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National College Choreography Initiative Artist-College Collaboration: Issues, Trends and Vision

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Executive Summary

CHANGE IS AFOOT, say numerous dance artists and faculty from colleges around the country. Indeed, it appears that we are entering a new era; not since the 1940s have colleges been in a position of such importance to the dance field. And, many appear up for the challenge. Dance/USA is pleased to address the developments taking place between choreographers and dance departments, and the ways in which being on the cusp of such profound change prompts us to look toward the future of our field.

Over the past two years, Dance/USA has convened a series of national forums to engage professional artists and college faculty in conversations about their efforts to collaborate for the benefit of students and the professional field. These forums were an outgrowth of the National College Choreography Initiative (NCCI), a program designed to foster appreciation for American dance creativity. NCCI provides funding to colleges to support the creation and reconstruction of American dances that are performed by students for audiences in communities across the nation. In its two rounds of funding, NCCI has made 85 awards and supported 63 professional artists who have worked in 69 colleges in every state in the country.

The concept for the forums has emerged out of one of the many unanticipated outcomes of NCCI's first round: As residencies took place last year, they sparked dialogue at the local and national levels about a host of issues and needs for both artists and colleges. As this dialogue grew, it became apparent that, apart from a brief evaluative discussion that may occur at the end of a residency, artists, students and college faculty rarely had the opportunity to reflect on their joint efforts, let alone to plan or consider their impact on the long-term health of the art form. Although these issues may have been part of faculty meetings for years, it has been understandably difficult for departments to independently formulate responses to the wave of needs, let alone to keep abreast of what is happening on other campuses. It seemed appropriate, then, for Dance/USA to take on the role of facilitator for this national conversation.

The purpose of the semi-annual forums is to provide a regular and more formalized mechanism for discussion. Beginning at Dance/USA's 2002 Roundtable in Miami and continuing at subsequent meetings in 2003 in New Orleans and Denver, the forums are designed to capture impressions of the collaborations that are taking place on campuses across the country. The goals are to explore and articulate major issues, as well as to lay the groundwork for future action. Most importantly, the forums are uncovering the potential to foster even stronger and more mutually beneficial collaborations in the future.

The enthusiasm for this discourse, coupled with the willingness to put difficult issues on the table, has raised the intensity of the discussion to a new level. Fueled by overall changes and issues in the dance field that are much larger than NCCI, the program's timing and circumstances have provided an opportune moment for reflection and action, as well as a lens through which the field could be viewed. The full report documents the nature of the rich discussion that has begun to unfold. It aims to present the variety of viewpoints that exist among artists and faculty members across the country—including much consensus and some dissent. It takes into account the trends that have affected artist-college collaborations, shares observations about what has been working and makes suggestions for the future. It is our hope that considering these issues will not only encourage discussion but may help to catalyze field-wide action.

State of the Field: Traditions of the Past and Priorities for the Future

Our university dance departments are at a crucial point where change seems not only possible, but inevitable. Shifts in ways of thinking and working are beginning to reverberate throughout the field. Universities strive to strike a balance between the traditional and the progressive, the established and the cutting edge—or, more specifically, the decisions about which artists and aesthetics are selected and what gets taught. Added to these conflicting priorities is the pressure to play a role in the national landscape. There is a growing expectation for colleges to provide a place for practicing artists whose support

structures have largely fallen away over the past decade. The sum total is an academic landscape that may be unsure of its priorities and future directions.

A Reverberation of National Shifts. The shifts that are happening at the college level may be a delayed reaction to two fundamental changes at the national level. First, since the mid 1990s, the traditional infrastructure of support for the professional dance field, particularly independent artists and small companies, has been largely dismantled. With the loss of national arts funding, an increasing concern about government support of controversial art work emerged, which trickled down to the state level. Eventually artists suffered a huge blow with the elimination of the NEA's Individual Artist Fellowships, one that attacked the core of the creative process. Attention was diverted from the artists and their work, and towards the effect of their projects on the community. Second, the universities are one of the remaining sources of support for new work. The leadership of some performing facilities on campus feel a sense of obligation to support the creative arts, especially in an economy where other financial resources are disappearing.

The Role of the Artist on Campus: Process, Product or Pedagogy? Though the advantages of supporting new work are apparent to artists and the field, the benefits for the university are not as clear-cut. Support for the performing arts has proven to be an asset to universities because they bring visibility and recognition to campus. One advantage of commissions is that they allow artists the relative freedom, in the form of time and rehearsal space, to explore their creative process and develop work—a rare commodity, given the array of cutbacks just described.

