

THE PRIORITIZATION OF MENTAL HEALTH IN DANCE

Natalie Pertz

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Readers' Committee:

Tony Montenieri, Faculty Advisor, Chair

Ramona Baker

Gregory Charleston

Ava Morgan

Chase Rynd

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I. EXAMINING THE ESTABLISHED CULTURE

It is hard to accept the impossibility of perfection after observing a professional dancer during class or rehearsal. The hours each dancer spends improving and fine-tuning techniques are just beginning during the structured confines of class and rehearsal time. A dancer will fall, fail, break, and bleed –often silently while struggling internally– out of dedication to the art form. How does this rich, complex day-to-day practice impact a dancer long term? Dance leadership must invest in the physical and mental health care of dancers to transform the established culture into one that prioritizes the well-being of dancers.

Dance leadership includes company administrative and artistic directors as well as dance teachers, all of whom inhabit positions of power and influence. The potential impact of leadership is significant given the amount of time student and professional dancers spend in the studio with teachers. “In dance, teachers are often important role models; they might also hold significant power over students and their progress” (Nordin-Bates 24). “This role only further intensifies if some of those students have professional aspirations,” says dancer health, nutrition, and lifestyle coach Jess Spinner (Spinner). The use of the word ‘dance’ is broadly defined and refers to all styles of dance in this paper. While certain studies have found a correlation between the style of ballet and higher instances of some mental health challenges, such as performance anxiety, all dancers experience some degree of performance anxiety (*Performance Anxiety*).

In this paper, the established culture refers to a close-knit yet competitive culture in dance that has been known to nurture outdated practices and the pursuit of perfectionism. The established culture encompasses dance school and professional dance culture. This study

examines feedback and testimonies collected through personal interviews that were conducted with current and former dancers, dance teachers, dance leaders, and mental health professionals. Interviewees are affiliated with dance companies and schools located in the following states and districts: Georgia, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, Washington D.C., and Wisconsin. Many of the leaders interviewed expressed that they wear multiple hats out of necessity, supporting their schools and companies as arts administrators on top of the official parameters of their titles. A survey (See Appendix A) was constructed and distributed to dancers and alumnae at select schools and companies who have begun to prioritize the mental health of their dancers. The original data collected captures the impact this prioritization is having and is a call to action to dance leaders across the industry – arts administrators, directors, and teachers.

The need for greater mental health investment is a universal one. One might ask: *Why prioritize mental health investment in dance?* Dance is certainly not the only artform nurturing perfectionism, but as it is the focus of this study it bears repeating that it is an artform and profession firstly enmeshed in the pursuit of perfectionism. “A growing number of studies has shown that in classical ballet and contemporary dance, perfectionistic tendencies are not only common but are also likely to affect aspects of performance, motivation, and well-being in important ways” (Nordin-Bates 24). Perfectionism may contribute to a prosperous career as it can be a source of drive and motivation, but it may come at the expense of self-criticism and dissatisfaction. It is a double-edged sword. Dr. Brian Goonan, a licensed psychologist, believes that part of the related challenge for a dancer is keeping the daily corrections received in class, rehearsal, and performance objective, rather than interpreting them as a criticism of one’s whole person (“Dancer Mental Health”).

Intensive training teeming with such corrections often begins before aspiring dancers are developmentally equipped with the tools to “identify or communicate their mental health” (O’Connell). Kathryn Daniels with the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science Dance Educators’ Committee adds that “the combined pressures of dramatic hormone fluctuations and a perceived decrease in ability can make this an emotionally challenging time” for adolescent dancers. Recent data from *Psychology of Music* has relatedly demonstrated that ballet, for example, can impact mental health by revealing that “young ballet students exhibit greater psychological inflexibility” (Serrano). Telmo Serrano and Helena Amaral Espirito-Santo, the researchers responsible for the study that produced the data, define psychological inflexibility as “excessive involvement with the content of internal events” (Jacobs). The first time that dancer Shelby Williams realized perfectionism could be a negative trait was as a student during a summer intensive at Houston Ballet Academy. Williams, now a soloist with The Royal Ballet of Flanders, describes the experience of beginning as a big fish in a small town then transitioning to classrooms full of equally big fish. Suddenly, she was exclusively perceiving classmates as the competition. “All of my mental energy was going towards quick back and forth comparison between seeing myself in the mirror and comparing myself to everyone else” (“Dancer Mental Health”). This ultimately led to Williams undergoing an anxiety attack during an adagio class (“Dancer Mental Health”).

