Zazzali and Jeanne Klein research the concept of self-discovery as a fortunate by-product of the undergraduate fine arts experience (2015). Their research into theatre programs in higher education relates directly to the discussion of dance in higher
education in the *Dance Magazine* article discussed earlier. Zazzali and Klein address the challenges of today’s employment opportunities in the performing arts and comment on how universities must address the needs, skills, and responsibilities of the twenty-first century college student. Zazzali and Klein advise:

Regardless of disciplines, all faculty need to cultivate young minds, for as Judith Shapiro, the former president of Barnard College, counsels students: ‘You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.’ (2015, 263)

If a BFA course of study can serve as an environment for faculty to encourage development of well-rounded artists, then during their education, BFA dance students can develop curiosity for discovering what piques their interests and motivates their creativity and imaginations. Regardless of the realities of the job market and field of study, Zazzali and Klein recognize undergraduate education as a vehicle for newfound growth during formative years of young adulthood.

Zazzali and Klein’s research on theatre in higher education supports the idea that pursuit of a BFA degree encourages the maturing of intangible traits and academic skills within each student. Dance, like theatre, is a humanistic discipline that fosters in individuals “civic discourse, critical thinking, imaginative expression, interpersonal communication, corporeal intelligence, creative problem-solving, empathic awareness, and intercultural knowledge” (Zazzali and Klein 2015, 263). The aforementioned writers seem to agree that social and academic skills acquired in undergraduate studies allow for a maturation of the artist, scholar, and person and manifest in a dancer’s artistry as well as the interpersonal relationships developed throughout her career. As dance studies interact and intertwine with other subjects, students develop skills beyond technical proficiency and become more sensitive to the ways the art form provides general cultural
Recent Graduate Perspectives

The four recent BFA graduates I interviewed for this study reaffirmed the claims made by the educators and scholars quoted above when recalling their experiences in college and how those experiences affected their professional lives. Their responses indicate how their BFA studies facilitated the development of personal and academic growth—more than learning the fundamentals of dancing—that prepared them for their lifestyles in professional dance communities around the country. When asked, “How has your undergraduate education served your professional goals?,” Caroline Lloyd, Kelsey Rohr, Tristan Griffin, and Robbie Priore expressed similar thoughts about developing a clearer sense of who they were and what they wanted out of their careers during their undergraduate tenure, which served their performance and non-performance trajectories.

For Lloyd, her undergraduate degree in Modern Dance and minor in Arts Administration helped her to develop clarity in her career path, goals, and identity. She comments:

I exited my [u]niversity experience with a clear sense of who I was as an artist, creator, young adult, administration professional, and contributor to the world through my experiences in academic coursework, extra curricular activities, and artistic exploration. . . . I am now pursuing a professional performance career with a clear idea of what kind of work I want to produce while working for a nonprofit dance organization that I wholeheartedly believe in. I was able to make the decisions to get where I wanted to be because I had a deep understanding of who I was and what I wanted out of my career by the time I finished my degree. (2016)

Lloyd’s praise of her college education speaks to the skills and knowledge she developed while studying dance in higher education. The abilities and personal insight she
developed while an undergraduate shaped her beyond being a dance artist; it shaped her as a whole person. Lloyd’s explanation of her experiences in a variety of areas—“academic coursework, extra curricular activities, and artistic exploration” (2016)—seems to suggest that her undergraduate career was fruitful for her and perhaps exemplified Perron’s description of a lively campus. This kind of dynamic learning environment positioned Lloyd to develop a clearer sense of how to participate in the professional world.

Lloyd is not alone in her feelings that her undergraduate experience strengthened her personal identity and prepared her to tackle her professional goals. Another graduate, Rohr, found that her college environment strengthened her capacities to be self-reliant and responsible while pursuing her degree, qualities that have served her well as a professional dancer. Answering the same question as Lloyd, Rohr writes, “My undergraduate education taught me how to hold myself accountable and set demands for myself. . . . I realized that I am the only one that knows what I want. It was my job to communicate this to the faculty and more importantly, challenge myself to reach set goals” (2016). Through the design of her BFA program, Rohr became an active agent in her education. She was able to recognize that she had an obligation to herself to realize her potential. The structure of her accredited BFA program facilitated the critical, independent thinking skills that empowered her to take charge of her personal ambitions.

