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Author

Shimko, Carissa

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The Gifts I Received in College Led Me to My Future

After four years, you don't always end up where you expected to be. But with a double major, foreign study, a hip hop crew, and paying attention to what you really love doing, your education can fuel the rest of your life

by Carissa Shimko

I just spent the last four years of my life studying dance and education at the University of California, Irvine and am now about to graduate. My 17-year-old self who just finished high school would be so proud.

Back when I was in high school and trying to decide on colleges, I had no clue what I wanted to study. But, since I was really involved in dance, I decided to just go with that and apply to schools as a dance major. Most of my other friends from the dance studio who were also getting ready for college were not considering majoring in dance. They made it seem like a waste of time. This was pretty discomfoting. Fortunate for me though, I had my older sister to look up to, who, at the time had been studying dance at CalArts. I could see that she was really happy, so that helped me to be slightly more confident with my choices. I also had the support of my parents and family. Everyone was extremely encouraging, so that helped me to be positive and excited about my decision. Keeping my friends' opinions in mind (and, also the fact that school is quite expensive), I felt that it was important to study more than just dance. I wanted to keep my options open and see what other possibilities there might be in life.

Now let's fast forward four years... UCI, it's been a wild ride. I can truly say without hesitation that I have learned, grown, and experienced so much from my time here, I don't really have any regrets. My experience at UCI looked a little this: being a dance major and gaining knowledge about much more than just dance, joining a hip-hop team and discovering myself, finding that other interest I was hoping for and declaring a double major, being introduced to what I like to call "the best job on campus," getting the incredible opportunity to study abroad, and finally, now being an almost-college-graduate!! Like I said, it has been one crazy ride, but I think it was the right one for me.

My first year at UCI was, for the most part, pretty exciting. Both of my technique classes had a different teacher each day, so I was undoubtedly learning a lot. I mean, six teachers between two techniques! It was overwhelming to say the least, especially since each teacher had their own style, but on the bright side, at least there was variety. There was a downside to my training though, I had major confidence issues and always felt like the worst dancer in the room. I had a horrible dance teacher before college who shot my confidence levels to the floor. He ingrained in my mind that I was not that good and that I should be intimidated by the others around me. I was pretty confident in my dancing, but there were a few times where I let the memory of his words get the best of me. This led me to turn a lot of my focus to other aspects of university.

My academic classes were fun, and it was exciting to experience life outside of the dance major. About halfway through my first quarter I found MCIA, a student-run exhibition hip hop team. MCIA became my life. It was a group of normal students (non-dance majors, that is) who all got together to be a part of a dancing family. We danced, performed, grew, and did it all for fun and for the college memories. MCIA gave me mentors and friendships that will last a lifetime—and it provided a place to grow into my own shoes. MCIA focuses on growth and

happiness, so it was the one place where I felt confident and accepted with my dancing. It was just what I needed.

I also discovered the education major, where we learned about child development and the psychological aspects of learning. It was a nice contrast to dance department courses, and I even think it helped me understand the way I learned dancing in the studio. I loved being a double major and having involvements outside of the department. I was learning so much and having many great experiences.

As exciting as my first year was, my second and third years were a little less so. I had my double major, MCIA, and also found a job for extra money. I joined a sorority, performed in dance shows and projects, piled on as many units as I could fit into a quarter, and was always busy!! It was stressful but somehow manageable. I was always drained, but I enjoyed what I was doing and always felt blessed and thankful for where I was. A major factor that kept me going was my job. I worked with international students who came to UCI to learn English, as well as get accustomed to Southern California culture. My job was basically to hang out, talk to, and make friends with the students while I took them out on activities.

My students were pretty inspiring and had educational backgrounds that were unknown to me, such as STEM or business. They would always ask me what I was studying and were shocked when I said dance. Sometimes I mentioned only Education, so I wouldn't have to deal with their responses. I felt weird and bad about doing this, so I found a way to make dance sound exciting and cool. Eventually, that gave me more confidence.

Life at UCI during my second and third years was tough. I tried my hardest, but sometimes my hardest felt like the bare minimum. I had some really great classes with amazing teachers, and some not-so-great ones. I let the great classes push me through the others and tried to keep pushing. I was ahead in my scheduled studies, so I decided to look into study abroad. There were so many pros and cons, a major con being that I would not be dancing for the entire time I was away (except maybe socially in clubs). However, I found some pretty good pros. I would be traveling the world, getting a chance to find myself as well as experiencing other cultures. This appealed to me, so I just went for it. My experience abroad taught me so much, I truly learned the importance of making my own decisions and how they can affect different areas of my life.

As clichéd as this sounds, I felt changed when I got back. I gained a deeper passion for school and learning and started enjoying UCI fully for the first time. Before, I liked school but always felt fine with doing the bare minimum. Maybe it was because this year I was taking really interesting courses, or maybe it was the post-study-abroad mentality? Well, whatever it was, this last year my eyes were more open than ever, and I started to fall in love with my own creativity. I found a new love for dance, I learned to own it and appreciate my own body. This newfound mentality also helped me discover my goals for after graduation. I want to teach English as a second language and move abroad for a year or two. I plan to keep dance in my life, but not in the conservative way that I have been studying for the past four years. I've considered learning the House style and doing battles abroad, I've also considered maybe even joining a company wherever I may end up. I don't want to worry about perfection anymore, but instead to keep dance as an experimental passion with me.

I want dance to be an enjoyable part of my life, and have noticed that when it's too structured and regulated, I tend to dislike it. I enjoy it when I have the freedom to dance the way I want. I enjoy it when I am learning new styles but not trying to be the best in them. I am so thankful for dance, because it helped me get into college and brought me so many things that I

never imagined. I went through many ups and downs with how I perceived the way I dance, but I think I have a better mentality now than when I first arrived at UCI.

I don't know what will happen, but I know I love learning, I love grooving, and I love dancing for myself. I was very fortunate to be able to go to a school as great as this and to have been able to study the things I wanted to study. I am blessed and proud and want to push myself to follow the new goals that I have set so that four years from, now I can look back and make college Carissa proud.