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Do Dance Majors Need Entrepreneurial Skills?

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Looking at the dance industry from the vantage point of a 25-year career, I often wonder if we truly prepare students to problem solve, promote, brand and grow our incredible industry—not to mention provide for themselves or impact their communities—over the course of their careers. Further, without consistently incorporating entrepreneurial skills into formal dance curricula, are we cheating dance majors? With a deliberate focus on art for art's sake, do we send them into the world with a naive notion that the rest will fall into place? An equally important question is, are we cheating the industry? My curiosity extends to a traditional dance major's degree plan, accompanying curricula and the impact of its training culture. As I grow weary worrying about the durability of the art I love so much, I wonder if there is more that can be done.

As one might expect, when dancers exit a university program, they have spent a great deal of time dancing. Countless hours each day and night are spent either rehearsing or in class. Flexing, rolling, reaching, isolating, jumping, counting, repeating, creating, preparing, investing, engaging over and over again. Dance students have an incredible and impeccable work ethic. They believe in what they do and share their passion with whomever will listen. But is this adequate to sustain a career in dance? As one who has passionately defended the art for art's sake ideal, I wonder if our present training model is enough.

It is difficult—not impossible—to support yourself in most any artistic career solely as a performer, as full-time performing jobs are limited. When an artist enters the workforce, they will wear many hats throughout their career. I ask a simple question: Should university dance departments be arming dance majors with the hard and soft skills needed to succeed in the marketplace, or should we expect them to fill in the gaps on their own after graduation?

For those unfamiliar with dance programs, universities offer a variety of courses and idiosyncratic degree pathways for their students. Some students earn a bachelor of fine arts in dance, others receive a bachelor of arts or bachelor of science, while others may major and/or minor in other disciplines. Depending on the program, students enter with varying degrees of experience and are often required to audition. Once enrolled, students take courses in technique, history, theory, choreography and production. Like other arts students, dancers may design the rest of their course load based on what they intend to do with dance once they exit the university. It might be said that if they wish to

be a dance entrepreneur/business owner, it is their responsibility to pursue courses, certifications, degrees or internships that teach those skills. I would challenge this notion by pointing out that the “real world” demands all dancers possess an entrepreneurial mindset equipped with hard and soft skills, even if they do not, or will not, “own” a studio or company. At the very least, performing artists must know how to market themselves, budget, negotiate contracts, etc. Because of the “all hands on deck” approach common in many arts organizations, if they work/teach at a studio or company they will need to work within a costume or production budget, assist in fundraising and, at the very least, create and sustain a strategic, social media-based marketing campaign. If they want to run a studio or dance company, they will need to manage databases, analyze audience and client data, design programs, engage a community, etc. Within a university program, especially small programs without support staff, there is a need for professors to promote concerts, design programs, adhere to university branding, work within a limited budget and, in many cases, help defend the program’s actual existence by using concrete data analysis. And, in the most recent example of a global pandemic, we all need to understand multiple digital platforms to maintain continuity in teaching, directing, performing and choreographing. To thrive in the dance world, it is important for students to prepare to do all of the above—and perhaps more—at some point in their careers.

One does not have to look far to see successful dance entrepreneurs using their creativity and entrepreneurial skills to solve problems and impact their communities. Monica Bill Barnes’ company motto is “Bringing dance where it doesn’t belong.” She maintains a clear brand and is successful in finding new ways to reach her community by moving into non-traditional spaces such as malls and offices. She works with musicians, actors and recently collaborated with radio show host Ira Glass. Ana Maria Alvarez, director of Los Angeles-based multilingual dance company *CONTRA-TIEMPO*, works tirelessly to build community and facilitate dialogue. It is her entrepreneurial leadership that sustains this company in a world where the socio-political conversations are imperative and ever-changing. Closer to my university, Raleigh, NC studio owner Chasta Hamilton runs two very successful local dance studios and is currently writing a book about the value of running a dance studio without exposing students to the competition world. She is also the founder of *Girls Geared for Greatness*, which inspires and impacts young women through presentations by successful and accomplished women in the community.