The theme of personal development and academic growth as a result of undergraduate training continued to be supported in the data by another study participant and recent BFA graduate, Tristian Griffin. Griffin shared Rohr and Lloyd’s sentiments about developing qualitative skills that bolstered his dance career. In response to the same
question asked of Lloyd and Rohr, Griffin explained his growth observing, “The process of being an [u]ndergraduate exposes the student to networking, self-discipline, and [professional] preparation” (2016). He further explains that how his program implemented the NASD standards happened to work for him and helped him become a professional dancer (2016). Because his undergraduate environment provided experiences beyond teaching dance technique, he learned to motivate himself, to make contacts and interact with employers, and develop and then successfully deploy his dance talent in the contemporary dance field.

Similar to the other three study participants and BFA graduates, Robbie Priore praised the design of his BFA program for developing career-enhancing personal traits. He is more specific in his explanation of how his BFA program enabled him to develop the strength to face the challenges of the professional dance field, especially the challenge of rejection. He observes:

I would say more than anything my undergraduate education set me up mentally for my professional goals. I went to a program with a very large number of majors, so it pushed me to continue to try and reach the top of the class. . . . Some years over one hundred men [competed] for the same ten or fifteen spots, so rejection was something I learned to understand early on in college. Rejection is the single hardest but most necessary part of working in the arts, and I think having faced it early, has given me the thicker skin I needed to succeed. (2016)

In light of his undergraduate experience, within the structure of his BFA program, Priore valued the competitive nature of the dance department he attended. Since the professional dance field is highly competitive, Priore’s practice at being rejected served his pursuits post-graduation. Familiarity with rejection taught him resilience—an invaluable quality in professional endeavors.
Within many BFA degree programs, students experience audition processes reflective of the professional dance field and compete with their peers to be cast in a work. For Priore, because of the quantity of male dancers in his department, there were times he was not cast. Because his audition experiences in college were competitive, however, he professes that he became more resilient—developing “thicker skin” (2016). As for many BFA students, the structure of their degree program allows for an ongoing dialogue with faculty who are professionals in order to reflect on the challenges students face in college—such as not being cast after an audition—and to develop new strategies so that their next attempts may be met with more success.

In this educational environment with access to faculty mentorship, handling disappointment becomes another lesson in the curriculum. Unlike the professional dance field, students (auditionees) have direct access to the faculty (auditioners) and can reflect on their experiences and discuss what they can improve and work on for the next audition. These continuing conversations with professors help students put rejection and other challenges they might encounter in the professional world in perspective and learn how to manage them successfully. Priore faced rejection without the added stress of losing work, which helped him become more cognizant of the challenges within professional environments, learn how to recover quickly, and persevere—all of which prepared him for life performing and choreographing in the contemporary dance field.

All four of the recent BFA graduate study participants agree with the scholars mentioned earlier in that they recognize their undergraduate education provided more than dance training; it helped shape intangible social skills and academic proficiencies during formative years of young adulthood, which served their pursuits of self-fulfilling
careers in the professional dance sphere. For Perron, Wilson, Smith-Fichter, and Zazzali and Klein, the rigors of an undergraduate fine arts program encourage an intellectual engagement with the art form. The positive period of growth during college years seems to be a direct function of the shape of one’s BFA degree structure as described by Perron and defined by NASD.

