

Dance in College and Companies

Prepared for Dayco Seminar March 2017

Preface - Everyone's journey is different and each individual has different needs based on his/her own personality, work ethic, maturity, passions, etc.

Be assured that there is no "wrong" decision. In life, we either succeed or learn. The most important thing you can remember is to be honest with yourself and those around you as your perspectives and priorities change over time.

As you are already aware, dance is more than a hobby - it is a lifestyle. It demands your constant attention, nurturing, energy, and time. Many of the challenges you face now - juggling dance classes, rehearsals, academics, family, friends, chores/jobs, etc will continue to be a challenge, both in college/company life and after.

At this stage, many of you are interested in becoming a "professional dancer" in a concert dance company so I will begin our conversation there:

Being a "professional" dancer simply means that you are paid to perform dance. This does not necessarily mean that dance performance is your sole source of income. It is important to acknowledge that many professional dancers working today (including those working for large companies) depend on other jobs to supplement their income. Some teach, choreograph, do administrative work, while others work in retail, restaurants, etc.

So why do so many professional dancers today have to rely on multiple sources of income?

Ballet companies began to emerge in America in 1930-40's with San Francisco Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet. Particularly during the Cold War, dance in America became about nationalism. Companies received funding from the government and wealthy individuals to tour and boast of our nation's artistic excellence. At this same time, modern dance was emerging in America and creating more companies. In the 1960's a group of individuals known as Judson Dance Theatre rejected the confines of ballet and modern technique. They introduced the experimental modes of what became known as postmodern dance. This "anything goes" approach to dance encouraged the formation of yet more dance companies/collectives. The dance performance industry continues to expand at a rapid rate creating more opportunities for dancers, but more competition for funding.

This being said, you do NOT have to have a degree to become a professional dancer. It is becoming more common, however, to see company rosters with dancers holding degrees. I think the following comments present a good argument for why studying dance in college prior to auditioning for companies could be beneficial...

Alexandra Wells, Founder and Artistic Director of Springboard Danse Montreal

In the past ten years, I have witnessed a dramatic change in the professional dance world...I can confidently say that these companies are looking for a new breed of dance artist. I have seen many beautiful and highly qualified dancers who still somehow lack the skills necessary to survive in these creatively charged environments. Beyond strong technical skills, intelligence, versatility and musicality, a dancer must be curious, open and prepared to make choices at any moment. A dancer in 2016 will be asked to improvise, "change up" a set movement phrase, retrograde material, or reinvent solo work into a duet. In addition to the physical articulation of the movement, a dancer needs to be able to verbally articulate their thoughts in order to teach other dancers their own movement material, relay insights to the choreographer, or answer questions in a post-show talk back. The dancer is an integral part of the creative process.

In college dance, we are invested in cultivating these types of dancers. The college dance experience is about challenging everything you think you know about dance. It goes beyond the physical training, focusing on your intellectual and artistic advancement. We focus on developing critical thinking skills, analysis, research, history, pedagogy, anatomy, interdisciplinary approaches.... The *how* and *why* become a central focus in dance studies - teaching you new ways of thinking, writing, and speaking about dance such that you can contribute to the advancement of the field. In a college environment you are being mentored, you have access to teachers and peers and are encouraged to ask questions and seek answers. Many colleges bring in guest artists/companies; in one location you are able to interact with many choreographers, some of whom may help connect you to future employers. In my opinion, the most valuable thing a college dance program offers is a safe place to explore, take risks, and mature before transitioning to "adulthood". Life experience fuels artistic development. A college environment offers a community of people with different passions, values, and perspectives. Your daily interactions with cohorts and professors outside of the studio will inform your dance practice.

Currently there are two types of undergraduate degrees offered in Dance Performance – the BA and the BFA.

BA stands for Bachelor of Arts. This type of degree offers intensive training in the area of dance, but course requirements encourage students to engage in liberal arts studies outside of the field. This is a great opportunity for students to be exposed to or develop other interests outside of dance. For example, USC is a BA program. One sample schedule would be that dancers take regular academic classes (maybe 8:00-11:00), then take technique classes (11:00-2:00), then rehearse for faculty, guest, or student choreography concerts (2:00-4:00) and take dance academics (5:00-7:00).

BFA stands for Bachelor of Fine Arts. Schools like Butler, Indiana University, Julliard have BFAs. These types of programs take a conservatory approach meaning 2/3 of the course requirements are in the area of dance and 1/3 is devoted to liberal arts (history, literature, etc.). This degree is often more fixed in the realm of dance with less interaction with other subject areas.

Again, each program offers something different so it is important to do your research when considering which programs to apply for.

<http://www.allartschools.com/bachelor-art-fine-arts-compared/>

<http://www.danceinforma.com/2012/12/05/to-bfa-or-ba-that-is-the-question/>

Many degrees allow you to choose a concentration. In addition to Dance Performance there is Dance Pedagogy, Choreography, Dance Education (teaching dance in public schools), Dance Science, Dance Technology, Dance Film, and more.

