



Fostering Unity in the Field

Voices from Higher Education

Donna Davenport & Stephen Ursprung

To cite this article: Donna Davenport & Stephen Ursprung (2020) Fostering Unity in the Field, Journal of Dance Education, 20:2, 107-108, DOI: [10.1080/15290824.2020.1754096](https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2020.1754096)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2020.1754096>



Published online: 05 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 71



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Fostering Unity in the Field

Voices from Higher Education

**Donna Davenport, EdD and
Stephen Ursprung, MFA**
Dance 2050 Organizing
Committee Members

From time to time, the National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) invites voices from the field to provide insight on issues that affect dance education. For this issue, members of the Dance 2050 Think Tank will answer questions about the role that higher education can play in uniting the sectors of the field. Two dance professors representing different genders, races, ages, and positions in the field respond to the same three questions below. The first responses are from Stephen Ursprung, MFA, Assistant Professor of Dance, and the second replies are from Donna Davenport, EdD, Professor of Dance.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR CURRENTLY PLAY IN UNITING THE FIELD OF DANCE EDUCATION?

Voice 1.

The traditional trajectory of dance in higher education has not supported a unified field, with many programs focusing on the pathway to the binary of professional practice or critical theory. What this fails to encompass, however, is the critical need for better pedagogical practices in our field. Almost all dancers find themselves teaching at some point in their careers, and there is a deeply rooted viewpoint that good dancers are inherently good teachers. While many dancers are inherently excellent educators, this is not universally true. And, more importantly, not everyone should be expected to know how to teach. We rely on passing down teaching skills through osmosis, an effective yet unreliable methodology. Therefore, higher education has had its eye on a binary that excludes the critical third pillar of dance education: pedagogy.

On an individual level, those of us in higher education see the obvious value in pedagogical inquiry. It is what drives us in our own teaching. On the institutional level, however, there is a fundamental lack of emphasis on sharing these skills with our students. We, as educators, have the potential to provide unity in the dance field at large. Many programs do include pedagogical inquiry in their curricular mapping; they serve, however, as exceptions to the rule.

Voice 2.

Currently, I believe that the higher education sector plays little to no role in uniting the diverse subfields of dance education. While post-graduate academic degrees often earn faculty and staff the privilege of working in institutions of “higher” learning, I believe it may be difficult for these trained dance professionals to feel anything but under-appreciated and overworked. Due to the time and energy that most dance faculty and staff spend fighting battles at work, they are tired and myopic. They rail against false dualism—brain versus body; stereotypical hierarchies—physics at the top and dance on the bottom; elitist academic standards—PhDs are better than MFAs; and general ignorance—dance is anti-intellectual. Like all people struggling on

the margins, they are fatigued by the effort to feel respected, by grubbing for essential resources, and by the desire to be treated the same as faculty in other disciplines.

This scenario, however, is sheer hypocrisy: while faculty and staff fight for labor equity and against academic discrimination, they may think of themselves as more highly credentialed than their dance counterparts in K-12 and private studios. These faculty and staff from the Ivory Tower, therefore, end up using the same systemic bias (they reject) to measure the educational worth of the “other” sectors. This analysis is not novel; it’s a common irony. The human condition. The bullied bully. Thankfully, humanity also celebrates empathy and critical thought, the ability to become aware of human frailties and to mitigate them. In dance, we can do better. No doubt, we dancers are smart enough to notice the pattern and to stop it.

When dance faculty and staff think about the purpose of their jobs, they realize they would be nowhere without dance students: they would have no body-minds to train, no dancers to choreograph, no majors or minors, no budding dance scholars. Quite simply, without dance programs for children in schools and after schools, without competitions and dance battles, there would be no “dance in higher education” as we know it. Universities could offer beginning-level dance classes and courses for students to appreciate dance as art in “general education.” But imagine, if dance in higher education were limited to teaching only those students whose bodies and minds knew almost nothing about dance. That is not a future anyone reading this journal would want to envision.

WHAT ROLE CAN HIGHER EDUCATION PLAY IN UNITING THE FIELD IN THE FUTURE?

Voice 1.

Higher education has the opportunity to directly shape pedagogical shifts in our field. From an internal perspective, training dancers to teach provides dance programs the opportunity to have a direct impact on the preparedness of their future students. From a more altruistic perspective, this provides the opportunity to build community—a community of educators in the K-12 and private sectors that have allies in higher education; a community of performers that are better equipped to support themselves through teaching master classes; a community of administrators who can better program educational programs for arts institutions; a community of professional dancers and dance professionals that see opportunity in collaboration with those outside of their own siloed work.

Voice 2.

In the future, dance educators might accept the fortune of their access to rigorous education, their privilege to earn more than one college degree, and their freedom to choose their artistic/scholarly identity. And then they might also accept their reliance on other dance professions. Every dance sector is inter-reliant and inter-related. We all need one another.

WHAT STEPS CAN DANCE 2050 TAKE TO FOSTER A MORE UNITED FIELD?

Voice 1.

Dance 2050 needs to serve as a platform for sharing best practices in embedding pedagogical practices in all sectors of the field of dance. We need to provide resources and opportunities for those to engage who have been unable to contribute to the Dance 2050 work done thus far. What are the questions we are not asking? What are the strengths we are looking past that already exist in our field?

We must also recognize that we are not inventing new ways of thinking—rather, we are finding better ways to communicate and share our successes. We need to look outside of the walls of higher education and recognize that all dance educators are valuable resources that we must share in order to strengthen our field. We have a decentralized body of knowledge in our field that we must unify in order to move beyond our current paradigm.

Voice 2.

To make progress, I believe we could change the subtitle of Dance 2050 to include all sectors of dance education. All dance educators who care about equity and inclusion—who teach along a continuum from preschool to elders, from disabled to able-bodied—are in need of opportunities to dialogue, to understand one another, to extend empathy, to share stories, and to reach beyond differences to move the field forward. National and state dance education conferences are opportunities to foster this interaction among dance sectors. A conference theme could encourage all members of the organization to think about it: How are all sectors of dance education inter-reliant? How might we learn to appreciate one another’s interdependent roles in the field? While higher education provides a pathway to various careers in dance, equally important careers—instructors, choreographers, and studio owners—train the young dancers that fall in love with dancing and dedicate hours each week to follow their dreams.