*BFA Dance Programs as Insular Entities*

In contrast to Perron’s description of university dance departments as “incubators” (2006, 10) that support students’ personal and academic growth in preparation for professional life, scholar and dance professor at Florida State University (FSU), Sally R. Sommer, describes dance departments as “insulated” (2005, 71). Sommer claims that within a university dance department, students have “little chance to collide with different ideas about what dance is, what art is, and why they are doing it. . . . [They] need to understand—better yet, they need to feel—the difference between the accommodating womb of the university and the tough dynamic life-style of young [professional] dancers” (2005, 71-73). While Perron addresses how a BFA degree program provides a supportive environment where students develop necessary skills for entry into a professional career, Sommer presents a different perspective. Using language that is evocative and derogatory in connotation, she claims that the undergraduate academic environment is an “accommodating womb” (73) creating an insular experience that does not provide enough significant off-campus involvement with professional dance artists and dance communities during college years.
Engaging the Professional Dance Career

BFA programs address issues of insularity as defined by Sommer by implementing strategies that prepare students to more easily enter a dance career with realistic expectations. Two examples of such strategies include having open, candid conversations about the realities of the field with faculty and guest teachers and providing first-hand, immersive experiences in the professional dance world, including semester study programs and guest artist classes. These examples are a few of many approaches that help students engage more directly with professional dance careers.

Developing Realistic Expectations

Open, candid conversations between students and faculty about life after graduation may provide practical guidance for students and help them understand the realities of the professional dance field while also addressing Sommer’s viewpoint of the academic environment as insular. In her article, “Getting Close to Real,” dance artist and graduate of Hampshire College (not NASD-accredited), Jane Jerardi, recalls her senior year when renowned director, choreographer, dancer, and educator Bebe Miller sat her class down for a “reality conversation” (2005, 125). During this conversation, Miller talked about how much dancers get paid, the challenges of balancing multiple jobs, and the usual lack of a straightforward progression towards a professional dance career (125). Jerardi and her peers benefited from access to Miller, asking her questions and getting information about the stark actualities of performing with a company or working with different choreographers as a freelance artist. Similarly, many undergraduate dance students in BFA programs benefit from access to faculty who have sustained significant professional careers and continue to engage the field. Faculty mentorship that features
consistent open, candid conversations about what to expect as a dance artist helps students better understand and prepare for professional dance careers.

Besides the faculty giving students a sense of the professional landscape that awaits them, Jerardi suggests these conversations can also include opportunities for students to consider difficult and sometimes unpleasant questions about whether a student prefers an inconsistent income but having the flexibility of self-employment, or a steady income from a full-time job (127). If a student realizes that she desires the financial security offered by full-time employment, then she may identify that living the economically challenging conditions that a young performer or choreographer often endures is not for her. She may decide that she favors being involved in the dance field in a different, more secure career path such as teaching or arts administration. This type of dialogue encourages students to voluntarily confront the realities of the professional field with the guidance of faculty and professionals and plan accordingly. According to Jerardi, conducting realistic discussions is one way to provide students with career guidance and encourage considerations of personal goals and professional desires. These conversations can make a connection between undergraduate dance studies and students’ anticipations of professional dance careers, thereby helping to mitigate Sommer’s concern about the insular tendencies of BFA degree programs.

First-Hand Interaction with the Field: Balancing the Academy with the Professional World

Another way BFA programs facilitate engagement with the professional world is augmenting the degree curriculum with for-credit opportunities for on-campus and off-campus interactions with national and international artists and dance communities. For instance, some universities offer semester study programs and guest artist classes. These
opportunities to engage with and in the professional dance arena may provide students with clearer ideas and more accurate expectations about life as a contemporary dancer while also counteracting the potential of insularity within the department as expressed by Sommer.

*Semester Study Programs (Off-Campus): FSU in NYC*

Florida State University’s (FSU) *FSU in NYC* is one example of a semester study program within a NASD-accredited BFA program. To combat her dissatisfaction about the confines of academia, Sommer co-founded the *FSU in NYC* program in an effort to have the professional sphere play a more active role in undergraduate dance training. In “Gateway to the City: NYC Field Experience Has a Profound Impact on Students,” Sommer outlines the semester study program explaining how FSU offers an intensive, experiential immersion experience in New York City’s dance community every fall semester, which serves as an introduction to life in the professional dance field.