Accounts like Williams’ involving prolonged battles fought in isolation are not unusual. “Dancers are experts at masking physical pain, and sadly we are also extremely adept at disguising mental anguish,” remarks Sarah Cecilia Bukowski, a dancer and writer in residence at Amy Seiwert’s Imagery. Bukowski finds it unsurprising that “many of the mental illnesses prevalent among dancers are closely tied to our bodies” (Bukowski). Dancers sometimes set

externalized goals along these lines leading to unhealthy habits like the pursuit of perfectionism and eating disorders (O'Connell). Minding the Gap founder and former dancer, Kathleen McGuire Gaines takes this relationship a step further by identifying perfectionism as the root of many eating disorders ("Dancer Mental Health"). A National Institutes of Health systematic review and meta-analysis affirms both the increased likelihood and prevalence of eating disorders amongst dancers. "Dancers may be three times as likely to suffer from an eating disorder than the general population." Only further intensifying such suffering is the reality that dancers sick from eating disorders are more susceptible to injury (Arcelus). Eating disorders and disordered eating are not interchangeable. "Although there is no definitive clinical definition for disordered eating, this term is often used among the eating disorder treatment community to describe various abnormal eating behaviors" (Fuller). Those struggling with disordered eating can adopt the habits of an eating disorder but to a lower severity ("Disordered Eating & Dieting"). Examples of disordered eating habits include extreme dieting, laxative abuse, and bingeing and purging (Fuller). A recent study tracking disordered eating among adolescent ballet dancers found that "a greater number of lifetime disordered eating behaviors was associated with a greater number of lifetime injuries" (Thomas). Both disordered eating and the onset of a single injury are challenging at best for a dancer's psyche. Many concerned arts administrators in dance are now envisioning the potential psychological consequences of the two occurring simultaneously throughout a dancer's career when appropriating the budgetary line for mental health support.

Another way to consider perfectionism as it relates to dance and respond to the case for prioritization of mental health in dance is the paradox of effortless perfection. Coined during a 2003 Duke University study on the impact of how young women experience undergraduate

campus culture, the expectation of effortless perfection pressures women to be outwardly beautiful with a rich social life while excelling at all academic and extracurricular pursuits. “They were supposed to do all of this without seeming to try at all, without showing the strain, without breaking a sweat. Failure was unacceptable, but so was the appearance of trying to succeed” (Angyal). Chloe Angyal, author of *Turning Pointe: How a New Generation of Dancers is Saving Ballet from Itself*, proposes that effortless perfection is at home in dance. “This is what we were taught in dance: to be athlete-strong but artist-unruffled. To work just as hard at concealing the work as we did at the work itself” (Angyal). What kind of change would ensue if “we shifted our ethos to center the mental health and resiliency of dancers just as much as we fixate on the beauty and power of our bodies” (Bukowski)?

The nurtured pursuit of perfectionism ingrained in the established culture can also increase dancers’ susceptibility to another mental health struggle: depression (Park). According to The American Psychiatric Association, “one in six people (16.6%) will experience depression at some point in their lifetime.” Late teens to early 20’s is the most common period in which individuals first experience depression. Due to competitive training and career trajectories, McGuire Gaines identifies this same period as the most stressful for dancers. Recent studies specifically revealed that one-third of women will have a major depressive episode in their lifetime (Torres). According to Data USA findings from 2019, 70% of dancers are women (“Dancers and Choreographers”). While depression is more prevalent in women, it is not a struggle exclusive to one gender. A 2019 study conducted by The National Institute of Mental Health confirmed that 6% of men experienced their own “major depressive episode” that year (Torres). Female dancers in ballet schools relatedly outnumber their male counterparts 20 to 1 (Yntema). Dancers who may already feel in the minority, such as male dancers, transgender

dancers, and dancers of color, among others, are additionally at higher risk of body dysmorphia, a mental health disorder characterized by a preoccupation with perceived bodily imperfections (Hope). “The requirement to be strong enough to do what is asked while also being lean enough to fit the mold is true of all sexes. Some of the worst eating disorders I’ve witnessed have been among male dancers,” says McGuire Gaines. The universal susceptibility of depression in the dance industry is motivating concerned arts administrators in dance to dispel misinformation across company culture while ensuring that all dancers –identity aside– are offered equal mental health services.

There are a number of reasons why the established culture has persisted in dance for so long. One reason being that some members of dance leadership still use tradition as justification for detrimental practices such as body shaming, mind games, and developmentally inappropriate expectations, to name a few. Conversely, the characteristics of self-awareness and sound judgment are intrinsic for a good dance teacher. A good dance teacher must “decide where to draw the line when it comes to judging what support you should and shouldn’t provide” (Spinner). As any good teacher can empathize, this work is ongoing and not without its challenges. Some teachers have created and maintain healthy environments, others are less blatant when mocking dancer appearances, but yet body shaming –among other practices– remains toxically present, says Dr. Nadine Kaslow, psychologist for Atlanta Ballet. “It’s just more hidden and subtle” (Hope). João Ducci was a senior BFA student in Dance Performance at the University of California, Irvine, when she wrote about mental health in dance. “It is clear that dance educators are stuck in old ways when it comes to so many things –mental health is just another topic on that list.” It is almost like there is an ingrained reluctance and fear from dance leadership that altering the known, however arguably harmful, will hurt the established,

exceptional levels of artistry. One could do a quick digital search and find scientific developments in dance science, physical therapy, and injury prevention to confirm that many of these old or traditional ways are outdated at the least (Ducci). A current professional dancer with New York State Ballet (NYSB) affirmed such experiences in her own career in which old-school teachers use practices she described as “mind games.” The NYSB dancer hypothesized where such practices come from, “the older directors tend to be of this mindset that we suffered and now you need to too.”¹

