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Author

Fors, Zuri

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B+ is for Ballet

What it's like when grades make you feel like you're being punished for pursuing your passion

by Zuri Fors

Growing up, my love for dance was unwavering. I felt an indescribable connection to the art form when I stepped in the studio for the first time. In dance class, I could truly be myself. It provided me with a means of expression and a way to connect with others. I knew from the second I started dancing that it was something I wanted to do forever.

Over the years, I trained more intensely, and my passion grew even stronger. I couldn't imagine my life without dance. As I embarked on my collegiate journey as a dance major, my enthusiasm for ballet remained firm, but something shifted. The constant presence of B+ grades began to cast a shadow over my once-burning love. I was always eager to embrace corrections and work on self-improvement, but like many dancers, I grapple with inherent physical traits that deviate from the "ideal" ballet physique. My shoulders curve forward slightly and my neck is naturally very tense. These shortcomings are as much a part of me as the dedication that fuels my dancing. However, it seemed that regardless of how diligently I practiced, an A grade in ballet was elusive.

My university dance program was rigorous, with a focus on shaping students into professional dancers. The department offered four major techniques, but only ballet had five levels and a minimum requirement of three classes a week, one more meeting than jazz and hip hop ever had. Four full-time ballet professors often shared the teaching of one course. Many dancers, including myself, were naive in thinking it would be possible to get an A in ballet by just attending class and working hard. Instead, it always felt as if some dancers were favored and others weren't.

I vividly remember the first time I received a B+ in ballet. I had just finished my first quarter at university, completely online due to Covid. In the sea of As on my transcript, a lone B+ stood out, preventing me from achieving a perfect 4.0. To my surprise, the B+ was in Ballet 2. How could this possibly be? Even with the challenge of starting school online, I felt I had put forth my best effort and made technical advancements throughout the quarter. I hadn't missed a single day of class, so what had gone wrong? Looking back at the syllabus for the course, I tried to figure out why I had received this grade. I couldn't tell, and in subsequent queries I made, the answer was never really clear.

When a dancer enters college, it's likely the first time they ever get a letter grade for dancing. Because grades can play a significant role in determining one's self-worth, getting a low mark in ballet can surely hinder your motivation and artistic growth, or at the very least affect your passion for dancing. On your transcript, it could also affect perceptions and job opportunities after graduation. When dancers can't seem to earn an A, despite fulfilling all the requirements on the syllabus to the best of their ability, they often suspect they've really failed at being their professors' ideas of perfection. The few individuals blessed with so-called perfect ballet bodies

or “natural” talent seem to be favored by professors, getting rewarded with As consistently. The rest of us, who may have different body types and other anatomical limitations, such as limited turnout or flat feet, receive Bs, no matter how hard they try.

A typical ballet syllabus in university courses might state that grades are based on attendance, participation, attitude, alignment, posture, and “quality of work,” an ambiguous category. At my school, professors emphasized attendance, because how could you assess someone's capabilities if they weren't present? However, it seemed to many that the “prima ballerinas” or favored dancers got more leeway when it came to attendance. I witnessed this inequality firsthand when someone who missed 7 classes still got an A in the course, seemingly just for fitting ballet's ideal aesthetic. This can be extremely discouraging to those who attend every class and put forth their best effort, yet still can't get an A.

After interviewing many of my fellow dance majors about their experiences with the grading system for ballet, I found that many of them felt some degree of inconsistency and bias might occur. In one of my classroom courses with ten other dance majors, I once conducted an activity called “Take a Step Forward” to assess whether they had ever felt that ballet grades were unjust. The premise was simple: As they stood at the same starting point, I read a series of statements, ranging from whether they ever felt ballet grades were based on appearance rather than skill, to whether they had ever felt that instructors might have unconscious bias in the kind of feedback or corrections they gave. For every statement I read, almost everyone stepped forward. This activity shed light on shared struggles within our ballet community and also paved the way for a crucial conversation about the need for change.

Unsurprisingly, the faculty are always quick to deny any accusations about being unfair. An article written for *Dance Spirit Magazine* by Sophie Robertson, a Dance Arts Administration and Journalism double major at Butler University, revealed that most of the various college dance professors consulted said they don't grade students based on their natural abilities. Butler University professor Susan McGuire stated that, “It's what you do with the facility you're given that makes the difference” (Robertson). In other words, an “A” student shows up willing to work, behaving professionally in class and always strives to grow as an artist. At my own university, I was told that what distinguishes an A student from a B+ student is their effort and improvement throughout the quarter, that students who receive high grades put in extra energy as well as willingly take corrections and assimilate them into their practice. Bias is thought to be avoided by having grades averaged from several instructors who may be teaching one particular course. Grades are also rounded up if professors disagreed, we were told, but this wasn't my experience.

While assertions of fairness in ballet grading likely reflect ideals and good intentions, the perception of bias persists, with many students noticing that dancers getting the most attention were those with impressive feet, high extensions, and 180-degree turnout. The nature of unconscious bias is that a teacher may not even be aware that they have anatomical preferences that could affect grading. In the ballet world, it would seem particularly difficult to be objective, given that visual impressions and aesthetic preferences are so prominent. How, for example, does a teacher decide on how to grade the “quality of work”? Individual professors may have predetermined ideas of what makes a dancer “good” and these mindsets can affect the way they grade, even if they aren't aware of it.

Without clear rubrics, grading in ballet classes can appear to be subjective, and resulting low grades can take away students' love for the art form. In my experience, a low grade in ballet doesn't make you want to work harder; on the contrary, it actually discourages dancers who otherwise enjoy coming to class and working hard. When you know that no matter how well you dance or how many classes you attend, your grade will always be a B+, it doesn't exactly feel good. Additionally, many students who double major fear their dance grades can lower an overall GPA, which is looked at by graduate schools. This can actually impact what students choosing other careers can do after college.

If letter grades are problematic when it comes to an art form, what's the alternative? What can we do to address possible bias in ballet grading and work towards a more equitable and supportive environment for all members of our ballet community? Instead of letter grades, a Pass/No Pass system might work better, providing students with the opportunity to take risks and have freedom to fail. For some, however, motivation could decrease when there's no grading pressure pushing students to show up and put forth effort. So perhaps giving students the option to pick between letter grades or pass/no pass systems would work best. According to Kristen Schwab, who received a Master's in Journalism from Columbia University and a BFA in Dance from New York University, it works at the NYU Tisch school. In an article for *Dance Teacher Magazine*, she reported that Cherylyn Lavagnino, chair of the dance department at Tisch has found that using this system fosters a positive learning environment and encourages students to develop their own voices (Schwab).

It's unfortunate that grading systems at some universities seem to favor a specific body type or "natural" talent, rather than recognizing the effort and dedication each dancer puts into their craft. Getting Bs in ballet can make dancers feel as though they are being punished for pursuing their passion. It's important to implement changes to foster a supportive and equitable environment in ballet programs. Having to take ballet for a grade and always getting B+'s made me feel like I was never good enough. I'm not planning on pursuing a career in dance, so for me, it was purely my passion, and why should a dancer be punished for doing what they love?

Zuri Fors graduated with a BS in Exercise Science and a BA in Dance in June 2024. She plans to pursue a professional career in Physical Therapy and is eager to use her deep kinesthetic awareness and medical knowledge to treat injured dancers.



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