Dance in college is a relatively new branch of study. Whereas the first American college is said to have been founded in 1636, the first dance program did not appear until 1926. For this reason, and due to the transient nature of dance itself, it is difficult to make broad claims about the various dance programs across the country. Please bare this in mind as I attempt to answer your questions.

What are college dance departments looking for in technique vs. artistry? Do they place a higher value on one of them?

In today's dance climate I think it is safe to say that colleges and companies are looking for dancers who excel both technically and artistically. Dancing with confidence, high energy level, attention to detail, and intention will help you stand out in an audition.

How intensive are rehearsals in college?

At USC, our rehearsals are intended to simulate that of a company environment. Expect for rehearsal periods to be physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting. Our dancers rehearse two hours daily with extra evening/weekend rehearsals when working with a guest artist or in the theatre. This is comparable to BFA programs, but slightly higher than other BA programs.

Are there more performance opportunities as an apprentice in a company vs. a college?

This depends on the dancer and the environment. In college, performance opportunities are viewed as essential to education and participation in a certain number of performances is required to graduate. In companies, casting is often based on who is best for the role at the time and choreographers do not consider educational value for the dancer. At USC, there are 5 stage productions per year. This number varies at other Universities.

How intensive is the schedule of a professional dancer?

Again this varies based on the company. Professional dancers can expect to take technique class daily followed by up to 8 hours of rehearsal. Many dancers will leave rehearsal and continue to teach or work another job for several hours in the evenings.

Is there time for a professional dancer in a company to pursue an academic degree at the same time?

Nothing is impossible, but it will require good time management and self-discipline. Online courses (1-2 at a time) may be the best way to accomplish this goal,

Would you suggest applying to a lot of professional programs and colleges?

Yes - It is great to give yourself options, but applications can be labor-intensive and costly. I recommend doing preliminary research to focus in on schools and programs whose mission, faculty, and repertoire are most appealing to you.

What are some pros and cons in the environment of college vs. a professional company?

To me, the primary benefit of a trainee/apprentice program is the ability to observe seasoned professional dancers at work. You can witness and observe artists in their daily life and gain an understanding of whether or not a dance performance career is right for you. The stakes are high in these types of fast-paced, often competitive environments. The focus is usually on perfecting physical execution. You are expected to process choreography and corrections instantaneously and are often left to your own devices to figure out how to do that. In choosing a trainee program look at company bios and see if the majority of company dancers were trainees first. It should not be assumed that a trainee position ensures you a company contract in the same way that it should not be assumed that a degree guarantees you work.

How do you balance dance and education at the same time?

Balance is difficult to achieve in all aspects of life. Organization, honest communication, and the courage to ask questions will help you towards this goal.

How do you know if you want to major in dance if you want to major in something else?

You may not know, and that is ok! You can change your major or add a major or minor once enrolled in college. Often the admission process into a University and into their dance program is not the same. If you know you are passionate about dance and think you might want to pursue it in college, I would advise auditioning as a dance major. This may open scholarship opportunities and typically the student/teacher ratio is smaller than in other fields allowing you to speak personally with your professors to gain advice on your next steps if changing or adding majors.

Do you recommend double majoring?

This is a personal choice... If you have two things you are equally passionate about – go for it! Do be prepared for a more intensive work load, less time for socialization/extra curricular activities, and potentially an extra semester in school.

Minor vs. Major?

Dance majors will take at least 1 technique class every day. Dance minors maybe only twice per week. Of course you can choose to register for more classes, but the majority of your time will be devoted to coursework relating to your major. Dance minors often have fewer performance opportunities. Minor in dance is an excellent option for students who do not want to pursue a career in dance, but want to continue to be involved with dance.

Is it better to go to a company first or college? Pros and cons company vs. college?

The answer is different for everyone. For me, I felt I was able to engage with dance on a deeper level and get the most out of my performance career after attending college. Going to college first helps cushion the transition from being at home to on your own. Matt, who recently enrolled in school after dancing first for 10 years feels that he is more engaged in his studies having matured through life lessons gained in the professional dance world first.

What can I do dance-wise in high school to help me get into a good college dance program?

Stay open-minded, absorb as much information as possible from your teachers, and begin to reflect on what life lessons you have learned through dance and vice-versa. Do research on the programs you are interested in. This may mean contacting friends (or friends of friends) in different college programs and asking them questions. Many college applications require an entrance essay and solo – give yourself time to draft, revise, and edit. Be sincere and showcase your knowledge of the program without changing your personal views to match those of the program. Practice your interview and public speaking skills and treat the audition like a performance (Don't hold back!)

How important are summer intensives? Do summer intensive help acceptance into that college?

Summer programs allow you to be exposed to different perspectives, to meet people from around the country/world, and to have new experiences all of which are vital to your development as a dance artist. Each college program is different. At USC, we do NOT give preference to students who have attended the summer program, but do ask admitted freshman to attend prior to their first semester. As with company auditions, the more opportunities you have to interact and showcase your strengths, the more positive of an impression you will make.