The close knit yet competitive nature of many dance school and company environments is another factor contributing to the continuation of the established culture. Environments of this kind make it difficult for dancers to speak up against detrimental practices. The NYSB dancer affirmed that it can sometimes feel like all dancers are out for themselves and that personal-professional boundaries are near impossible to construct with dance teachers.¹ Janelle Spruill, a dancer on faculty at The Governor’s School for the Arts, strives to counteract this in making her classes a safe space by “doing more listening than talking” and keeping personal opinions to herself while advocating for increased teacher diversity. Arts administrators, particularly those who also have a foot in the daily artistry of a school or company, can speak more specifically to the benefits of diversifying teaching rosters when hiring protocol is being evaluated.

Spruill believes representation is a part of creating a safe space. “If a student doesn’t feel comfortable, she won’t come to you in the first place.” When one dancer does feel comfortable or brave enough to break the silence, it has the power to galvanize others to do the same. “There’s a solidarity to knowing that someone else is struggling,” remarks commercial dancer Lindsay Benjamin. Benjamin acknowledges that there will always be competition intrinsic to the culture but questions why it cannot be a friendly one. The ‘tough enough’ narrative is yet another

detrimental practice. “Some may argue that if one is not strong enough to handle the harshness and criticism of the dance world, they should just not be in it at all. Not only is this senseless argument hurtful, but it perpetuates the idea that people should not challenge abusive and insensitive teaching methods, and should instead remain complacent with how things are” (Ducci). Employee complacency across administration and studio spaces alike begets the continuation, even nourishment of the established culture

A third factor contributing to the established culture is that dance leadership sometimes regards investing in one mental health service as the solution for providing dancers with adequate support. Whether a school or company currently boasts a counselor, few were founded, like Charlottesville Ballet in Charlottesville, Virginia, with the prioritization of the whole dancer in mind. Charlottesville Ballet co-founder, Sara Clayborne, describes the company as the “authentic exception” to her knowledge. Clayborne is heartened that some industry colleagues are slowly changing alongside DEAI conversations but shares that her students report back about the perpetuation of unhealthy industry norms, such as thin prioritization, after attending top summer intensives.

Many large schools and companies will be the first to offer a resource like a medical professional on staff but the last to make the investment of physical and mental health care a long-term prioritization. Clayborne asserts, “I don’t see the big companies changing for decades. I think that’s an ingrained leadership problem. Surface level change isn’t going to make huge impacts until leadership changes.” McGuire Gaines adds that “companies will do virtue signaling, often in the form of listing mental health professionals on staff who actually have zero presence or relationship to them.” McGuire Gaines was at a summer ballet intensive in 1997 when news broke that Boston Ballet dancer Heidi Guenther had died from eating disorder related

complications. The initial intensives that followed underwent “noticeable shifts” such as hosting lecture(s) led by mental health professionals or nutritionists. “But it felt then, and continues to feel, like many of these gestures are liability management” (McGuire). Spruill knows that some of the most prominent schools and companies have 70 plus years of work to undo. This is no excuse for shortsighted complacency. “It took us years to get to this place. It’s going to take us years to get back to a prior place or a brand new one.” Jenelle Drake is a psychologist with Children’s Hospital of the King’s Daughters (CHKD). She runs CHKD’s in-school partnership with GSA dancers. Both Drake and Clayborne are optimistic as they consider the future in the hands of rising generation, Generation Z. Generation Z “refers to the generation that was born between 1997-2012, following millennials” (Meola). It is through this present push by arts administrators for equitable employment and leadership opportunities that Generation Z will benefit.

Effectively communicating the availability of mental health support to school and company dancers is the oft overlooked second step. Even if/when leadership effectively communicates the availability of such support, its location should be a prompt, secondary consideration. Despite dancing with his school for 10 years, Josh Spell, Consulting Therapist at Pacific Northwest Ballet, only learned of the two wellness staff available to dancers at the time when he returned years later in his current role. Josh believes this is because “it wasn’t visible, it wasn’t normalized.” The NYSB dancer knows from experience with prior companies that if asking for help is not normalized and stigma persists, it is likely more impactful to offer off-site support services rather than an in-house counselor with a designated office.

II. INVESTMENT MODELS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN DANCE

While the established culture may have a stronghold on the majority of programs in schools and companies across the country, there are a few trailblazers redefining the role of physical and mental health services in dance through inventive programs that are striving to wholly prioritize dancer wellbeing. This group of trailblazers includes Charlottesville Ballet, Dance Institute of Washington, Minding the Gap in residence at Point Park University, Misty's Dance Unlimited, and Pacific Northwest Ballet. To capture the impact of these programs, leadership from each was interviewed to learn about their genesis, sustainability, struggles, and successes. A survey (See Appendix A) was also conducted to collect feedback from dancers and/or alumni regarding their experiences as dancers in the programs. The following section will highlight each program then share their respective survey results. The hope is that this study captures the benefits to dancers, and therefore the entire school or company when such a prioritization is made in an effort to call others across the industry –leaders, teachers, and arts administrators– to action.

