

# Dance Education

## CAN ENLIVEN DANCE DEPARTMENTS

by Cynthia Mwenja

In the 80s, I attended a small, private liberal arts college in Alabama, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Dance. The curriculum was fairly standard for a performance-focused program: we had ballet class every day, modern, jazz, and folk dance twice a week each, and we typically presented a major production each semester.







The program assumed that all of the students would become professional ballet dancers, even though most program graduates became dance teachers instead. The department ended up being completely eliminated a few years ago, when I was still teaching dance full time.

This move to close the program has made other alums and me feel cut off and disconnected from our alma mater. I feel as if I do not have an undergraduate institution anymore.

### How a Dance Department May Have Been Preserved

While the department was closed for a variety of institutional reasons, I do wonder—as a graduate who taught dance for years—if the degree program could have instead been preserved by the addition of a dance education track.

College dance program graduates, then and now, typically have four career choices: performer, choreographer, studio owner, or dance teacher.

While all of these careers are options, dance educator Doug Risner writes that most dance graduates do become dance teachers. Despite these realities, most dance programs today still solely focus, as mine did, on preparing students for the career path of performance.

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A dance education degree which aligns with state education standards can help to fill this gap. In such programs, students learn not only dance content but also education standards and approaches. Everyone benefits—students who will go on to perform gain the skills they need, and those who will become teachers learn how to teach in addition to content specific to various dance styles.

Dance teacher and researcher Dr. Lisa Gibbs explained to me that students in such programs finish their degrees with experience in performance craft but little information about effective dance teaching strategies. In other words, students in these programs learn the least about the career they are most likely to have.

Gibbs discusses the misalignment between performance-focused college dance programs and the requirements for dance teachers in K-12

schools. She says that the 2001 version of the “No Child Left Behind” Act (NCLB) moved dance from the category of physical education, establishing it as an art and part of the core academic curriculum.

The NCLB requires “highly qualified teachers” to teach academics, and a “highly qualified” dance educator is one with a dance education degree. Sadly, every private university in Alabama with a dance program had closed it by 2010, and the few state universities with

dance programs have largely continued to focus on developing performers. Alabama reflects the national trend; most schools offering dance programs focus on performance skills.

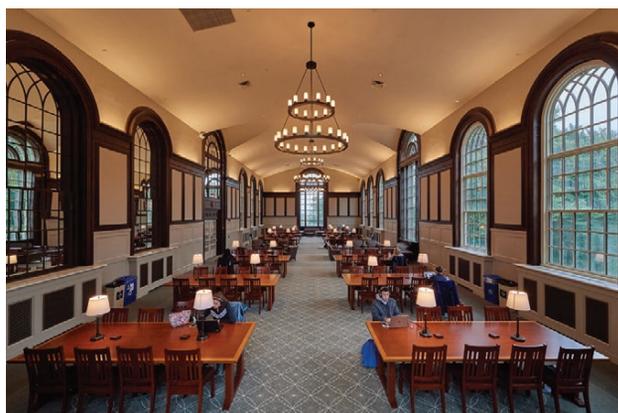
Like many other states, Alabama has only one institution of higher education offering the dance education degree required of K-12 dance educators in the state’s public schools. In fact, about a third of US states have no college or university dance education degree program at all.

### Dance Education Degrees

According to the Dance Colleges website, the schools that have dance education degree programs are spread fairly evenly around the nation, with almost half of the top ranked dance education program are at private institutions.

The schools that do offer dance education degrees tend to roll them together in a combined drama and dance education program. As Gibbs points out in her 2019 article, “Dance Education Certification in Alabama,” however, “If the arts are nationally seen as core academic subjects for public school education, dance faculty [and

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their institutions] have an opportunity, perhaps even a responsibility, to offer an additional career track for their undergraduate students.”

One reason that dance departments don't offer dance education programs is that many dancers and dance program administrators dismiss dance education as an inferior, less prestigious degree option.

Dance educators, however, contribute to the academic successes that the arts as a whole can provide to students at all levels of schooling. The 2014 South Arts study points out that arts education has been shown to strengthen a wide variety of seemingly unrelated issues: graduation and attendance rates, academic success, and test scores.

In defining “the arts” as academic, though, the NCLB and related state standards allow any art— theater, music, visual arts, or dance—to fulfill the requirement. Perhaps because dance education degrees—and thus, certified dance educators—are sparse in many parts of the nation, K-12 schools often choose to include music or visual arts in their programs rather than dance.



Photo courtesy of Hofstra University



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In our conversation, Gibbs pointed out that Montgomery County, Alabama, lies directly between both Alabama and Mississippi's only dance education degree programs. Perhaps not coincidentally, Montgomery County also employs the highest number of dance educators in the state.

More dance education programs nationwide could bolster the presence of dance educators alongside their music and visual arts colleagues in K-12 schools nationwide.

Just as dance educators benefit their students academically, physically, and culturally, dance education programs benefit their graduates, too.

When dance programs assume their graduates will become performers, those graduates aren't prepared for the whole array of jobs they might do after graduation, and they often lack a clear path to employment.

