

National Association of Schools of Dance

ADVISORY

The Transitions of Professional Dancers to Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs

Introduction

The natures of dance and dancing normally produce a focus on the professional performing career in the late adolescent and early adult years. Many professional dancers delay their entry into undergraduate or graduate programs so that they may devote their full attention to the maintenance and development of their artistry. At a certain point in many dancers' lives, gaining an undergraduate and/or graduate degree becomes attractive. The following points are intended to help dancers ask themselves good questions about the transition from the profession to degree study.

Assistance in Considering Transition

Consider these issues and questions before applying for degree programs.

- What advice can you gain from respected colleagues, mentors, and teachers about transition centers, career counseling services, and educational options?
- What recommendations do you obtain from your trusted sources, faculty, administrators, and other representatives at undergraduate and graduate programs?
- What professional help can you obtain from AGMA, Dance USA, and other organizations concerned specifically with the well-being of professional dancers?
- What resources and connections does your company or institution have that would be useful in answering the specific questions that you have?
- Does your professional company have a specific transition relationship with one or more institutions of higher education? Whether the particular transition pattern offered is immediately attractive to you or not, it would be useful to understand how the transition program works.
- Since transitions often depend on how the performing career ends, what can you do to be somewhat prepared for various eventualities, ranging from a retirement plan that works perfectly to conditions that require an abrupt change?

Goals

Consider these issues and questions when planning the steps to reach your ultimate goal.

- To what extent does your present planning include setting goals following the completion of your professional performing career?

- Do future plans and goals include dance?
- If so, is dance central, or is it the content of work in another field, such as design, arts administration, medicine, philanthropy, and so forth?
- Do your goals include teaching dance? If so, at what levels and in what circumstances would you like to teach?
- Are your next goals centered on a field or career other than dance? How far removed would you like to be from your professional performance career?
- To what extent is the establishment of new goals your choice or caused by circumstances beyond your control?
- How does further education relate to your goals?

Selecting an Undergraduate or Graduate Program

With some exceptions, selecting a degree program involves the same issues irrespective of the age or experience of the applicant. Dancers seeking to enter undergraduate or graduate programs in dance are encouraged to review the NASD papers in this series entitled “Advisory: Transitions from High School to Undergraduate Degree Programs” and “Advisory: Transitions from Undergraduate Programs or Professional Companies to Graduate Programs.” These advisories contain detailed information and questions regarding the nature of programs, admission procedures, finances, and so forth.

Dancers seeking degrees in fields other than dance should review college and graduate school guides at the beginning of their search. A sample list of such guides and resources are provided at the end of this paper. A great deal of information may be found online. The NASD list of schools is an important resource.

In addition to these possibilities, please consider the following questions:

- If you are seeking to enter an undergraduate program, what are the institution’s policies regarding the acceptance and placement in various types of undergraduate programs for adults with professional experience?
- What types of credit will be transferred from other institutions where it has been earned or granted for life experiences?
- To what extent will demonstrations of knowledge or skill or proficiency cause required course work to be waived?
- How can you arrange a site visit that best informs you about the nature of the institution and its programs, the learning environment, and specific compatibility with your goals?
- What knowledge and skill will you have to gain or refresh in order to begin and complete the program successfully? Are there prerequisites that you need to fulfill?
- How long will the program take, in your specific case? Are the time requirements compatible with your needs?
- How much will the degree program cost? If applicable, how much debt will you incur?

- To what extent are you able to assure yourself that there will be a good working relationship between you and your teachers? To what extent will your professional achievements be appropriately respected?
- To what extent do you believe that you will enjoy pursuing a particular degree? Are the detailed requirements regarding content, process, and evaluation consistent with your interests, goals, and ways of working?

Preparing in Advance to Make this Transition

Professional dancers are encouraged to collect documentation during their career that would create a thorough portfolio to help them in such matters as degree program admission, life experience credit, and documentation potentially useful to researchers and analysts.

Professional dancers are encouraged to start saving money as early as possible if they plan a transition from their career that includes pursuing a degree program. An alternative is to accept the reality of loans or grants to pay for the costs of further education. Professional dancers should decide the amount of debt they are willing to accept.

Professional dancers are encouraged to gain experiences that give them an understanding of what regular undergraduate or graduate degree study will be like. The transition from the professional world is usually more successful if the dancer has a sincere interest in a new kind of day-to-day experience that enhances what has already been accomplished during their professional performance career.

Investigate opportunities for starting a degree or gaining undergraduate or graduate credits through distance learning. If you are looking at specific undergraduate or graduate programs, be sure to contact them about the acceptability of any credits you earn through distance learning.

Being a professional dancer requires many attributes that are critical for success in collegiate and graduate level education, and in many professions beyond dance. Dancers should look forward to this transition with confidence that they can succeed and flourish during and after a degree program.