Survey

As part of this investigation, I asked dance entrepreneurs (dance studio or company owners) to identify the hard and soft skills required to be an entrepreneur and which skills they observe in the new hires or dance majors with whom they interact. The survey was anonymous and I distributed it digitally via the *Qualtrics* platform. Twenty-one dance entrepreneurs responded to the survey. In defining hard and soft skills, the remainder of this essay references the *Oxford Reference* summary:

Hard skills are competencies that employees possess such as numeracy, literacy, fluency in a foreign language and specific job-related technical abilities (operating a machine, creating a spreadsheet, touch-typing, driving, dressing a wound and so forth). Typically these skills are relatively easy to measure and are often validated with some form of qualification. More recently, there has been a shift in emphasis towards the need for soft skills in addition to technical abilities.¹

Soft skills are competencies that employees possess associated with activities such as customer handling, communication, problem-solving and teamworking. According to various surveys, these soft skills are considered by employers to be of very high importance and (in the UK) sadly lacking amongst new recruits. The definition of soft skills sometimes includes loyalty, enthusiasm, punctuality and a strong work ethic, although critics argue that these are not really skills but rather qualities or attributes that someone has and may (or may not) choose to display at work.²

Hard Skills

The first part of the survey asked participants (a) to identify the hard skills needed to operate a dance business, (b) whether they observed these skills in the dance majors they came into contact with and (c) to identify the skills dance majors lacked. Choices included the following list of hard skills currently sought after in the marketplace: bilingual/multilingual, database management, *Adobe* software suite, data/statistical analysis, accounting, SEO/SEM, marketing and campaign management, programming languages, fundraising/grant writing and mobile development.³

The survey results identified the top five skills dance entrepreneurs need: accounting, marketing and campaign management, fundraising/grant writing, database management and data/statistical analysis. SEO/SEM and *Adobe* software suite followed closely behind. Respondents identified the top skill observed in dance majors as marketing and campaign management, with fundraising/grant writing as a close second. Skills deemed needed yet lacking were SEO/SEM closely followed by database management, data/statistical analysis and accounting.

This information is useful in many ways. If a dance major wishes to move towards owning a studio or company, it is valuable for them to have basic business, fundraising and marketing skills. Dance majors seem to be successfully bringing marketing, campaign management and fundraising to the table. Unfortunately, dance majors do not seem to be fluent in SEO/SEM (a necessary skill to drive website and social media traf-

¹ The definitions appearing above are by no means a consensus. Some feel soft skills are character traits and attributes, not actual skills, while others believe they are, in fact, skills that can be developed and translated into job success. See *A Dictionary of Human Resource Management*, s.v. "Hard Skills," accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095920725>. As a dance professor, I am often faced with trying to convince administration that art is a place where students can share vulnerable moments to help them become more creative, empathetic, open-minded, etc., and that "soft skills," though less measurable and traceable, impact student success. I believe soft skills are qualities of an individual's personality, yet can be practiced and developed in an appropriate environment, such as a dance studio.

² *A Dictionary of Human Resource Management*, s.v. "Soft Skills," accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100516309>.

³ "Hard Skills vs. Soft Skills," Indeed, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/hard-skills-vs-soft-skills>.

fic), database management (a necessary skill to organize information in a useful manner), data/statistical analysis (a skill necessary to respond to changes in a business or organization) and accounting (a necessary skill to manage revenue and expenses). Without these skills it would be challenging to manage and, in turn, grow a successful dance business, even if used infrequently or as a situation demanded. One survey participant remarked that, "In my experience, unless the dance majors I have come into contact with have had an outside interest in these areas...they are not equipped to be in the world of dance in whatever capacity: dancing, auditioning, teaching, running a company/studio and administrative." Another stated, "Often, dance majors are so focused on the art and the compositions that they de-prioritize the skills...that are synergistically fundamental in the success of their art."

Soft Skills

The second part of the survey asked exactly the same questions as described above, yet focused on soft skills. The choices included the following skills currently sought after in the marketplace: integrity, dependability, effective communication, open mindedness, teamwork, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability, organization, willingness to learn and empathy.⁴ The respondents stated that dance majors needed all twelve soft skills to run a dance studio/company and noted the added importance of conflict management/resolution and cultural competence. The soft skills dance majors typically possess are teamwork, creativity, integrity and willingness to learn, and those lacking were effective communication, problem solving and adaptability.

