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Is Going to College the Right Choice?

Why not start company life right away? Here's how to make a decision when you're stressed out and wondering if a degree is worth it

by Racquel Mar

Growing up as a dancer, I constantly contemplated the question, “Do I want to go to college to pursue my dance career?” For a while, I thought that I wanted to start auditioning in New York City and the Los Angeles area right away. Company life was the path that I always craved, and still do to this day. I really wasn’t a person who wanted to go to college or enjoyed being at school for that matter. But now that I am so close to graduating with a BFA in Dance Performance, I am very glad that I made the choice to continue my dance education by going to college.

Dance scholar Janice Ross says that, “Dance in the university is usually framed as supporting, paralleling, and enhancing some other curricular objectives, such as [...] community-building, or self-esteem.” But these two objectives are only the beginning of the skills acquired through the college dance curriculum. Going through a college dance program provides us with countless opportunities to learn and explore as a student and a developing artist. Embarking on this journey in college will mold us into the best artist that we strive to be. It is true that the college dance environment demands a lot mentally and physically. This can be quite exhausting; however, the result at the end of the road ultimately comes down to the progress and success that was created during the time spent at college. We learn multiple lessons that we will use every day after we leave the school setting. We are then fully able to invest and indulge in all aspects of dance that guide us to become understanding and aware of dance as an art.

So what can we really gain from going into further training at the university level? To start, I interviewed my friend Douglas Burkhardt, who attended Marymount Manhattan College in New York City and is now performing in the cast of Punchdrunk’s long-standing immersive dance theater show *Sleep No More* in New York City. When I asked him the one thing he learned through a college dance program, he responded, “I would say one of the biggest is to work your ass off, because hard work pays off. This industry is hard and there are a lot of talented, hungry dancers out there who are better than you. But if you work hard and know your worth and know you have something to offer, you can set yourself apart from the pack.” I was curious to know if he still used this today. He said, “Absolutely, every single day, in rehearsal, in performance, and in non-dance related things.”

Without having gone through a college program, Burkhardt may have never learned this life-lasting skill that we as dancers MUST have in our toolbox. He even stated, “I knew there was absolutely no way I could have made it (...) as far as I did in the auditions had I not gone to school for dance and earned my degree.” As he emphasizes, so many dancers want the same thing, we have to work hard to put our best self out there in any situation, even in things outside of the dance world.

Another interview I conducted was with Ching Ching Wong, a UC Irvine alumni with a BFA in Dance performance as well as a minor in Education and Psychology & Social Behavior who now dances with *Northwest Dance Project* in Portland. One tool that she acquired in college was “time management.” She said, “I did not always manage my time well, but being a dance major forced me to organize my body, my mind, my schedule, and my focus.” Now that

she dances with the company five days a week from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, she has to use the tool of time management so she doesn't get burnt out. At times, I find myself having to do the same thing as I work to finishing up my degree, balancing my homework, class and rehearsal schedule, and performances to try and keep as much of an equilibrium as possible to prevent too much stress, exhaustion, and injuries. Keeping up with a busy daily schedule is something that I know I will always need to do, no matter what. Ultimately, I want to try to remain stress free and be able to live in every aspect of my dancing and non-dance practice, which can be done by practicing time management.

Being exhausted dance majors, we always come back to that one thought of wanting to give up. Giving up can be done by checking out mentally in classes, wanting to skip class because of too much stress, and possibly thinking about dropping the dance major completely. At this stage, we may start to question whether getting the degree is really going to help us in the future with our dance career. It is also at this stage that we get to know how strong we really are. In a final interview, I talked to my friend Michael Kelly, a recent graduate of NYU Tisch School of the Arts and now a dancer with the *Moulin Rouge* in Paris. "The reality is that college is a time to become self-motivated," he says. "College taught me that professors do their best to teach and correct, but it is up to yourself to apply those corrections."

Having a strong sense of self-motivation ultimately provides us with the true test of how far we can potentially make it in the dance world. Every day, company life can be exhausting and may not consist of receiving feedback at every second. We have to have that constant inner push to get us through each class, rehearsal, and performance. I know for a fact that I have to keep motivating myself everyday, especially the long ones; otherwise nothing will get accomplished. Having to cope with multiple things at once throughout college certainly helps you develop self-motivation.

There are so many factors and influences that lead us to where we are now. The college training and overall experience aids us as we continue our growth as dancers and artists. We learn so much from college. Kelly says, "Through NYU, I was able to make a connection which in turn gave me a job. College taught me to have a voice and how important communication is." Burkhardt says "Going to school for dance was the best decision I ever made. The knowledge, the tools, and the community that comes with it are invaluable and I wouldn't trade it for anything." Wong says, "I remember being so scared as a senior in college with the future looming as this big unknown black cloud. However, I graduated feeling like I had accomplished college and it was hard-earned work: a true battle. After you survive a battle like college, you gain a sense of readiness to tackle the future, tackle the world."

I have come to realize college has offered so much that helps me in every way possible. Going to college for dance should not be seen as giving up or merely securing a back-up option. Rushing into auditioning for dance companies does not allow for much exploration of the dancer or artist. The experience in college supplies guided discoveries that everyone can take advantage of. Taking various classes throughout many sectors in dance is what we have the chance to do that a company will not offer. With that, we are capable of having the chance to strengthen our bodies and minds to steer us towards the greater path of success in dancing. There is so much for one to learn and absorb in college. We are all big sponges that can seize any opportunity we have to increase our knowledge in dance that can cater a more well-rounded dancer. There is always room for every artist to grow, even the most successful.

College is meant to test you in various ways. College challenges every single thing we already know prior to it. It gives us even more knowledge and tools that we can use for the rest

of our careers and lives. It is so exciting. If you find yourself in doubt, constantly questioning your plan, becoming stressed, remember to just breathe. Take a step back. Look and think about what you have accomplished and what you can accomplish. I can assure you it is quite vast. One day, you will be thankful and glad that you set out on the wild ride of going to college for dance. It will serve you well.

Works Cited:

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Racquel Mar was a member of the 2017 graduating class at the University of California, Irvine, earning a BFA degree in Dance Performance. She aspires to join a contemporary or modern dance company in New York City and then ultimately move to Europe to continue her career.