But bringing artists into the university's bureaucracy can be complicated, given the pressures on artists to fulfill so many roles, from creator to teacher to community organizer. The artist's role is shaped by the faculty's approach to education and familiarity with the national scene—which ultimately influences how artists are selected, who selects them, and by what criteria. Colleges may long for national visibility and recognition as among the “best” in the field, but “the extent to which the administrators and university deans understand the national field, and what best serves it, can vary,” said one forum participant. Unclear roles and expectations can be exacerbated by the divide in expectations between the university's performing arts center, which focuses on generating audiences, and the department, which focuses on student outcomes.

In what appears to be a growing trend, artists are on campus in stints that range from short-term residencies to adjunct contracts to associate professorships to tenure track positions. One major motivation has been that jobs in academia provide a relative sense of stability in the form of a salary and health care—resources that are hard to come by when living on a freelancer's wages in major cities. The paradox is that, upon entering the university system, the realities of the university may hinder artists' ability to actually use these resources: the artist's academic time is overbooked, the studio space is reserved for classes, and artists are not allowed to guest teach or tour without hiring a substitute and having their paycheck docked. While university employment does offer certain securities, non-tenured positions such as adjuncts have benefits but also drawbacks. Adjuncts can bring fresh and varied aesthetic perspectives, and are not encumbered by the responsibilities that consume much of full-time faculty's energy. However, contracts are often temporary and rarely come with benefits.

Mission and Curriculum

Foremost among concerns was the dichotomy of educating the next generation of dancers for *their* future, rather than for the world of dance that came to fruition in the past. “What are students being prepared *for*?” was the guiding question asked by many forum participants.

Over the past few decades, with the advent of postmodernism and multi-culturalism, the influx of diverse dance forms and influences has complicated the choices, and sometimes sparked controversy, about which artists and approaches are included in dance studies. The field of dance education has also expanded to mirror the many roles students may take on, not just as dancers, teachers and choreographers, but also as scholars, writers, interdisciplinary artists, historians, arts administrators, digital artists, musicians, technical directors and filmmakers. In an effort to ensure that students don't get just a taste of many forms, without depth in any of them, course offerings have left the resources of departments stretched to the limits as they try to expose their students to every facet of the field. Layered on top of their own all-encompassing curricula are influences by outside areas of study as diverse as semiotics, literary theory, popular culture, anthropology and cultural studies. As one faculty member exclaimed, “We are cowering from the monster of redoing curriculum. We keep adding things on, and it is an unbelievable load for faculty. [At our college] we had to say ‘Stop it! We cannot work any harder or longer.’”

There was a strong sense in discussions that new models for educating dancers in the university system may be emerging. The topic that sparked the most controversy was the teaching of composition and choreography. Participants shunned the top-down method of teaching craft that encourages emulation over original expression, and product over process, and instead called for new ways to encourage students to find their own voice. Decisions about curriculum have led to debate about what the mission of dance departments should be, and made visible the lack of clarity under which faculty regularly operate. Part of the

problem is that a curriculum renovation of this magnitude requires a degree of creative thinking that may be threatening to at least some members of faculty and administration.

Bridging the Gap with the Professional World

Students. Forum participants expressed concern about students who think they will instantly be creating work in the real world upon leaving college. When this doesn't automatically happen, they get discouraged and overwhelmed, especially in a society where the cost of living and expectations of lifestyle are both high. Given that students can't rely on a stable dance income after college, but are still faced with persistent student loans, many don't feel free to pursue dance as a major. Faculty can help students adjust their expectations by bringing in professional artists as mentors.

Faculty. Although allowing faculty members to remain creative and active in the professional dance world is a great benefit to the university's curriculum, many colleges undervalue the importance of their professors' remaining active as artists. While colleges want faculty members to be productive and visible (if not famous), these academician/artists are loaded down with so many other responsibilities that service ends up being the major part of their workload. A number of those present advocated for release time that would keep faculty involved and creating work, allowing them space to grow and, just as important, new information to bring back to their students.

Models and Ideas. The models and ideas generated at the forums include new courses about current realities, alumni talks to advise students about life as an artist, programs that immerse students in New York City, internships with arts organizations in major dance centers, participation in conferences held by the Association of Arts Presenters and Dance/USA, provision of space to professional artists for research, field-wide dialogue via the Internet and longer-term guest artist residencies.

Elements of Successful Residencies: Lessons Learned from Artists and Faculty

Throughout the forums as well as NCCI residencies and related discussions, it became increasingly clear that those responsible for collaborations would benefit from guidance from those who had successfully implemented similar projects. While some of the concepts about such collaboration may seem simple to the more sophisticated presenters or seasoned artists, they simply aren't being put into practice and warrant serious consideration.

