

WELLNESS PROGRAMS IN PRE-PROFESSIONAL BALLET SCHOOLS BY ELIZABETH SULLIVAN

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From the Green Room: Dance/USA's e-Journal

Introducing Wellness Programs in Pre-Professional Ballet Schools in the United States -- Part 1
November 30, 2010 · By Elizabeth Sullivan

From the nine-year old girl who puts on ballet slippers for the first time to the soloist at an elite ballet company, physical, emotional and mental demands are placed on dancers training for a career in ballet. The traditional approach to training ballet dancers has been effective in turning out highly skilled practitioners of a difficult art, but only at great cost to the dancers themselves. A consistent lack of interest in helping dancers cope with the demands of the training they undergo has led to a startlingly high rate of physical, emotional, and mental difficulties among ballet students.

The past few decades have seen the emergence of a growing concern about the physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of ballet students. Recently, a number of professional ballet schools have created programs designed to help ensure the health of their dancers. Wellness has been interpreted by most dance practitioners as a more holistic approach to dance training. Rather than focusing solely on the body, many dance practitioners have begun to move toward a multi-disciplinary approach to training. Wellness has been interpreted by most dance practitioners as a more holistic approach to dance training. Rather than focusing solely on the body, many dance practitioners have begun to move toward a multi-disciplinary approach to training. This approach often includes attention to proper nutrition and rest, injury prevention and treatment, and mental health issues.

Dancer Wellness Research

Despite the creation of wellness programs at a number of professional ballet schools in the past decade, and their obvious importance, to date no one has studied those programs as a group. In an effort to learn about the programs, I interviewed directors and administrators from seven prestigious dance schools in the United States, then created a case study on each school's wellness offerings. The schools included were The University of North Carolina School of the Arts (NCSA), The School of American Ballet (SAB), The Boston Ballet Center for Dance Education (BBCDE), The Ailey School, The Joffrey School, The San Francisco Ballet School (SFB), and The Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School (JKO) at American Ballet Theatre. The case studies shed light on what wellness looks like in practice at these schools.

Wellness Program Components

The most thorough wellness programs have three main components:

1. Injury Prevention and Treatment: Prevention takes the form of pre-season screenings to discover old injuries and weaknesses that could develop into injuries under the daily stresses of professional training; prevention may also include lectures on anatomy and seminars about common injuries and about strengthening regimes. Whenever possible, treatment for injuries is entrusted to medical professionals with prior experience in dealing with dancers.
2. Nutrition: A nutritionist works with students both in groups and individually and addresses the physical demands of ballet training on the developing body and how to fuel the body for optimal performance, as well as how to cope with a culture that demands thinness.
3. Mental Health Prevention and Treatment: Prevention takes the form of seminars that address the occupational stresses of dancing, eating disorders, and body image issues, as well as encouraging peer support and verbal expression of dancers' experiences.

These components are strengthened by teacher education and when physical therapists, nutritionists, and psychologists work out of the school itself. This close proximity of medical professionals and paraprofessionals and a professional training program facilitates communication and helps build trust, which in turn improves the efficacy of wellness programs. In addition to teacher training, other steps can be taken by a school's administration to help. (See Part 2 on Thursday for recommendations on how to build an effective wellness program in your school or company.)

Elizabeth Sullivan started dancing at age eight in Albany, N.Y. She spent her high school years at the North Carolina School of the Arts where she majored in classical ballet and her summers training at pre-professional ballet schools including San Francisco Ballet School, Boston Ballet School, Kirov Academy in Washington, D.C., and the Hungarian National Ballet Academy in Budapest. At 19, Sullivan began dancing with the Cleveland/San Jose Ballet as an apprentice. In her second and third years with the company, she danced soloist and principal roles before leaving for the Boston Ballet in 1995. After two years in Boston, Sullivan matriculated at Dartmouth College where she majored in Classical Archaeology. Equipped with her B.A., Sullivan moved to Italy where she lived for six years and eventually ran Dartmouth College's study abroad programs in Rome. In 2007, she returned to the U.S. to earn a Master's degree in arts administration at Columbia University. While at Columbia, Sullivan interned at The Joyce Theatre and American Ballet Theatre (ABT). She is currently being certified as a health and wellness coach through the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York City and is developing a wellness curriculum for dancers. She plans to help young dancers in training achieve their maximum potential as artists and individuals through a balanced approach to their health.

Material from "The Introduction of Wellness Programs in Pre-Professional Ballet Schools in the United States," written and submitted for completion of the M.A. degree in Arts Administration at Teachers College, Columbia University on February 2, 2009, by Elizabeth Sullivan.