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Author

Maduro, Gabriela

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Is A Dance Major “Enough”?

Why do institutions value and strongly emphasize academics over the arts? Yes, academics are important, but the arts are equally as valuable to one's life experience and future life choices.

by Gabriela Maduro

I have often heard the statement that pursuing an education in the arts is “following one’s passion” and is not practical in real life. People say an education in the arts is taking the easy way out. As dance majors, career anxiety drives us to consider “second” careers while we attempt to develop as dancers. I decided to pursue a double major in dance and exercise science but ultimately ended up dropping the biology major because the large combined number of credits would have compromised my ability to maximize my development as a dancer.

Supposedly, obtaining a second major provides dancers a “fallback” opportunity if a dance career does not materialize. We use the second major as a crutch to feel a sense of security and stability. However, I have realized that dance has given me much insight and ability to succeed in life. The reality is that whatever major one pursues will not guarantee happiness or success later in life. Every major has something valuable to offer to our life and our development; it’s all about what you take away and how you apply your knowledge to your life. A college education in traditional math and science courses gives you some tools that can be helpful later in life, but those are not the only important experiences you need. It is up to each of us to recognize the emotional and intellectual skills we have, how to use them, and how to make our way in the real world.

Throughout my life in school I have always questioned the unequal divide between academics and the arts. Institutions place a significantly higher value on subjects like math and science as being more practical, but dance is just as important and useful in obtaining useful skills. A dance major is considered a non-traditional education because it does not focus on the “academic,” but like other subjects, it cultivates one’s intellectual development, just in a different way.

Dance is “deep in the heart of every culture throughout history; [it] is part of the pulse of humanity” (Robinson). Dance is a nonverbal way of communicating, and by using our bodies to speak to one other, we build strong interpersonal and teamwork skills. Visual learning also helps us understand and interpret abstract concepts. Dancers learn how to tap into their creative spirit, to understand and appreciate convention and to not be bound by conventional thought. Dancers learn how to take different ideas in music, movement, history and synthesize this information into something creative and new.

A recent study found that, “In the past 30 years, job tasks in the U.S. have shifted dramatically toward tasks requiring noncognitive skills” (Whitmore). These skills, also known as “soft skills,” relate to motivation, integrity, and interpersonal interaction. The soft skills that are valued in the real world include hard work, discipline, and dedication. These are skills you have had to develop from a very young age. You can attain a certain skill set with any major in college, but one major doesn’t provide more beneficial skills than another. Additionally, “only 27% of

college graduates [work] in a job that even relates to their major” (Stahl). That means that 73% of students in traditional academic majors like economics, psychology, or biology do not make direct use of the knowledge gained in college in their professional jobs. This demonstrates that your college major does not necessarily have a relation to your success and should not define what you can offer. Plus, no college major could ever prepare you enough for the real world and give you all the skills you need. Therefore, what is wrong with pursuing something that is meaningful to you and motivates you?

Dance allows one to be creative, innovative, and think outside of the box in a different way than other subjects. It takes discipline, determination and self-control to give up countless hours and energy to physically be ready to perform on stage in front of an audience. Dance and performing gives us even more tools than some majors because it gives us the opportunity to relate to people and create a connection with them, unlike, say, math or science. Dance majors have to work together in a cohesive group to pursue a shared goal, to create choreography and perform as a unit. It helps you to stay organized, effectively use time management, and plan schedules. As a dance major, you become highly educated in the arts and an innovative thinker. Dance is not just a passion, but just like every other major, it provides skills that will aid you in your life experience.

Another myth about majoring in dance is that it’s an easier major because it is “not academic,” but this is also false. Although a dance major may not seem as rigorous to those in science or engineering, dance majors still use the same problem-solving and analytical skills. Camryn Eakes, a junior dance major at Chapman University, wrote “dance is one of the most meticulous, intellectual majors on campus, and I know that the majority of this campus will never agree with me.” This is a shame because as a dance major myself, I understand and know where she is coming from.

As dance majors, “you have a very tight schedule and very little free time” (Tarnowski). We take about five to six classes a quarter. We are required to take regular technique classes (jazz, ballet and modern), general education requirements, other dance-related major requirements and attend extra rehearsals on the weekend. Therefore, we are not only drained mentally due to all our academic courses, but also physically because we dance about three to six hours a day. In addition, as dancers it is not enough to physically show up to class, but we must be fully engaged and invested in our growth in and out of the classroom. “No dancer ever became successful riding on their natural born talents only” (Doskocil). For a dancer, the training and learning never stops, because there is always room for improvement. We are constantly working to not only uphold our grades in our academic courses but also maintain our dancing body and continue cultivating our craft.

As dance majors we know that opportunities in dance are fleeting, so we convince ourselves that we need a second major to grant us more opportunity after our dancing career. However, can you maximize your skills if you are splitting time between two different subjects? As a freshman, when I began my double major in dance and exercise sciences, I felt like I was doing an adequate job of attending to the two majors, but it was causing me stress because I was unable to effectively divide my time between dance and exercise science. I thought one of them would suffer.

Andy Hill from the *Entrepreneur* says that, “When we multi-task we can’t give ourselves to the present. Instead, we sacrifice now for later with the hopes of future happiness.” This observation shows that by dividing our time and attention between two things, we may be unable to fully invest ourselves in each and be completely present. Studies show that “only about 2% [of the population] are good at multi-tasking” (Quast). Lisa Quast from *Forbes*, says that “multi-tasking can reduce our productivity by as much as 40%.”

By splitting our attention between two things, we are compromising our ability to fully develop and excel to our potential. To be a good dancer, to be good at anything, requires time and total commitment. Therefore, it was my decision to withdraw from the exercise science major, because I wanted to be fully committed to my art and to be the best dancer I could be. Learning that lesson, how to work on becoming the best version of myself as a dancer, would have been lost if I had divided my attention with an exercise science major.

In conclusion, being a dance major helps prepare you for life in the real world. Dance challenges you to learn how to think in new and creative ways. It teaches you determination, commitment, discipline, and communication skills that are vital to the real world. Although these skills may not be recognized by some people in an academic setting, the skills you learn as a dance major are highly useful in the real world. Being able to connect with someone on a personal level and communicate with one another is a valid and important life lesson that majors like science and math do not really teach. Still, the skills you learn in college will only take you so far. It is up to you to keep developing and growing, using the things you have learned to guide you in the direction you want to go. As a dance major you are just as qualified for the real world as any other major and it should not be dismissed or devalued.

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