1. Charlottesville Ballet (School & Company, Charlottesville, VA)

Charlottesville Ballet (CB), the only full-time professional dance company in Charlottesville, Virginia, was founded 15 years ago by Sara Clayborne and Emily Hartka. Clayborne and Hartka met at The Richmond Ballet after auditioning around the country. CB was founded with and remains guided by a unique mission focused on nurturing dancer wellness in a healthy, holistic environment. It has always been expected that this environment would apply to everyone “down to the janitors and choreographers and students,” says Clayborne. No other company at the time had a wellness-based mission at its forefront, at least from their estimation. CB was created “like a case study to see if a healthy company was possible” (Clayborne).

The first step taken towards that healthy company was the decision to remove the hiring requirements of professional ballet from the application process. While the established culture maintains a height/weight standard for ballet of 5'4''–5'6'' tall and between 90–110 pounds, CB refrains from collecting the weights and heights of their dancers. Clayborne describes these steps taken as “easy things.” The more challenging step in its inception was that CB started from nothing. There was no angel investor, so its founders recruited people “based on the heart of the organization” (Clayborne). This is how Dr. Heather Snyder, a podiatrist, first became CB’s pro-bono medical director after attending their gala. Dr. Snyder’s leadership has been instrumental, according to Clayborne. Beyond her own expertise, Dr. Snyder uses ties in the community to secure free medical services for company dancers such as x-rays, orthopedic references, and unlimited, free physical therapy sessions even in the off season. CB also partners with a local social worker who offers mental health sessions for dancers on a sliding scale. Despite all these investments towards building and sustaining a healthy company, more CB dancers take advantage of the available physical health care resources than the mental health ones. Clayborne believes providing access to the latter is important nonetheless, yet this demonstrates that not every dancer will take advantage of the mental health support offered to them.

Another step that CB has taken towards the prioritization of dancer wellness since their founding is the creation of a company handbook. Clayborne and Hartka were again instrumental in this administrative task. A pillar expectation stated in the handbook is that teachers and dancers alike are not permitted to talk negatively about their body or anyone else’s while in the studio. “You can have those feelings and express them in a safe space but not in front of students and peers,” says Clayborne. Similarly, all staff are asked to refrain from the use of the word ‘tummy’ when correcting students in class (Clayborne). Dance teachers are human and therefore

chock-full of their own insecurities. Spinner, the aforementioned dancer health, nutrition, and lifestyle coach, would commend CB on these decisions. In her coaching work, Spinner tells teachers to avoid body-related comments, including nutrition advice, of any kind with students. “Perhaps you may not have a positive body image of yourself. But as you work to improve your relationship with your own body, try not to transfer your struggles onto your dancers” (Spinner). For Trainee Program dancers, CB leadership also shares similar guidelines of their making with guardians and parents in an effort to reinforce the mentality at home. These expectations are of particular significance for Hartka, who suffered from bulimia and anorexia for 10 years and was about to quit dancing altogether prior to founding CB. While Clayborne and Hartka acknowledge that they cannot stop a dancer from similarly suffering, both feel compelled to do their part artistically and administratively to “help mitigate the problems.” Dancer contracts have always included language to make clear that CB is not a company that promotes eating disorders. Clayborne thinks this addition has an ongoing impact; she has never had to pull a dancer out for intensive eating disorder treatment. Some dancers have struggled over the years, but they made the choice to seek help (Clayborne).

Survey respondents included CB dancers and alumnae. All respondents shared positive experiences with the ballet and a comfort level with talking to a dance teacher or leader if a question or worry arose, among other affirmative feedback. When asked if CB teachers and leaders care about their physical and mental health, a current student said: “The teachers and leaders have shared their own struggles and stories. They are supportive and truly care about each dancer. They do not let us dance through injury and give us the tools to take care of our bodies and brains.” An alumna replied to the same prompt by sharing that teachers and leaders were understanding of her 1.5 hour one-way commute. They welcomed her if she was tardy and

permitted early departures when necessary. “They made it clear I came first, not their class. [...] Additionally, I was never the most flexible, and was never pushed to go too far beyond my limits in the name of getting the perfect form or line, or to be the perfect match with others I danced with. I still earned exciting roles in productions.” The student further reflects on being a part of broader conversations regarding dancer health. “Some company members came to CB following toxic careers, and this was always discussed fairly openly with students so that we knew what to be careful of and that we were valued as we are!”

Imagine where CB would be today if Clayborne and Hartka, its founders, leaders, and only arts administrators for a time, kept their holistic mission isolated to words on a website rather than taking swift action to prioritize it within their infrastructure. Staving off the established culture remains most difficult for the dance schools and companies that, unlike CB, have not made such a prioritization.

