

American Modern Dance Is a Pyramid Scheme

By Sarah Anne Austin

There's no money in being a dancemaker — except to train new ones.

Rosalynde LeBlanc Loo did everything right.

After getting her BFA from SUNY Purchase, a well-regarded dance program, she went on to dance with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project, and freelanced with renowned choreographers John Jasperse, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Larry Keigwin, and others. But about ten years ago, [LeBlanc found herself hoping](#) that her likeness on a bottle of wine, or scoring a gig in a Broadway show, would be the miraculous way to get more money in her checking account.

LeBlanc's story is not unique. Making a living as an American dancer and choreographer today is a fantasy. By this, I mean it's a fantasy to think a person can make enough money to afford a place to live, keep the lights on, have enough to eat, and cover transportation costs solely by creating and performing dances.

Or, as [Ken Tabachnick, deputy dean of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, puts it](#), “The heart of the matter is that we expect to be able to earn a reasonable living through our art, but the current environment makes this an unrealistic expectation except for a very select few.”

According to a [recent study](#) [PDF] by BFAMFAPhD, 2 million arts graduates in the United States have bachelor's degrees in the visual and performing arts, though fewer than 10 percent make enough money to live as working artists. Most arts graduates work in non-arts fields — the ubiquitous “day job” that they are encouraged, rightly, not to quit, especially given the cost of an arts degree.

The [current average published yearly](#) tuition and fees for a college degree ranges from \$8,655 as an in-state student at a public four-year university to \$29,056 at a private four-year university. The recently graduated class of 2014 has [an average student loan debt of \\$33,000](#) for all majors.

And there are more expenses on top tuition for dance students. A summer job? Forget it. To make connections, get seen by future employers (a term used very loosely), and keep dance technique up to standard, students can attend American Dance Festival (2014 tuition: \$1,990, room \$990), Bates Dance Festival (2014 full-time tuition: \$1,350, a shared room and meals: \$1,250) or any number of other summer workshops aimed at college dancers. You could argue that these expenses are a necessary investment, that these experiences improve technique, and

that they foster connections. But out of hundreds of students who attend these programs, anecdotal evidence confirms that only a few will be contacted for an opportunity to audition for or dance with a choreographer.

And what if that happens? What if a dancer gets asked to work for a choreographer? Essentially, it's one freelance job that hopefully leads to another. Dancing for a company full-time is a relic of the past; most modern and contemporary "companies" today are a loose collection of artists paid a flat fee per project and, if they're lucky, paid for their work and time in rehearsal. Dancers cobble together income from a performance gig here, a teaching residency there, a few days of teaching a body-awareness or fitness class (athletic training, yoga, Pilates — jobs that require their own specialized training and certification, which must be paid for), topped off by a weekend of nannying.

These shrinking opportunities for dancers and choreographers to get paid for their work are one example of the overall contraction of the modern dance field. [Funding for the arts struggles to rebound after the recession](#). For dance, specifically, the field is getting smaller, with fewer opportunities to work professionally. Lois Welk, former executive director of the now-closed Dance/UP in Philadelphia (a branch of Dance/USA), noted that sources of money for general operating costs are "[few and far between](#)." The Merce Cunningham Dance Company folded after its founder's death. [Dance New Amsterdam filed for bankruptcy and closed](#) after 30 years, and [Gibney Dance took over the space](#). Although we should celebrate that the space is still used for dance, the smaller number of gatekeepers is concerning.

Continuing the contraction in the field are more alignments of artists and institutions. Dance Theater Workshop and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company [combined their organizations in 2010](#) and formed New York Live Arts. Earlier this year, [Twyla Tharp joined the Joyce Theater](#) as artist-in-residence more than 10 years after disbanding her own company. Even the [ultra-successful Trey McIntyre Dance Project](#) closed shop this year.

These are successful choreographers by any definition. They won Tony Awards and Emmy Awards and received prestigious grants. Why would they align with another institution (which they will then have to report to), or quit altogether?

