

Redefining Excellence

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[Van Dyke, Jan](#), 2009: *Redefining Excellence*, Journal of Dance Education, volume 9/ number 1 pp 3-5

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Abstract:

I am writing in response to the recent series of editorials by Dr. Doug Risner dealing with the issue of equity in dance education. He looks critically at the choices dance programs are making: cutting out many liberal arts and education courses to emphasize studio arts classes. My particular concern is about what happens to our students after college. As Dr. Risner states, the number of BFA programs is growing across the country, ¹ focusing young dancers on technique and other studio-based classes. We are graduating more and better dancers than ever before. But then what? There are ethical questions raised by providing student artists a narrow education in the studio when we are a field with relatively few performance-oriented jobs.

Keywords: higher education | dance education | dance professionals | studio arts classes | university dance programs | dance professionals | dance careers

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I am writing in response to the recent series of editorials by Dr. Doug Risner dealing with the issue of equity in dance education. He looks critically at the choices dance programs are making: cutting out many liberal arts and education courses to emphasize studio arts classes. My particular concern is about what happens to our students after college. As Dr. Risner states, the number of BFA programs is growing across the country, ¹ focusing young dancers on technique and other studio-based classes. We are graduating more and better dancers than ever before. But then what? There are ethical questions raised by providing student artists a narrow education in the studio when we are a field with relatively few performance-oriented jobs.

Our students should be taught the dynamics of the profession: that especially for young women, the odds are against finding fulltime work as performers. Most likely, they will have to piece their lives together to stay in the field and find a means to support their work as dancers. In higher education, we have the wherewithal to provide the knowledge and experience needed to find power and fulfillment in the dance field in spite of the shortage of performance-oriented jobs. We need to consider the kind of education we are providing.

Risner writes that in his view, by sequestering "ourselves [as dance educators] in the comfort of our own studios and programs, finding great challenge and reward in the fulfilling and meaningful isolation of teaching students,"² we contribute to our own marginalization. I think he is right, and I would broaden his statement to say that as we sequester ourselves, we encourage this kind of focus in our students—those who will inherit the field using us as mentors and models.

A narrow focus necessarily creates barriers to communicating with non-dancers in a meaningful way—either verbally or with our dances—which serves to further isolate our art. We are able to talk about what we know, and our work reflects our thinking. A tightly focused range of knowledge restricts what we do and how we see it, and our concerns begin to be limited by the techniques and behaviors of our art. In my view, if we want dance to speak broadly and resist isolation within our particular realm of expertise, we need to stop thinking that the studio is enough. Otherwise, we set an example, accepting a lack of general power within society in exchange for the very personal sense of power that comes from having strong physical and technical skills.

It is important to realize that with professionalism widespread in academia, dance is not the only field being narrowed in this way. For that reason, our audiences, viewing dance through the lens of their own educations, will see and interpret our work very differently from the way we do, if they are interested at all. Our reference points will not be the same. If we take the long view, we can see that not only do most young dancers need a range of skills to survive in our field, but our art form requires this kind of diversification in our population as well. Excellent teachers and strong dance programs in the public schools are needed to help overcome the marginalization of our art in this country. Early artistic experience influences lives for years to come. I think part of our job in higher education is to train the teachers who will provide those early dance experiences, building commonality among the young.

As a field, we discount liberal arts and education courses at our peril. Many narrowly-focused dance programs have cut out the social and philosophical grounding young artists need to understand the world and form a response to it, no doubt affecting both art and lives in the long run. A point of view, necessary to the development of one's own voice as an artist, needs cultivation and stimulation, exposure to ideas, and faith in one's own ability to know truth. Over the long term, the professionalism of higher education does not always work in our favor. No matter how excellently we dance, without a broadly based educational background, we are vulnerable and relatively powerless outside the studio.

It seems clear that our students should be provided a wide variety of experiences and expected to read and write. They must be allowed to find their own ideas apart from received ones and learn to organize and express them in a direction that will take them toward life, community, and culture. It is my experience that when encouraged to think about the development of dance audiences in their home communities, BFA students quickly grasp the centrality of early

education and the idea that dance in the public schools may be the most important means of building an audience. The fact that teaching and liberal arts programs are needed for both individual survival and that of contemporary dance in America is an important lesson we can teach. Giving students more responsibility for their own learning and for finding motivations within themselves to dance will produce dancers who are more developed as human beings and may also nurture artists capable of developing dance as an art.