2. Dance Institute of Washington (School, Washington DC):

When Kahina Hayes first met with Fabian Barnes, the late founder of Dance Institute of Washington (DIW), the two had different priorities. Hayes had a vision for a progressive space to reimagine dance education; Barnes was solely focused on arts accessibility. DIW was in a vulnerable position at the time and needed to make significant changes to remain viable. A reality which seven years later, Hayes, now the executive director, regards as a blessing because Barnes likely felt there was nothing to lose. Hayes brought a new direction focused on holistic, trauma-informed dance education using an adaptable model. Today, DIW boasts a pre-professional school for dancers ages 2.5-18 and is organized into four divisions based on age. Each division has a regular programmatic element related to mental health. Ever the diligent arts administrator, Hayes begins by utilizing specific goal setting for guidance on program

prioritization, among other things. A goal like ‘solving the problem’ would be considered a nonstarter because it remains broad and unfocused. Hayes similarly advises others to avoid beginning with the services themselves. “Otherwise you’ll find every reason to invest every dollar you have in mental health.” Hayes adopted a logic model and theory of change. Using these tools, once DIW tried to achieve a specific outcome it became clear how to focus their energy. It was a time consuming but illuminating process. “You’ve got to understand what slice of the pie is yours. That’s where we started.”

DIW worked with a mindfulness specialist, a clinical therapist, and a child and family services specialist to construct these programs. The early division (ages 2.5-7) includes a monthly mindfulness space with parents or guardians while the middle division (ages 11-13) has Power Hour, an ongoing class with a curriculum informed by student development and challenges as dancers. Upper division (ages 14-18) students have Power Hour plus additional resources like an onsite clinical therapist who visits twice weekly and a cool down room which Hayes describes as “just a space dedicated to time away from the studio if needed.” While mental health is addressed differently with each division, Hayes has made sure that all of DIW’s program goals are rooted in authentic intentionality. She leads with a humility conducive for experimentation and admitting when a program is not working. There is something to be learned from any program, particularly the bad ones. A recent failed program with another DMV nonprofit taught Hayes and other DIW leadership that consistency and small group settings are necessary for students to develop trust, participate, and grow.

Another administrative achievement was the start of an alumni network over the years to ensure dancers continue to experience DIW as a community and resource long after graduation. A DIW alumna shared that she grew as a dancer and person while dancing at DIW and that

leadership cared about her physical and mental health while helping prepare her for the future/becoming an adult.

Arts administrators and educators are often mission-driven and can struggle in negotiating the regular presence of their left brain alongside their right brain. Hayes' thoughtful yet logically informed leadership at DIW demonstrates this balance is not only feasible but necessary to the healthy continuance of both fields.

3. Minding the Gap in residence at Point Park University (School/Conservatory, Pittsburgh, PA)

Kathleen McGuire Gaines founded the nonprofit Minding the Gap in 2018 after an extensive career as a dance journalist for top publications including *Pointe*, *Dance Magazine*, and *Dance Spirit*. McGuire Gaines' 2017 *Dance Magazine* article entitled *Why Are We Still So Bad At Addressing Dancers' Mental Health* recounting her experience as a former dancer went viral and ultimately became "one of the most read in the magazine's history." Disturbed by the article's resonating popularity plus the 899 responses to her survey via *Dance Magazine* on mental health in dance, McGuire Gaines left a leadership position in development to found Minding the Gap the following year. She is aided by the ongoing consultation of mental health experts Leigh A. Skvarla, PhD, and Brian T. Goonan, PhD. Together, they seek to "disrupt dancer culture to value the importance of mental health through advocacy, research, and eventually, resources and solutions" (Minding the Gap).

A recent partnership with the dance department at Point Park University (PPU) is one way in which the nonprofit is working to enact this vision. Minding the Gap and PPU just secured grant funding to extend their current partnership focused on creating a program to support the mental health of PPU dance students for another two years ("Point Park"). McGuire

Gaines and Dr. Colleen Hooper, key stakeholders in the first-of-its-kind partnership, were interviewed for this paper. McGuire Gaines spearheads partnership programming with support from Dr. Hooper, the PPU Chair of Dance as of August 2021. Dr. Hooper describes her role as an arts administrator as “making sure we have the systems and processes on our side to support this work.” These two leadership roles meet regularly to check-in on the effectiveness of the partnership; in one meeting it was determined that an entire class should be scrapped as it was doing more harm than good. McGuire Gaines finds that leadership in general can get defensive when receiving dancer feedback regarding school or company shortcomings. She recommends reminding them that dancers come from all across the country with every kind of education and training experience ranging from enriching to traumatic. This partnership has had buy-in from dance leadership at PPU since the beginning. Dr. Hooper’s predecessor Garfield Lemonius is responsible for initiating that first conversation with McGuire Gaines. He read the viral Dance Magazine article in 2017 and realized they were both based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The partnership holds personal significance for Lemonius, another former dancer turned arts administrator who witnessed the trauma that can come from the established culture firsthand. He vividly remembers the night he watched an ambulance drive away with one of his York University classmates after she fainted at a dance performance. Lemonius’ love for the industry is palpable yet he does not shy away from acknowledging its faults. “When we talk about a dance students’ health, our go-to is their physical well-being—what are we doing to take care of their bodies and make sure they are in proper physical condition? Which means, do they have the strength, flexibility and stamina to do the work we are asking for? —ignoring the fact that there is a larger issue there, and that is their mental health” (Ritzel). Dr. Hooper acknowledges that a conservatory setting like the PPU dance department is high-pressure; this remains a frequent

topic of conversation between her and Lemonius, who has since assumed a new leadership role as a dean for the university.