Advance Planning and Communication. A number of forum participants encouraged planning (preferably face-to-face) that brings together the faculty and artist prior to embarking on any residency. As evidenced by the results of the first round of NCCI funding, communication and planning are central to success and often made residencies surpass expectations. SUNY Brockport's Dance Department requires advance face-to-face planning with each artist in order to develop a partnership and discuss residency goals with all who will be involved, including student representatives, faculty, production director, and the artist or company manager. When the artist does arrive, how are time, resources and people allocated to ensure that their talents are used wisely, and their interests honored?

The Value of Time. Another of the most important ingredients of successful residencies is allowing enough time for exchange to happen and relationships to build among the artist, students and faculty, which lays the most basic foundation for opening up a dialogue. Several credited the structure of NCCI with creating this openness in both the university's schedule and the students' lives because it required that universities make time for artists to get to know the students and involve the surrounding community in residency events.

Leadership. A vital component in any residency is the leadership and investment of a person on faculty who is committed to ensuring its success. Such faculty members serve as chief promoters and "translators" to various departments and people, be they faculty, students or community partners. From comments and NCCI final reports, it became apparent that the success of residencies comes down to the steadfast commitment of an individual. For example, Jawole Zollar credits much of the success of her experience at Five College Dance Department to Peggy Schwartz, former Chair of the department, and the kind of tone she set for all involved.

Student Preparation and Involvement. Since the students will spend the lion's share of time with the artist and hopefully be the beneficiaries of the artist's expertise, they need to be prepared in advance. If the artist works in an unfamiliar style or form of dance, students may require extra groundwork in order to feel competent and comfortable. Dance forms such as contact improvisation can cause discomfort for some students who have never experienced the kind of intimate physical interaction and trust that the form demands.

Recommendations

Throughout discussions, forum participants encouraged reciprocity, where artists, faculty and students can contribute and learn from each other. But, engaging in this kind of relationship charges universities to, as one faculty member said, “step up and see themselves not as adjunct but as central to the field” which will give them “a kind of relevance” they haven’t had in a long time. In the following recommendations and guidelines, participants suggested ways to support innovation and collaboration.

Consider and pursue ways to support longer-term artist residencies that enhance relationships among faculty, students and guests. Having an artist in residence for a semester, or possibly one or two years, would raise the level of discourse. Extended residencies could expand the degree and range of contact from the kind of superficial experience that is centered around a performance date, to a more meaningful one that experiments, asks questions, poses solutions, and has the potential to advance the curriculum.

Explore, and consider establishing policies about, artist-college collaborations. NCCI could convene artists to discuss alternative approaches to contracts with colleges and release time for artists who are employed at universities so they can research and make work. One suggestion was to remain open to hiring artists who may not have advanced degrees, but offer different and equally valuable credentials. Another issue is the over-reliance on adjunct faculty, who are not provided sufficient employment benefits. These topics could also be addressed by other organizations that deal with dance in higher education, such as NASD or ACDF.

Increase communication among faculty, as well as with artists, about working in universities. More communication will allow artists to affect student learning and curriculum. A number of ideas were offered to increase communication: encourage discussion between NCCI artists and faculty who will be working together on residencies; establish mentorships for students to learn from professional artists about managing a professional career; encourage discussions about curriculum and mission; address the topic of artist residencies at convenings such as at NASD and NDEO; and, if possible, develop a clearinghouse of information about residencies, which would include details about college facilities and needs, as well as artists’ skills and ideas.

Increase recognition about the NCCI’s efforts and accomplishments and the issues contained in this report. National recognition helps dramatically in obtaining financial support and visibility at the local level. The credibility associated with a national program also attracts the attention and endorsement of college administration.

Create our own measures of success that can raise the visibility for collaboration. As a field, our charge is to define and articulate such measures and how they differ from other departments. Although our measures of success may demand the same degree of excellence as chemistry or literature, they may be unclear to those outside the field. As someone who has designed curriculum stated, “We need to educate [the outside world] about how being invited to perform at [Danspace Project at] St. Mark’s, or setting your choreography on ABT, is as equal to us as publishing in a journal of nuclear physics.”

Explore ways that NCCI can foster a dance legacy for the next generation. Both artists and universities have the power to influence another important part of the dance field—the children who are the potential dancers, teachers and choreographers, as well as future audience members, funders and advocates. Recommendations were made for finding ways that NCCI can become increasingly connected with the community, beyond the university’s borders. By requiring outreach as a part of residencies, NCCI has already encouraged such connections.

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