A dance education degree which aligns with state education standards can help to fill this gap. In such programs, students learn not only dance content but also education standards and approaches. Everyone benefits—students who will go on to perform gain the skills they need, and those who will become teachers learn how to teach in addition to content specific to various dance styles.

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Hofstra's Dance Education program is just one of the tracks available in the Dance Department; students can also choose to pursue the more performance-oriented BFA or BA tracks instead. By offering this variety of degree options, Hofstra has developed a vibrant and strong dance program.

### Training Students to Excel in Multiple Settings

Students with dance education degrees have the qualifications to teach in all settings, including private studios, institutions of higher education, and K-12 schools. Gibbs outlines the coursework for such degree programs: not only dance technique, dance history, and choreography, but also "classroom management, lesson planning...and knowledge of the body."

One way for dance departments to provide dance education programming is to partner with the education department at their institution.

For one example, Hofstra University employs this strategy for their dance education degree; their undergraduates are prepared to be teachers, dancers, and choreographers working with students of all ages and skill levels, both within private studios and public schools.

The Dance Education program coordinates with Hofstra's Education Department, requiring specific education courses as part of the degree plan. The combined requirements ensure that the program's graduates can become certified dance educators in the state's K-12 schools.

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### Expanding a Program Rather Than Closing a Department

In the future, I hope that colleges and universities which may be considering how to strengthen a struggling dance program might follow Hofstra's model, expanding the degree programs rather than closing the department.

That might not have been possible in the case of my alma mater, but I would feel more connected to and proud of my school if it had been able to take this route.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.



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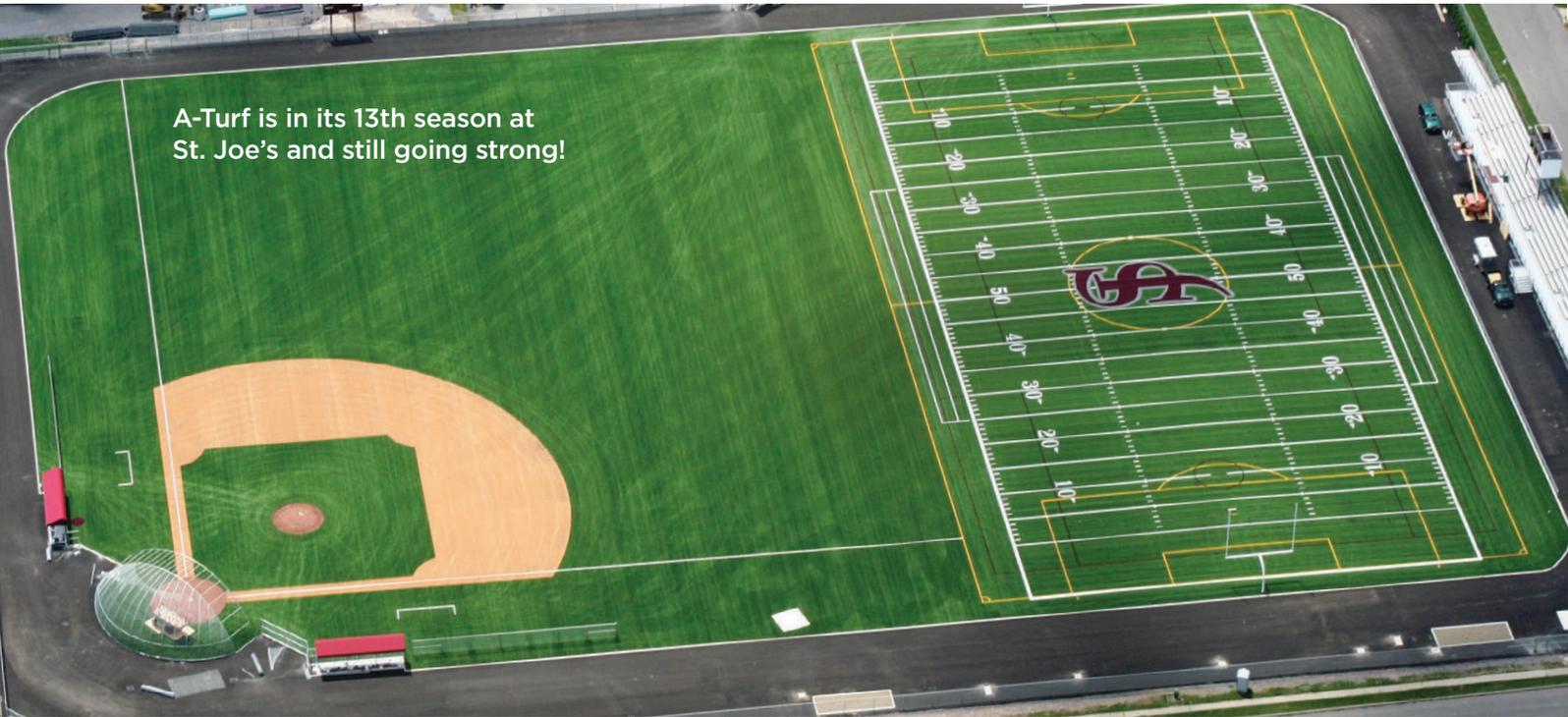
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