The mental health professionals charged with working with the PPU dance students are PPU doctoral students with no dance background. McGuire Gaines meets with them prior to their work with the students to provide context on the unique stressors of dance. “If that person isn’t literate in dance, help them become literate.” She shares her own traumatic experience in the established culture to “get the shock and awe out of the way.” The following is guidance McGuire Gaines suggests for programs looking to make positive change: 1) avoid dance references in popular culture as a means of connection 2) do not advise an action that is ignorant of a dancer’s daily regimen. “Don’t tell them to take a week off from dance, they won’t do it.” 3) educate yourself regarding a dancer’s regimen through humble dialogue with former and current members of the artform if they are willing. While the ideal remains having dancers work with mental health professionals who have a dance background, McGuire Gaines still thinks it helpful for them to see those without such backgrounds on occasion. These experiences can remind dancers of the uniqueness of their challenges and perspectives.

The PPU doctoral students are not the only regular mental health presence in the partnership. McGuire Gaines has three psychologists on her research team, each has experience with dance or is a former dancer. The year-to-year partnership structure consists of some skill-based sessions for dance students and separate ones for dance teachers on various topics related to dancer wellness. She recommends that every session include a mental health professional who specializes on the topic of that particular session, but a psychologist is also always present. This is what McGuire Gaines continues to do with the PPU partnership, though she acknowledges the privilege of her situation having a rolodex of experts to bring in from various stages in her career

(Gaines). Arts administrators can begin to address this conundrum for their school or company by familiarizing themselves with the experts and resources already inhabiting their communities.

The separate, ongoing education for both dancers and dance teachers is deliberate. Teachers and leadership are never in sessions with dancers. McGuire Gaines remarks that a level of deep, internal work is required with teachers, which at times may include recognizing that they themselves were in abusive situations. This is a necessary step for teachers to talk about the outdated practices in the room and work holistically, but not everyone is emotionally ready to do this. “You can’t help people who don’t want to be helped,” said McGuire Gaines when considering this resistance.

The partnership regularly administers surveys and then uses survey results to inform how the future is shaped. A general mental health survey was distributed to all 316 dancers in November 2020 at the beginning of the partnership. The clinical survey used 5 mental health measures and took an estimated 20 minutes to complete. 106 dancers took the survey; 78 of those 106 results were complete and used to aid leadership in identifying problems and creating an action plan. McGuire Gaines is cognizant that dancers and dance teachers have different challenges, so a concise session reply form goes out to every member of both groups following each session. Survey results are shared anonymously with all parties including dancers, teachers, and other leaders. She encourages others to make regular evaluation a habit for continuous learning and to avoid being prescriptive. A neutral party such as a company or school administrator with no ties to casting should be assigned survey distribution and collection (Gaines).

4. Misty's Dance Unlimited (School, Onalaska, Wisconsin)

In 1998, Misty Lown turned down a spot in a training program with The Ailey School to open her own studio after a transformative realization that the classroom had to be her stage. Today, Misty's Dance Unlimited (MDU) continues to operate in Onalaska, Wisconsin, for 24 years and counting. While Misty recognized that her background lacked the typical leadership requisite of a professional dance career, she did possess an unusual credential: a master's degree in education. Misty has chosen to build upon this credential by committing to a self-described lifelong journey to lead a pedagogically appropriate dance education. Individually, she is also now pursuing her PhD at Concordia University with a working thesis stating that safety training can enhance not hurt the dance industry (Lown).

While this commitment to education began with Misty, it is universally prioritized across the studio. MDU is the nation's only safety certifying organization for dance teachers through the expert assistance of Youth Protection Advocates in Dance (YPAD). Founded in 2012 by professional dancer Leslie Scott Zanovitch, YPAD "believes that when you know better, you do better. As a result, YPAD courses are evidence-based, educational courses with a trauma-informed approach for dance professionals and the dance industry as a whole" ("About YPAD"). Well before YPAD was acquired by Misty in 2019, she noticed it was an organization guided by doctors, therapists, educators, and youth specialists doing "first of its kind research" for a more holistic approach to dance. This prompted Misty to become a YPAD sponsor and member of their advisory panel. The 2019 acquisition came after further cultivating the relationship: she realized that YPAD's work was the missing piece to fill in the gaps at MDU. 270 dance locations that cumulatively engage 100,000 students weekly are YPAD certified at present (Lown).

