

Dreams die when arts funding disappears

Without enough support for dancers from all backgrounds, will we ever get to see the next Misty Copeland?

by Dora Kao Cheng

For many aspiring dancers, the path to a professional career is unfortunately accompanied by financial obstacles, with access to proper education and training often remaining out of reach. If you are a dancer reading this, you may already understand what I mean. If you are not, allow me to break it down for you: tuition at a conservatory or professional school can range from thousands to ten of thousands of dollars; specialty shoes can cost a lot, with a pair of pointe shoes costing around \$100 (dancers may go through several pairs in a month); and summer intensives can cost up to \$3000 or more. On top of that, expenses such as room and board may apply if you are studying away from home. And this does not include other overlooked expenses such as gas, food, studio fees, competition fees, examination fees, costumes, and airfare.

From my own experience, it cost roughly \$10,000 each year to support my dance education—a significant financial barrier for many families. This is where arts funding plays a pivotal role, acting as a bridge that helps overcome this barrier and ensures that talented dancers from diverse financial backgrounds can pursue their passion. The need for sufficient arts funding is crucial, not just for accessibility, but to nurture professionals. Scholarships and reduced fees ensure that any talented dancer has the support they need, so they can offer innovative choreographic ideas and performances to the dance community.

There is an urgent, ongoing funding issue in the United States' arts sector, which poses a significant risk of losing young, talented dancers whose valuable contributions to the creative community remain untapped and undiscovered. A 2016 survey identified funding as the biggest challenge facing the arts in America, with 37% of the respondents citing it as the top concern (McLennan). When comparing arts funding in the U.S. to that in European countries, the discrepancies alert us to a significant gap in support. In the U.S., there is an estimated £3.8 or \$5 USD per capita allocated to the arts. In contrast, European countries such as Finland receive £59.2 per capita and the UK receives £16.6 per capita (McCaughey). A study of dropout rates in the United Kingdom revealed that lack of passion is the main reason for student dropout in dance, not financial burden (Walker et al.). How wonderful would it be if lack of passion were always the issue rather than funding!

This shortage of arts funding is reflected in the lack of accessibility to dance in the American education system, especially in areas of poverty where many students may never have the opportunity to encounter the arts. In fact, 59% of high-poverty elementary schools do not have an art room, and dance has “all but disappeared” from the curriculum (O’ Brien). Thus, these children may never know about dance and the possibility of building a career out of it, much less experience nurturing in the field. Adequate funding should be defined as the kind that covers individualized training, mentorship, and resources needed to nurture a dancer’s full potential and development.

In order for a dancer to improve and reach their full potential, equal opportunities and access to quality education must be prioritized. Aspiring dancers should have the means to afford conservatory or professional school tuition, along with other necessary resources such as shoes, uniforms, and equipment. When discussing quality education in “The Dancer’s Dilemma: Is Attending Two Studios the Path to Improvement?” the author suggests that attending two studios can lead to greater improvement, as it provides diverse perspectives, increased difficulty, and exposure to a wider range of techniques (Rose). In addition to tuition, top-rated schools or conservatories usually come with additional expenses like room and boarding, which many students are often unable to afford without scholarships or aid (Rist). This raises an important question: how feasible is it for dancers, especially those struggling to pay tuition at just one studio, to pursue these options of dancing at two studios or living away from home to receive a better education? How can we cultivate talented, robust dancers without consistent, high-quality education?

When I considered pursuing dance more seriously at the age of 12, my family enrolled me at two different studios to increase my training hours. However, after two years, my parents were forced to ask me to quit because the combined costs of tuition, uniforms, competition fees, examination fees, audition fees, studio rental, and private coaching fees, which all created too heavy of a financial burden, even as a middle-class family. I can attest that without the scholarships or financial aid my family has received, I would not have been able to continue the dance education I so desperately wanted.

Clearly, funding through scholarships or financial aid is essential to level the playing field, allowing dancers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue dance professionally without financial burdens. In addition to quality education, arts funding that is specifically allocated to dance companies or dance schools can provide all young dancers with opportunities to network with professionals, perform, or choreograph, which can provide insight to real-world experiences in the dance industry. A prime example is American Ballet Theater’s National Training Scholarship, which covers the cost of tuition. Misty Copeland, who became a principal dancer with ABT, received that scholarship, allowing her to attend the ABT school despite financial hardships. This opportunity gave Copeland exposure to company life, while also bringing her talent to the attention of the director.

Similarly, Alvin Ailey’s Scholarship Program offers full tuition coverage, and students gain the opportunity to perform alongside the company, attend master classes, and work under the mentorship of faculty members. They are also able to meet with the director to talk about their future career plans, providing a path for professional growth and networking. It is worthy to note that these scholarships are only limited to a selected few each year and are merit based. Financial need scholarships often come in smaller amounts, covering only a fraction of the tuition. With sufficient funding, the number of scholarships and the amount offered could increase, giving more dancers the opportunity to pursue their dream career.

Without sufficient arts funding for dance scholarships, financial aid, or grants, we will undoubtedly lose out on many fresh choreographic ideas and performances. And though it may sound cliché, many dreams are shattered. This issue of arts funding in dance education is both urgent and overlooked in the United States. During my research, I realized that the U.S. lacks

research in this field. Why are articles about arts funding in European countries so much more abundant than in the U.S.? Are we avoiding the problem? Or do we not believe that it is worth the time and effort to investigate? So, what can we do to ensure that financial barriers are not the reason that young dancers are forced to quit dance? The more dance majors know, the more they may be able to advocate for increased funding in the future.

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