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How do you navigate being a full-time dance major and wanting a career in the commercial dance industry? Can you do both at the same time?

by Sabrina Huang

Before becoming a dance major at the University of California, Irvine, I often questioned how I could simultaneously build a name in the commercial dance industry. Both were huge priorities of mine. Three years later after earning my bachelor's degree, now as a first year MFA student, I found myself navigating through the same question once again. Can you do both at the same time?

To be a commercial industry dancer, you need to take industry, attend auditions, and it's highly recommended you sign with an agency. All of these tools allow dancers to build useful connections in the way they need to in order to gain exposure. Nowadays, showing up to an open-call audition is not enough, because many auditions prioritize signed-dancers before anything else. And if you're in college, you can't always make "outside" jobs a priority.

On the other hand, there are many reasons a dancer may want to attend a college dance program. It could be a "backup plan," because having a degree prepares you for many jobs you might want, full- or part-time. Or, a young dancer might want to develop more before joining a company or making it to Broadway. While the options are endless, I joined a college dance program to further experience the concert dance world through higher education. In my own undergraduate years, I began to develop a further interest in choreography, teaching, and screendance, all of which then became why I further pursued my studies in graduate school. But the question still remains: how can I combine my interest in my studies and my desire to make a name in the commercial dance industry? Here are some clues I've gathered along the way.

First, it helps to map out your schedule ahead of time to make the most of the time you have. This requires a lot of planning ahead. In my undergraduate years, I mapped out my 4-year school schedule and even managed to switch it to a 3-year plan, once I learned about the graduate program. Having a clear plan helped me to see what other opportunities I could take on that would not interfere with requirements to graduate.

Being in a college dance program gave me the space and time to workshop my ideas, so I wasn't just focused on visibility or validation from an audience. I spent late nights and even overnights in the studio creating simply for myself, because that is when it did not interfere with my schedule. I then continued to build more on my social media presence for fun with choreography, and by the end of my second year, my choreography slowly started to take off within the industry. I started to receive opportunities to teach my choreography at well-known open dance spaces in Southern California, such as Offstage-by GRV and SnowGlobe. I knew this was an opportunity I could take because these classes would be taught in the evening.

By the time my 3rd year came around, I wanted to continue to build more connections by traveling as a convention teacher choreographer. From there, I started judging for dance competitions on assigned weekends. It would be false to say that good time management was the only solution for everything. It's one of the necessities to have in order to combine goals, but I learned through the years that you also have to be willing to take risks and trusting the process.

Even now, as a graduate student, I'm still juggling my priorities. I strive to create more strong connections with choreographers through taking industry dance classes and finally signed with an agency, but I can only go to auditions when it aligns with my academic schedule. As I continue to grow my audience as a choreographer, I recently began teaching at another well-known space, Playground LA owned by Kenny Wormald and Robin Antin. You see, even now I am still in the process of working through my career goals, and throughout it has mainly shifted to being a choreographer in the commercial dance industry.

At the same time, I am able to actively pursue my academic interests in choreography and screendance at my university and receive further credentials in being a professor in the near-future, since that is another interest of mine. Balancing both worlds can be difficult because it does come with sacrifices. Even though I know I have a commitment to school, of course there will be times when I would like to attend a dance audition for performing at the half-time show. It continues to be important to be able to adapt quickly and plan accordingly.

More examples of balancing work and a university schedule can be seen through interviews with a few undergraduate seniors currently at University of California, Irvine. I selected these people since they are either interested or already in the commercial dance industry. I asked them, "Do you think you can attend a dance major program at a university and create a name for yourself in the dance industry? If so, how was your personal experience?"

Kira Montgomery stated: Upon entering a program I thought would be largely modern- and ballet-based, I can't deny that I had doubts about how I would continue my training in commercial styles... In the past 4 years at UCI, I have found several ways to feel connected to the dance industry while pursuing academics and immersing myself in training at UCI. Outside of UCI Dance, I danced and choreographed for [the hip hop crew] Kaba Modern, which allowed me to make connections with alumni involved in the industry throughout Southern California and more broadly within the hip hop community of Orange County..."

For Mia Simone Balancio: "It is about the possible opportunities that could open up with the other dancers surrounding you. I feel like most dancers go into college with the same mindset and want to further advance their name in the industry, so the way we can do both is having the chance to network with each other and show up to the opportunities, whether that's in or out of school. From my own experience, being a part of the UCI Spirit Squad Dance Team, I was able to train in something that I really wanted to do outside of the dance major. Joining other dance groups and staying involved was definitely a big part of staying involved and keeping up with future dance goals."

There will always be sacrifices and adjustments made when being a dance major, but

the choice is up to you with how involved you would like to be in the industry, in school, or both. Ask yourself: what risks are worth taking and how will you balance them? When will you know to take risk or sacrifice? What kind of artist do you want to become?



Sabrina Huang is a Los Angeles-based versatile dancer, choreographer, educator, and dance adjudicator who teaches at open-class spaces including Playground LA and Offstage. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Dance at the University of California, Irvine, continuing to develop her work as a performer and choreographer.

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