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OMG—you're not going to dance professionally?!

Don't worry! Being in college can actually be the better way to find a job in the dance world

by Ashleigh Moss

Does going to college mean we've given up on dance and are just doing it for "fun"? There's always that one family member or friend who doesn't really know much about dance and who asks you why you're still dancing in college. "Are you going to dance professionally still, or did you give that up to go to college?" We all came to college with the same intention: to learn, to grow, and to experience. We came here to learn more about dance, about life, about ourselves. So why is this discredited when people ask us about our passion?

Going into a college dance program is actually "the thing to do right now," but why is it still so disrespected and looked down upon? In order to be educated about our art form, it's important to understand that this misconception about college ending your professional dance career ambitions. It's not the case, so we have to remain confident and firm with this decision and our amazing achievements while majoring in dance!

I decided to reach out to two people in the dance department who had already had professional careers before going back to college. I asked Nicole Vitale, a transfer student, and Alana Isiguen, who earned an M.F.A. and currently teaches ballet as an adjunct. What were their experiences, and what did they think about going to college instead of just jumping into a professional career?

Nicole Vitale transfer to UC Irvine in the fall and has really made an impact here, with her nice personality, great technique, fierce dancing, and positive attitude. I thought she would be a great person to interview for my research, because she's done what most of us want to, already dancing with a company. I asked Nicole if coming to college has changed her perception of this idea of giving up on a career, and told her I wanted her to be completely honest. Her response was informative:

At the time that I graduated high school I thought that was the only way to do things and that going to college would only set me back from reaching my goals as a professional dancer... [but] It's so much better that people go to college, meanwhile creating a foundation in order pursue their dreams to the best of their ability.

Alana Isiguen is one a well-respected past graduate student, whose calm, cool, and collected attitude makes everyone feel welcome, and her positive outlook on life and dance seems to inspire everyone. She has quite the resume before entering graduate school. She trained at North Carolina Dance Theatre (now called Carolina Ballet) directly underneath Patricia McBride, a dancer who had a flourishing and outstanding career all because of George Balanchine. Isiguen was therefore able to learn the Balanchine technique and choreography from one of Balanchine's protégées. She then went on to become an apprentice with the North Carolina company, with the opportunity to perform

and tour. After this experience, she decided to attend NYU's Tisch School of the Arts for her BFA in Dance, where she was able to expand her horizons and knowledge of dance. She then danced with project based companies in New York, which was something totally different than what she experienced in high school. She also found a new passion that wasn't exactly involved with dance but had a strong connection to it--Pilates. After moving around the country and dancing with many different projects and small companies on both the east and west coast, Isiguen decided to return to school to obtain the appropriate graduate degree in order to teach at the university level.

Did professional companies care if a dancer attended college? I asked Isiguen what she saw directors were looking for when hiring dancers for their companies and projects:

Directors did want older dancers with life experience. It's because they want to make sure there's an artistic quality behind the professional dancer they're potentially hiring. How can a 16-year-old who has never left home or never had their heart broken convey a dramatic storyline that choreography requires? It is something crucial in the professional dance world—dancers with experience!

That seems totally right: how can we portray certain characters and storylines if we have absolutely no connection to them? I also asked Isiguen why she advocates for college dance and why it is the better and smarter decision to make for someone who is potentially striving for a professional dance career.

There are less companies these days that can offer a job. Jobs come from the networks you make in college. The people you're in school with are the future choreographers, company directors, and artists. You guys are making the next dance world. You're making your own work. The world is changing, and it makes more sense to have as many options as possible.

Students from college dance programs have always changed the world of dance. They are not just a place where students just go take class and go about their days; they are going above and beyond and changing the way of dance and the future of the next generation of professional dancers. In *Dance Magazine* Josie Sadan wrote about how college dance programs are ways for dancers to find other passions and connect those with dance, saying, "Colleges are rethinking how they prepare students for sustainable dance careers."

It is extremely important to remain confident with the decision of attending college and majoring in dance. Not only is this major physically demanding, but also mentally. It's difficult being able to explain what this major entails and requires to outsiders, but deciding to continue your dance training in college will further your ability to answer, as well as being beneficial to a professional dance career. "The key is to focus on the ultimate goal, not financial uncertainties or parental deterrents," says Jen Peters, another dance writer. Remaining focused and confident is the most important thing to remember. We are growing physically, mentally, and emotionally, and all that will benefit us when stepping out in the professional dance world.

We are the future of dance. We are the next group of people who will be dancing, running dance companies, and creating new works. If we aren't educated about how to do these things, how will we be successful? "More than 1,100 students graduated college during the 2015 academic year with a bachelor's degree in dance from 73 programs that participated in a survey by the national Higher Education Arts Data Services Project," says Sadan. "That's up 33 percent from a decade ago. In a saturated market, many find that the only opportunities are those they create themselves through their own projects and pickup companies."

You learn so much from your professors, and learn so much beyond dance. Professors are here to nurture us during our growth as young adults before we venture out into the big, scary professional dance world. Sadan interviewed one professor, Jennifer Edwards, at Point Park University about how dance programs change a dancer's experiences. "I think dance teaches us, subconsciously, how to live," she says. "To bring all of that kinesthetic intelligence to bear, and apply it to budgeting and taxes, and contract negotiation; bringing your mission and values and impact you want to have on the world into a verbal, written statement—that's really amazing."

In high school, I never thought about going to college. I always thought that I would go straight into a trainee program associated with a professional dance company. Choosing college made it seem like I was giving on my dream of dancing professionally. I believed that college dance programs were not that great, the dancers weren't very good, and the teachers were once-upon-a-time dancers who never had to chance to dance professionally. We hear about dancers who join companies immediately after high school or at 15 years old and make their way through the company. But were they ready physically, emotionally, and mentally? Were they ready to transition into such a different world?

Moral of the story? Going to college was the smart, wise, good, mature decision! Coming to college has helped me find myself as a dancer and as a person. I found a way to express myself differently as an artist. Going to college, you are able to have real-life experiences and learn how to express certain emotions. College also teaches us how to network within the department with our faculty, graduate students, other dance majors, and even people outside the major. There are so many opportunities within the dance major, as well as beyond. You can do so much with dance and art at a university or college and can learn so much about this art form. You did something smart and good coming to school!

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