*FSU in NYC* addresses professional preparation of undergraduates; it provides an opportunity for students to have immersive, first-hand experiences in the kind of dance center that they might not have access to in Florida while receiving credit towards their degrees. Addressing the program’s mission for students, Sommer observes, “The aim is to better prepare them for life after college—while they are still in college—by providing them with professional training and the crucial, intangible insights about self and careers that come from experiential immersion in the life of [New York City]” (2005, 71). She sees experiential study within a professional setting while in college as a vehicle for students to develop stronger senses of personal identity and career goals while gaining a realistic grasp of pursuing dance as a profession in New York City. For the FSU students
who enroll in the semester study program, the amount of dance classes, lectures, and performances that are available every day in New York City may help students better understand and assess the broad spectrum of contemporary dance styles and working choreographers, which they can then apply towards shaping their personal and professional goals.

*Guest Artist Classes (On-Campus)*

Many prestigious BFA programs that have working graduates in the field invest heavily in bringing professional dancers and choreographers to campus to teach classes to students. Guest artist residencies within BFA programs are examples of professional engagement that serve to address Sommer’s criticism of insularity in that they provide students exposure to a range of contemporary dance artists on-campus. Inviting professionals to participate and offer their expertise within a BFA program may serve as substantial professional preparation for students and provide different perspectives of the contemporary dance field from a variety of professionals.

Some of the choreographers interviewed emphasized the importance and benefits of inviting knowledgeable, working professionals to guest teach in college programs. Fabio Liberti insists, “It is extremely important that . . . [students] work with as many choreographers as possible. . . . This is why I think [it] is important that universities collaborate strictly with the choreographers of the moment and stay as updated as possible to where dance is and where dance is going” (2016). Similarly, Joshua L. Peugh asserts, “I think it [is] essential [that] students have access to choreographers working in the field” (2016). Liberti goes further and suggests inviting “choreographers of the moment” (2016). Liberti’s emphasis on interacting with choreographers at the forefront
of innovation might provide students with special opportunities to learn from artists who may be influencing the greater dance world and gain new knowledge about cutting edge innovations and evolutions within the contemporary dance scene. Liberti and Peugh’s suggestion that universities invite dance artists who are presently working professionally may, in addition to providing students with new artistic perspectives, extend opportunities to network with potential employers. Some choreographers—like Liberti and Peugh—who are currently working professionally may also have emerging dance companies and be seeking new dancers. Having time in person with these choreographers in guest artist classes within a BFA program—versus at an audition or an intensive workshop with a large number of dancers—can be beneficial for students in that they are able to interact with professionals within a familiar space and establish connections that would be otherwise unlikely.

Similar to offering semester study programs, providing guest artist classes may be a useful strategy for incorporating the professional dance world into the curriculum of the undergraduate dance degree. Where the two strategies differ though is rather than students leaving campus to immerse themselves in vibrant dance communities, guest artist classes bring the professional field into the academy. To that end, Esperanza suggests to students: “Take advantage of artists coming into the program. Keep the relationships. . . . Timing is such a key and if you maintain your connection [to professionals], things fall into place” (2016). It seems that Esperanza believes if given opportunities to work with guest artists, students improve their chances of employment post-graduation provided they maintain their communication and association with the artists. Peugh, Liberti, and Esperanza acknowledge the value in guest artist classes as one
example of how BFA programs strategize interacting directly with professionals to advance students’ career preparation. Artist involvement within college dance departments may address the concerns of those who believe college dance programs do not provide enough experiences representative of the professional sphere within their course of study.