Because running a company is *hard*. You're not just a choreographer -- you have to be or hire a company manager, lawyer, accountant, janitor, technical director, IT director, chief fundraiser, and general jack-or-jill of all trades. Given these burdens, it's easy to get burned out, especially if you have to hold down a day job to pay your living expenses. Having a [fiscal sponsorship](#) — whether you're Jones at New York Live Arts or an independent artist sponsored by a group like Fractured Atlas — takes a little of that burden off your shoulders. But with no health care

coverage, no retirement plan, and no job security, the romance of being a starving artist can wear thin. Thus we've seen many choreographers begin looking for even bigger institutions where they can take shelter.

Institutions like colleges and universities, which come with a cadre of dancers -- the tuition-paying students hungry for opportunities to work with choreographers..

Higher education was always a haven for modern dance, from the 1950s when Merce Cunningham was forming his company at [Black Mountain College](#) to today with [William Forsythe joining University of Southern California](#). Choreographers-turned-professors receive (in theory) departmental support, free labor in the form of students rehearsing and performing their works, and academic and artistic freedom to create work in a supportive environment.

Unlike opportunities in modern dance, the American university system is growing rapidly. [Tuition doubled over the past two decades](#), no doubt in order to compensate impressive [university presidents](#) and [renovate and construct buildings and stadiums to attract students](#). Departments have to attract students to their programs, so they hire and promote star faculty to prove to the administration that they deserve attention and funding.

For dance departments, that means giving students the opportunity to work with top choreographers. More and more established choreographers are signing on as full-time faculty in the university system: Bebe Miller (The Ohio State University), Sara Pearson & Patrik Widrig (University of Maryland College Park), Tere O'Connor (University of Illinois), Suzanne Farrell and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (Florida State University), and David Rousseve (University of California Los Angeles).

It's hard to say no to an office, subsidized health care, and a TIAA-CREF retirement plan. If you're lucky enough to get those benefits, you're doing far better than most artists in the dance field.

But these are difficult --- almost [impossible](#) --- jobs to get, and tenure and full-time positions are dwindling with universities [choosing to hire adjunct professors as full-time professors retire](#). And these aren't easy jobs. They are overwhelming and can be downright [deplorable](#), especially for adjunct professors (the working conditions of adjunct professors is a whole other ball of wax I won't get into here). There is bureaucracy, red tape, endless committee meetings, demanding students (and sometimes parents), and piles of letters of recommendations and grants to write. The days are very full. These jobs are time-consuming and don't leave much opportunity for time in the studio to allow for the creative process to take hold.

What does it say about the conditions professional dancers and choreographers in the United States have to endure that so many established, well-respected, award-winning choreographers are clamoring to join the ranks of tenured faculty? It says that they are tired of the rat race. It says that at least all of the work, meetings, and rehearsals are compensated, making the work worth it. At least as a tenured faculty member you (hopefully) get a desk, a phone, and reliable WiFi, along with use of a studio. At least money goes into your bank account in regular amounts at regular intervals, and you can stop living Kickstarter check to Kickstarter check.

Ironically, there's no better time to be a dance student in higher education. The trouble is that with a degree in hand there's no where to go but back into the system. If, that is, you can swing it.

So, if opportunities in American modern dance are disappearing, and if being a tenured faculty member at a university is the only stable job available for dancers and choreographers, and having this job depends on being able to attract students who train so they can realize the only stable job available is as a tenured faculty member at a university, yet those jobs are also [disappearing](#), does this make American modern dance a pyramid scheme — defined by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission as a situation in which “participants attempt to make money solely by recruiting new participants into the program”?

Of course, there are exceptions. Kyle Abraham has found success as an independent choreographer, making and touring work all over the world. However, a glance at his website shows that seven out of ten of his upcoming performances are presented at institutions of higher education. Even if he is not directly employed by a university, he and his company still benefit from their existence, and from the audiences that include dance students. Abraham is also a 2013 MacArthur Fellow, which includes a no-strings-attached \$625,000 stipend. Ballet experiences its own [challenges](#) and [successes](#) as well, but those points are outside the scope of this article.