Another lens through which to view these issues is gender equity. As Risner points out, "Although women outnumber men significantly in dance and dance education, asymmetrical power relationships affect women adversely at all levels of dance training."² This is not meant to criticize hiring men on dance faculties—only to point out the numbers. One has just to look around to note the message that our female students receive. Many college dance faculties strive for gender equity regardless of the numerical dominance of women as students. In fact, one reason for increasing the number of men on the faculty may be the hope of attracting more male students. For example, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro during the 1993-1994 school year, there were 80 undergraduate dance majors—three of whom were male. During that time, the fulltime faculty consisted of five women and three men. The following year, the faculty ratio shifted to four women and five men. In 2007-2008, with seven male undergraduate majors in a total of 134, the faculty consisted of five men and seven women.

This is not atypical of schools across the country. An informal survey of some of the biggest and best known dance departments shows the following faculty ratios:

Ohio State University	5 men 14 women
University of Illinois	6 men 11 women
University of Iowa	5 men 4 women
University of Arizona	4 men 7 women
Arizona State University	5 men 13 women
Florida State University	8 men 14 women

However, the figures in higher education are more encouraging than those in the professional dance world where those companies that can afford it usually seek an equal number of male and female performers. In September 2008, a brief look at websites yielded the following ratios of dance company members:

Paul Taylor	8 men 8 women
Taylor 2	3 men 3 women
Merce Cunningham	7 men 7 women
Alvin Ailey	16 men 14 women
Martha Graham	8 men 15 women
Susan Marshall	3 men 2 women

Pilobolus	7 men 2 women
Streb	3 men 4 women

Even this kind of opportunity looks good when one considers leadership in the field, however. Consider a sampling of recent awards for artistic achievement listed on their websites:

- From 1993-2006 the Capezio Dance Award has gone to 2 women, 7 men and 5 institutions or companies;
- Of the 152 men and women honored by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts between 1978 and 2008, 22 have been dance artists. Of these, 13 were men and 9 women;
- Between 1954 and 2007, the Dance Magazine Awards have been divided among 100 men and 80 women;
- The MacArthur Fellows Program lists awards to 7 male choreographers and 9 female through 2007;
- From 1981 to 2008, the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award has gone to 17 men and 15 women; and
- The Doris Duke Awards for New Work at the American Dance Festival (a series of commissions) have been given to 42 men and 14 women over 11 seasons, from 1998 to 2008.

These statistics should speak loudly to us as educators because they are speaking to our students: although dance was pioneered and populated by women, female dance artists have a disproportionately difficult time finding recognition and employment. Despite the numbers, there is less opportunity in the studio and onstage for women than for men, in addition to less visibility. This daily reinforcing of traditional gender roles translates into a loss of confidence and lowered expectations for most female students, and gives us, as educators, the most important reason of all to be sure that they receive a well-rounded education and a means of finding a meaningful place in the profession.

Women are by far the majority of our dance students in higher education, and more than likely as graduates, they will have to make it happen for themselves. Chances are that in order to stay in the field, most will, at some point, find themselves branching into areas other than performance, one where a broad-based education will be required.

At a minimum, we should be recommending dance education classes to all our students because most dance artists will teach to support their careers. It is a fallacy to think that teaching dance is unrelated to being an artist. A dancer may find employment with a regional company that works in the schools to augment its budget. Or she may dance with a touring company that does residencies and gives master classes in college dance departments. Or she may become an

independent artist who survives on teaching residencies, or an entrepreneur who organizes and teaches community-based classes, or a teacher in the schools who dances on weekends. Even for those with the most successful performing careers, with age, touring and performing become less important, and teaching can become an important and rewarding way to continue in dance.

As Risner states, "The status of dance in the professional arena, in terms of social and economic equity, is...tethered to issues of gender, the status of women and the arts broadly, as well as the harsh economic realities dance professionals and companies confront."² Combining educational theory and the liberal arts with performance and choreographic training cannot help but benefit the field and the career spans of our young artists. In addition, it will bring the profession a little closer to the mainstream of American culture and give dance artists more leverage for influence. As educators, we can lower the attrition rate and help our field become more significant as we give our young female dancers the skills needed to negotiate meaningful careers in the profession. Working within our departments to expand the definition of "excellence" to include more than technique, performance and choreography—while not ignoring these important skills—will be a productive first step.

References

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