*Balancing the Insular and Incubator Perspectives*

It remains a complex task for BFA programs to address the competing perspectives of Perron and Sommer. BFA programs face the challenge of being both “incubators of dance” (Perron 2006, 10) that encourage personal and academic development while also exposing students to professional artists and communities, and thus avoiding insular tendencies of an “accommodating womb” (Sommer 2005, 73). While institutions may adopt different approaches in course structure, BFA programs espouse the four-year collegiate experience as an important and effective means to professional life. Each BFA program decides how to facilitate personal development and academic growth and pilot new, deeper, and more realistic understandings of pursuing dance as a career—encouraging students to make new discoveries, to interact with professors, artists, choreographers, and directors, and to participate in a professional dance context.

**Conclusion**

In 1985, members of the Council of Dance Administrators (CODA), which later evolved into NASD, declared, “We can’t have the same expectations for all students. The curriculum must allow for many options, not clones. All students may pursue a BFA
degree but they have individual talents and we can help them toward a variety of goals” (Hagood 2000, 261). While this statement indicates BFA programs seek to prepare students for a variety of career possibilities in both performance and non-performance areas, it also reveals the inherent challenge BFA programs face in meeting the multiplicity of needs and competing concerns of students, scholars, educators, and professionals.

NASD-accredited BFA programs continue to prepare students for a multitude of career paths while sustaining an emphasis on performance and choreography. BFA programs cannot guarantee job security after graduation because they do not control the market. However, it is their responsibility to provide a balance between a liberal arts and a vocational education. This objective illuminates the vast amount of choices within the NASD guidelines that accredited BFA programs can implement in order to build a degree structure that best suits their distinct departments.

Although it may not be possible to prepare students for all the unique challenges and realities they will face as individuals pursuing careers in dance, the three emerging themes—coursework that provides knowledge in non-performance careers, technique training that can be useful in a variety of contemporary dance styles, and building a degree framework that intends to support students’ academic, artistic, and personal growth as professional preparation—provides insight into BFA programs’ efforts to address a variety of tasks within NASD guidelines. After analyzing the literature and the interviews from the four choreographers and four recent BFA graduates, several important ideas come forward from this study that might augment future research on this topic. Firstly, having courses in dance-related, non-performance careers is valuable and
necessary during an undergraduate tenure given many professional dance artists supplement their incomes with non-performance jobs. Second, it is crucial for students to learn a variety of skills so they exit university with foundational techniques that can be more widely used to support participation in the ever-expanding diversity of contemporary dance styles within classical modern and postmodern contexts, as well as within the wide range of choreographer artistic singularities. Lastly, it is vital for a dynamic liberal arts institution to employ methods and procedures that keep it responsive to the growing expectations and realities of professional dance realms and that ensure constant connection with artists, choreographers, directors, and other professionals in the contemporary dance field.

It seems improbable that BFA dance programs can serve all career interests and trajectories for all students. However, the possibilities within the context of this study—and within the NASD accreditation guidelines—may help to expand and strengthen the connection between the academy and the professional contemporary dance world. As contemporary dance continues to advance, BFA programs are tasked with constantly evaluating and adjusting a course of study that facilitates students’ transitions into lives in evolving professional dance environments.
APPENDIX A

IRB letter of approval

TCU INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Approval Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval refers to research involving human subjects whether on or off campus. Significant changes in design, participants, or measures must be approved by the IRB. Multi-year projects must be submitted annually for approval. Any unexpected adverse effects on human subjects due to the procedure should be reported immediately.

Date: 01/08/16

Principal Investigator: Alexandra Karigan

Faculty Investigators: Dr. Nina Martin

Project Title: From Undergraduate Dance Major to Professional Contemporary Dance Artist: Aligning Successful Paradigms

Multi-Year Project: Yes [ ] No [X]

Which of the following applies? New Project [X] Amendment [ ] Renewal [ ]

If requesting approval for an amendment or renewal, please fill out fields a & b.
(a) Approval Number:  
(b) Approval Period:  

Proposed Participants:

[ ] TCU students, faculty, or staff
[ ] Non-TCU participants
[ ] Special populations (e.g., children) – specify:

Investigator Comments (optional):