But, so what if modern dance is a pyramid scheme based in the American university system? Many other disciplines (science, medicine) survive, thrive, and give back to the world as a result of having the structure and support of academia. Ground-breaking medical and scientific discoveries happen at universities, which happen to use students as research assistants, lab assistants, and even subjects, giving them education and experience to continue working in the field. Having the structure and resources of a large institution means more dance artists can make work, and they have a community to see their work.

However, I'd argue that society in general benefits more from, say, medical discoveries than it does from a dance being made. The effect and reach are greater -- one could say the audience for

new drugs and therapies is far bigger. Also, those who study in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) earn [more money](#), meaning they can actually pay back the student loans that covered their education costs. And these fields do not *solely* depend on the university system to survive -- STEM and other graduates can take jobs in private industry and government, jobs that *actually exist*.

The big deal, or the “so what?” is that dance programs are taking money from students to train them for jobs that do not exist, except within the small and highly competitive arena of higher education.

A [New York Observer article](#) about Gibney Dance closes with its founder, Gina Gibney, asking a community forum, “How are we going to build a new audience?” She continued, “It’s not enough to say what artists need in a performance venue — you also have to ask what audiences need.”

No one had an answer to her question, because no one was educated on it before. Dance in higher education is about *your* body, about *your* work, about *your* thoughts about the field, not figuring out how to get *other* people to see what you make. The audience is built-in at the university level, other students and faculty will come see your work. Students need to see performances for classes, faculty, staff, friends and family will come.

And that’s the problem -- the audience *only* exists in that community, replaced from year to year with a new freshmen class. Arts attendance is [decreasing](#). What’s happening? Why do seniors not go from paper-writing students to ticket-buying audiences? Has viewing modern dance become such an academic obligation that it’s no longer a leisure activity?

With the strongest voices in American modern dance being locked in higher education, I’m concerned that only a few elite voices are being amplified, and only those lucky enough to afford the ever-increasing cost of higher education are able to see and participate in modern dance (and then stop once they graduate). A bigger concern is what will happen to modern dance, and its audience, if the system collapses? That probably won’t happen, but what if universities faced the challenge of developing audiences head-on?

University dance programs should include classes in audience-ship and philanthropy. Not only should dance students learn how to get other people to see their shows and donate money, but also learn how to be a dedicated audience member and supporter of dance after graduation. Have students research and decide what kind of work, choreographers, and presenters they want to support, and have them report back. Tell us what it’s like five or ten years after graduation: how difficult is it to make time to see a performance when you’re working a full-time job and have

young children, especially when it's not a class assignment ? Otherwise, for the majority of graduates, life will get in the way and more pressing matters of money, family, and job will take priority.

Dance program faculty also need to be honest with incoming students. Most dance graduates won't dance professionally for a living and make enough to pay their bills. Most dance graduate students will not become full-time tenured professors at a major university. The bigger duty for students is to figure out how dance, and the study of its technique, theory, creative process, and history, fits in with their lives and goals. The effects I feel, everyday, from studying dance echo what writer [Sarah Vowell says about her time at Montana State University](#):

But I would like to point out that my perfectly ordinary education, received in public schools and a land grant university, is not merely the foundation on which I make a living. My education made my life. In a sometimes ugly world, my schooling opened a trap door to a bottomless pit of beauty — to Walt Whitman and Louis Armstrong and Frank Lloyd Wright, to the old movies and old masters that have been my constant companions in my unalienable pursuit of happiness.

University dance programs have such an advantage when it comes to building and growing audiences for the performing arts. It's time they stop training dancers for careers that don't exist, and start training them to be effective ambassadors of the field. Nothing bad will happen if we keep dancing and congratulating ourselves inside siloed ivory towers. But think about what could happen if university dance program graduates had the tools and talent to show the world what we do and make.

Rosalynd LeBlanc Loo, by the way, did find a way out of being a starving artist. [She is now an assistant professor of dance at Loyola Marymount University](#) in [location].

Special thanks to [Sarah Levitt](#), [Sydney Skybetter](#), and [Lisa Traiger](#) for their help conceiving and writing this article.

Sarah Anne Austin graduated from the University of Maryland in 2008. She works in the private sector and also serves on the board of directors of Dance Exchange. Sarah Anne lives in Baltimore, Md.