Maya Angelou once remarked “do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Angelou’s words have remained a guiding principle for YPAD and MDU since the acquisition (Lown). Surveyed MDU alumnae felt comfortable talking to an MDU teacher or leader if they had a question or worry. Everybody additionally agreed it is important for dance leaders to care about the physical health and mental health of their dancers. When asked to share a lesson or message regarding their mental health care or physical health care that they will never forget from dancing at MDU, an alumna said the following: “My mental and physical health is way more important than my dancing. I am worth a lot more than my skills.”

5. Pacific Northwest Ballet (School & Company, Seattle, WA)

Francia Russell was Artistic Director of Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) and Director of Pacific Northwest Ballet School (PNBS) from 1977 until retirement in 2005 (“People: About PNB”). In the 1980’s Russell decided that advanced PNB dancers required more education on the aspects of support available to them. Toby Diamond, a consulting psychologist for company and school, was hired shortly thereafter. He remained in this role for about 30 years, reflects former PNBS dancer and current consulting therapist Joshua Spell, M.S.W. Spell was brought on after leading a 2019 seminar on body image that was attended by Diamond and Denise Bolstad, PNBS Managing Director.

The 2020-2021 season included two wellness offerings happening independent of one another: seminars led by Spell and mentorship sessions led by two PNB dancers. The mentorship sessions are the brainchild of these dancers and originated during the pandemic. At some point during this season, the two parties began collaborating on leadership of programming after realizing they were trying to achieve the same goals of determining what PNB dancers needed while assisting in their healing process, particularly as dancers experienced the pandemic. The

present 2021-2022 season maintained the seminars and mentorship of the previous season but under one umbrella. There are now 10 mentors, all PNB dancers representing different company ranks. The mentors engage with students in each of the 5 levels within PNBS. Once a month the following occurs: a seminar, the mentorship program, and a meeting between Spell and the mentors. “This approach models that the organization is cohesive. We all have a similar end goal and we want to collaborate,” says Spell. While unaware of the services available to him as a PNBS dancer years ago, Spell remains optimistic that others were aware of these services and utilized them. Spell’s optimism holds strong today when considering the development of the whole dancer despite the challenge of a fixed, annual budgetary line allotted for this purpose. “It’s a start and it’s really great that there’s a start but there’s so much more that’s needed.” Leadership just approved Spell’s request to increase his time from 62 to 96 hours annually. Demand continues to grow as dancers have begun utilizing the services more due to increased visibility. Spell regularly dialogues with arts administrator Kiyon Gaines. Gaines is the PNB Director of Company Operations. A frequent topic of conversation between the two is PNB’s ability to one day act as a role model for others seeking to create a culture prioritizing the whole dancer (Spell).

Current PNB dancers, including a principal, an apprentice, and a corps de ballet member responded to the survey. Every dancer felt comfortable talking to a PNB teacher or leader if they have a question or worry and that they are growing as dancers and people. “Thank you for giving mental health some attention through your studies. I think that good mental health and coaching is vital to any athlete performing at the level that is expected of us, and at PNB, there is plenty of room for improvement in this area” added a respondent.

Every individual surveyed across these schools and companies felt it important for dance leaders to care about the physical health and mental health of their dancers. There were relatedly commonalities in regarding teachers and leaders as approachable, feelings of undergoing personal and professional growth, and an expressed enjoyment while dancing at their respective institutions. The leaders interviewed are all already working to prioritize mental health in their schools and companies, yet each one continues to educate themselves, ask questions, and dialogue with dancers, arts administrators, and other leaders at home and across the industry. These shared character traits will continue to positively distinguish them from other industry colleagues.

III. CALL TO ACTION

The absence of mental health care in schools and companies tells dancers that dance leadership perceives them as disposable. What other consequences must ensue for leadership to grasp the urgency of this absence? How many more dancers must depart the profession, lose sight of themselves, or die? The established culture has been given free rein to groom generations of dancers to suffer silently for too long, it needs to stop today.

Dance leadership must invest in the physical and mental health care of dancers to transform the established culture into one that prioritizes the well-being of dancers. Each of the aforementioned leaders went about this prioritization in different ways. From mission statement to company handbook, Charlottesville Ballet created an organizational infrastructure at its founding focused on dancer wellbeing. Instigated by new leadership, Dance Institute of Washington partnered with a variety of experts to construct developmentally appropriate programs for students, each of which includes a mental health component. While Pacific Northwest Ballet is redefining its wellness commitment with the goal of nurturing the whole

dancer through dancer-to-dancer mentorship and monthly seminars. There is no ‘silver bullet’ when it comes to an investment of this kind. It is a multi-disciplinary commitment involving ongoing education, communication between team and leadership, expert assistance, experimentation, evaluation, and most importantly: humility. Humility to hear and act upon feedback from dancers if/when such a prioritization is attempted. Lest a leader forget that dancers are the lifeblood of the organization, the human beings whose livelihoods are on the line.