It is not surprising that dance majors are strong when it comes to teamwork, creativity, integrity and willingness to learn. Creativity is clearly tied to being an artist and honed in most dance courses. Teamwork is necessary to the rehearsal process. Integrity is often practiced within the vulnerable nature of creating work, and willingness to learn comes with late hours in the studio and flexibility when working with a diverse range of artists and educators. It is concerning that dance entrepreneurs feel that dance majors lack effective communication, problem solving and adaptability—the soft skills I feel are closely related to breaking down barriers, moving the dial in difficult conversations and having a bold impact in the dance industry. Since soft skills are not as "measurable" as hard skills, it is not simply about which courses exist within a program, but how they are taught.

Degree Plans

In addition to analyzing trends in the survey, I conducted a brief overview of degree plans in the nation's top dance programs.⁵ These included: The Juilliard School, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Point Park University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Temple University, State University of New York at Purchase, Southern Methodist University,

⁴"Hard Skills vs. Soft Skills," Indeed, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/hard-skills-vs-soft-skills>.

⁵In the discipline, degree plans are not standardized.

The Ohio State University, University of Houston, University of North Carolina School of the Arts and Florida State University, among others. According to the *National Association of Schools of Dance's* handbook, to earn a B.F.A. in performance or choreography “approximately 55-60% of a 120-semester hour program is in dance studies, and 15-20% in professional education, to ensure that time is available to develop the requisite competencies.” For a B.A. or B.S. in dance, that percentage is reduced to 35-45%.⁶ Daily dance technique encompasses the largest percentage of these dance studies, with composition second. Additional courses offered within the programs include production/stagecraft, history, theory, criticism and kinesiology.

Few departments require career/marketing/entrepreneurship-based performing arts course(s) as a part of their degree. The Juilliard School requires second year students to take JUILL 102 *Essentials of Entrepreneurship in the Arts*.⁷ Florida State University requires all dance majors to take DAN 2101 *Introduction to the Dance Profession*.⁸ On its website, University of North Carolina School of the Arts states that B.F.A. students learn about “practical career and business issues such as unions, agents and managers, audition strategies, companies, contract negotiations and developing a digital portfolio.”⁹ The University of Houston has more robust offerings; students must take DAN 4305 *Senior Projects and Career Management*, DAN 4331 *PR & Marketing Entrepreneurship for the Arts* and DAN 4330 *Grant Writing and Career Skills for the Practicing Dance Artist*.¹⁰

Conclusion

The results reported in this brief survey are simply a springboard for a more robust conversation. For example, is it the responsibility of dance departments to provide dance majors with hard and soft skills necessary to embrace the entrepreneurial spirit needed in the dance industry? If so, is the solution incorporating more entrepreneurship-based courses? Should there be more marketing/branding/business courses specifically tailored to the dance/performing arts industry? Further, when guest artists are in residency, should time be taken to have workshops and lectures on sustainability in the dance field? Should dance entrepreneurship be a greater emphasis at student-focused conferences such as the *American College Dance Association*?

Although I do not have clear answers, I believe we must be careful not to narrow the potential achievements of dance students based on antiquated ideas of how to best prepare them. Technique and composition are incredibly important, and art and art making should always remain at the core of a dance degree curriculum. (I could write much about that). The dance world needs the next generation of artists to have an entrepreneurial skillset so that both dance artists and the industry overall can endure current storms and meet future challenges.

⁶ National Association of Schools of Dance, *NASD Handbook 2019-2020* (Reston: NOAA), 85.

⁷ “Dance, BFA,” Bachelor of Fine Arts at The Juilliard School, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://juilliard.edu/dance/dance-bachelor-fine-arts>.

⁸ “BFA,” Florida State University School of Dance, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://dance.fsu.edu/programs-2/programs/4/bfa>.

⁹ University of North Carolina School of the Arts, “Undergraduate Contemporary Dance,” accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.uncsa.edu/dance/undergraduate/contemporary-dance.aspx>.

¹⁰ “B.F.A. in Dance,” University of Houston, accessed May 7, 2020. <https://uh.edu/kgmca/theatre-and-dance/dance/academics/bfa>.

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