---------------------------------- DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE ----------------------------------

Comments:

Approval Period: 01/29/16-01/28/17
Approval Date: 01/29/16

Committee Decisions:

☐ Approved, Minimal Risk
☑ Approved, Expedited
☐ Approved, Exempt Status
☐ Conditional Approval, with following stipulations:

Approval Number: 088-1601-104

☐ Not Approved, Comments:

[Signature]
Chair

[Signature]
Date

01/29/16
APPENDIX B
Interview Questions

Questions for Choreographers:

1. How are the dancers coming out of undergraduate programs meeting, exceeding, or falling below you expectations?

2. What do you look for in a new, young dancer who is auditioning?

3. How has the market for contemporary dancers changed in your experience, if at all?

4. What would you consider an essential element of dance education/training?

5. What is your definition of rigor?

6. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the most), how prepared and ready have dancers been to become a professional? Explain.

7. In your opinion, what do dancers in training need in order to become successful in the field?

Questions for Graduates:

1. How has your undergraduate education served your professional goals?

2. What would you do differently if you could re-live your undergraduate experience?

3. What skills have you had to develop since graduating?

4. What is your definition of rigor?

5. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the most), how prepared were you after graduating from undergraduate to pursue a dance career? Explain.

6. In your opinion, what do need in order to become successful in the field?
APPENDIX C

Image of Data Table
REFERENCES


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Marshall, Amy, interview by author, e-mail message to author, January 2016.


Peugh, Joshua L., interview by author, e-mail message to author, January 2016.

Priore, Robbie, interview by author, e-mail message to author, January 2016.


Rohr, Kelsey, interview by author, e-mail message to author, January 2016.


VITA

Personal Background
Alexandra Katherine Karigan
Born in Toronto, Ontario, August 24, 1985
Daughter of Spiro and Katherine Karigan
Married to James Evan Farrior

Education
Diploma, The Hockaday School
Dallas, Texas, 2003

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Dance Performance
Summa Cum Laude
Southern Methodist University, 2007

Master of Fine Arts, Classical & Contemporary Dance
Texas Christian University, 2016

Certifications
Graduate Certificate in Women and Gender Studies
Texas Christian University, 2016

Awards
Tuition Stipend Award
Texas Christian University, 2013-2016

Graduate Student Travel Grant
Texas Christian University, Graduate Studies, 2014

Graduate Student Research Support Fund
Texas Christian University, College of Fine Arts, 2015

Professional Experience
Amy Marshall Dance Company
New York, New York, 2007-2013

BODYART
New York, New York, 2012-2013

Bruce Wood Dance Project
Dallas, Texas, 2013-2014

Dark Circles Contemporary Dance
Dallas, Texas, 2014-Present

Professional Memberships
National Dance Education Organization (NDEO)
2013-2016
ABSTRACT

University dance departments seek to prepare their students for the demands and realities of a variety of dance professions. The National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD) recognizes the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) to be the undergraduate dance degree that emphasizes performance and choreography and prepares students for a professional career as a dance artist. Even so, for professional contemporary dance artists, opportunities are scarce and most must work multiple performance and non-performance jobs to supplement their income. This study endeavors to examine the alignment between NASD-accredited BFA dance programs and the demands and realities of the professional contemporary dance field as well as how BFA programs support graduates’ abilities to transition into professional careers within the contemporary dance field. Because most of the scholarly literature on the research topic is over ten years old, through a phenomenological research design, I analyze the lived experiences of four recent BFA graduates and four contemporary dance choreographers in order to provide new perspectives of the research topic. In contextualizing the phenomenological data within the extant literature, I present three themes, which emerged from the data analysis that relate to BFA training and the transition to the professional contemporary dance field. These three themes are: experiences in non-performance careers; foundational training in contemporary dance techniques for stylistic range; and BFA degree structure as professional preparation. The three emerging themes reflect the unique challenges that accredited BFA programs encounter when preparing students to make the transition from dance major to dance professional.