Monetary constraints will remain a reality and while this may require sacrifice, creativity, or both, every interviewee agreed that meaningful investment can be made by dance leadership regardless of budget size. As Clayborne suggests, “You’re investing in the people and the people are the product. Otherwise, it’s barres and mirrors and a bouncy floor.” Dance leadership can begin this investment by familiarizing themselves with the existing resources and expertise already at home in their communities. They should talk about mental health in dance, and their goals to actualize this investment, with community members, dancers, colleagues, and other industry leaders. A 2019 Ohio University study affirmed that goal sharing with the right people holds the goal setter more accountable and increases motivation (Stieg). Respecting the level of expertise required to best support dancer mental health, leaders must work early and often with mental health professionals throughout this investment. It is possible, even likely that after meaningful investment there will still be dancers who never utilize the mental health resources now available to them. Some may perceive the utilization of these resources as a weakness or a hindrance to their creativity. This is unfortunate but understandable given the still influential stranglehold of the established culture across the artform.

It is difficult but not impossible to pressure the dance leaders for whom this is not a priority. One way to apply pressure is conducting and publishing more research on the benefits

of these investments rather than just the need. Further pressure can be applied as more funders commit to supporting robust programs like the Minding the Gap residence at Point Park University. Funders today are not only the driving support of such programs, but they are also driving the professionals, like researchers, at the back of the line to do more. What once seemed daunting or unrealistic becomes feasible, even normalized as 1) new program structures are created encouraging others to follow suit, 2) industry leaders better educate themselves and learn from colleagues who ‘get it’ rather than perceiving them as competitors and 3) dancers, allies, and individuals with a platform, keep talking about mental health. This will lead to an increased public awareness as already demonstrated by leaders like Simon Biles, Naomi Osaka, and Mary Cain.

Each of these American athletes is, or once was, one of the best competitors in their respective sports. Biles, a decorated gymnast, withdrew from competition due to mental health struggles during the 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo. Public backlash ensued following her decision, nevertheless Biles stood her ground and continues to use her experiences as an opportunity to better advocate for mental health support. Osaka has been similarly vocal since withdrawing from Wimbledon last year to care for her mental health despite being “the No.2-ranked player in the world” (Silva). Cain was a track and field phenom before joining the Nike Oregon Project. She published her story detailing the “win-at-all-costs culture” imposed by coaches and how it dismantled her through The New York Times in 2019 (Cain). Today, Cain is the CEO and Founder of Atalanta NY, a mentorship program partnering girls with professional female runners. “Social media is encouraging people to present the perfect journey, but there’s power in being vocal about the difficulty of the profession and the tools we use to navigate the industry,” adds Benjamin.

Could the prioritization of mental health in dance reduce injury rates while recruiting and retaining talent? Quite possibly, longer term the potential impact of this prioritization is largely unknown and arguably limitless. Even those companies and schools profiled for this paper are either in their first years of investment or in their first years of tracking the impact of that investment. Over time, the dance industry could transform into an artform full of dancers who trust that their leadership sees and cares for them as whole persons. Until then, leadership ought to remember that dancers talk and word of mouth can be the most powerful recruiter.

Select schools and companies, such as those described in this paper, are already models of good investment. Their work, paired with Generation Z's open attitude towards mental health, creates a bright light that has the potential to redirect the dance industry forward. But as Kahina Hayes, Dance Institute of Washington's Executive Director reflects, there are years of work to be done before any one of these investments can be called the best investment. A handful of the schools and companies interviewed understand this and have already begun their own longer-term processes. When other dance leaders choose to join them and move forward, it is necessary to remember the difference between pressure and shame. "Shame is at direct odds with learning and progress. It's admittedly a slower approach but we believe that the alternative is a quick burn that rarely leads to change. The path is messier, longitudinal, and relational," concludes Misty Lown. Mistakes are inevitable along any such path to true change. Leadership should not let these realities deter them from beginning today.

Appendix A

Survey Questions Distributed to Dancers and Alumni

I enjoyed my time at [NAME OF COMPANY OR SCHOOL]. (Agree/Unsure/Disagree)

I felt comfortable talking to a teacher or leader if I had a question or worry.

(Agree/Unsure/Disagree)

I grew as a dancer and person while I was dancing at [NAME OF COMPANY OR SCHOOL].

(Agree/Unsure/Disagree)

[NAME OF COMPANY OR SCHOOL] helped prepare me for my future/becoming an adult.

(Agree/Unsure/Disagree)

Do you feel it's important for dance leaders to care about the mental health and physical health of their dancers? (Yes/No)

Do you feel the teachers and leaders cared about your mental and physical health? If so, why?

(Fill in the Blank)

What is one lesson or message regarding your mental or physical health that you'll never forget from your years dancing at [NAME OF COMPANY OR SCHOOL]? (Fill in the Blank)

Notes

1. A personal interview with a New York State Ballet ballet dancer was conducted by phone on October 29th, 2021, and the dancer wishes to remain anonymous.

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