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The Case for Adding Club Involvement to Your Undergraduate Dance Education

Participating in an “extra” like Bare Bones Dance Theater at UCI can help you prepare for the future by enhancing your skills

by Simon Harrison

Do you know what you are going to do after you graduate? Do you know the career options available to you in the field of dance? Do you feel prepared? If you were involved with Bare Bones Dance Theater, a student-run organization at the University of California, Irvine, you would be more likely to confidently say, “Yes!”

Bare Bones Dance Theater was founded in 1987 by a group of students who wanted more opportunities to display their choreographic work, as there were not enough of them at the time. Through the years, Bare Bones has become a distinguished non-profit organization, attracting increasingly large audiences and reaching more communities. It has expanded its mission to not only produce an annual dance concert featuring choreography by UC Irvine undergraduates of various majors, but also to produce affordable workshops taught by professional Los Angeles-based dance companies open to the community, which bring in students from surrounding universities, creating an intercollegiate dance community. There is also an active outreach initiative, in which local K-12 students are invited to attend a free performance and talkback. They also take workshops in a university setting and are offered scholarships to participate in summer dance programs.

So who runs all of this? A committee comprised of about 14 UC Irvine undergraduates produces Bare Bones’ events, with support from a faculty advisor from the dance department. The students learn the ins and outs of running a 501(c)3 organization firsthand, and manage all aspects of an arts organization including marketing, development, and event planning initiatives. Traditionally two students take the reigns co-chairing the committee, splitting the duties as an artistic director and an executive director.

I am incredibly proud to have co-chaired this committee and co-directed this organization for the past two academic years, and have learned invaluable skills in this capacity. I did not and could not have gained these skills from the classroom and dance major curriculum, and the experience has shaped my personal interests and career path I wish to pursue. Sure, I opted to take the “Arts Management” course as one of the elective class options for the dance major, because I was interested in administrative and management jobs in the arts after graduation. It was insightful, and I was able to pick the brains of guest speakers who work in the field, but it did not give me the hands-on experience that I can cite when I’m in the interview room for a job.

Undergraduate students often are afraid that their extra-curricular involvement is simply “extra” and expendable. They worry about still doing well academically. Well, listen up! We all know the stereotype that dance majors have difficulty finding steady income when pursuing a career in the performing arts after graduation, so it is common for performing artists to supplement their income with another job. In order to stay in the field, to stay true to their passion, I know many alumni who hold other jobs in the arts, as an administrative artist. It is also common for company members to wear multiple hats within the same small company, performing duties as a dancer and as an administrator. So shouldn’t our educational institution

prepare us for the 21st century workplace? Unfortunately, it seems to just brush the surface on the areas and skills that are important for dancers to have in order to pay the bills. Getting involved in a dance club is not just for social fun; it is a beneficial complement to an undergraduate dance degree.

Backed up by decades of research, Alexander W. Astin wrote about his “student involvement theory” in the *Journal of College Student Development*. He found that “the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development.” Astin defines “student involvement” as “the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel.”

I can speak from my own experience, that the more responsibilities I held in the organization, the more skills I learned. I reached out to alumni to see how they valued their experience with Bare Bones and how it has applied to the job force, to make sure it’s not just me who feels this way. They filled out an online survey posted on Bare Bones’ social media pages, to submit testimonials and memories to be shared at the 30th anniversary celebration event. The following are select submissions:

Michelle Maasz Brouwer, class of 2014, currently lives in Germany managing administration for two dance studios and social media for a finance firm, as well as teaching ballet classes. She says Bare Bones “was the best extracurricular undergrad investment for its community and utility. I met so many amazing artists and dancers, across all genres, and got to contribute to this inclusive campus community (it wasn’t exclusively a dance major bubble). As part of the committee, I learned invaluable skills including graphic design, social media marketing, event planning, team building, fundraising and budgeting, navigating a university bureaucracy, networking...the list goes on.”

Kirsten Barron Kinney, class of 1997, currently lives in Seattle, Washington as a choreographer, teaching artist, and dancer. She admitted that the organization met “a lot of resistance from the dance department” during her time, but the experience taught her “to overcome obstacles, and that you can do whatever you set your mind to.”

Megan Bowen, class of 2016, currently lives in New York City and teaches dance, fits pointe shoes, and dances in small projects. She says co-chairing Bare Bones “taught me to work and gave me skill sets that helped prepare me for the ‘real world’ of a dancer post graduation. Most of my jobs that I have had or currently have were extremely impressed with my resume and skill sets that I had gained from Bare Bones Dance Theater.”

Ginny Ngo, class of 2014, is currently dancing with DanceWorks Chicago. She says, “Learning to work with your colleagues is such an important part of being a professional dancer. Through Bare Bones, I developed the skills and the maturity to collaborate with my peers and friends in a professional setting. We learned to bounce ideas off of each other and make compromises.” Anne Carr, class of 2014, is currently based in New York City, dancing with several modern companies and writing for online dance magazines. She says, “Bare Bones really taught me what it takes to run an arts non-profit, which has been so useful post-graduation!” Susy Davis-Coleman, class of 1988, is one of the three founders of Bare Bones. She says they “are so proud of the past and present choreographers and dancers that have made this passion project thrive.”

As someone who has held a leadership role in the organization and mentored peers in navigating the management side of the dance world, I have witnessed firsthand the growth in my

colleagues from this experience. I have seen some individuals shine—whether it is excelling in poster design and marketing, or coordinating detailed logistics of a fundraising dinner event. And others, not so much. But that's OK! It is obvious to me when someone is disengaged during a committee board meeting, scrolling through their Instagram feed watching dance videos. I know in that moment that this disengaged person aspires to be elsewhere—probably on the stage like the dancers on her screen. She might not be listening to me, but I know I have taught her something—that this kind of work is not for her. And that is important!

College is the time to try new things, and what better way to do that than to apply for a position in a club—what you put into your education is what you get out of it. If you hate what you're doing, no problem, try something else. In any situation, you will gain new skills that can be applied to any position you end up pursuing. Being a member of the Bare Bones Dance Theater committee means developing critical 21st century skills that employers look for. Don't be afraid—invest time and energy into learning more about yourself—it's the most important thing you can learn about.

Works Cited

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Simon Harrison graduated from the University of California, Irvine in 2017 with a B.F.A. in Dance Performance, B.F.A. in Dance Choreography, and B.A. in Education Sciences. He was the Co-Director of Bare Bones Dance Theater 2015-2017.
