

Beyond a Backup Plan

One of your majors is dance? That may be the one that makes you a better doctor—or any other profession you choose

by Brenna Farrell

Whenever I introduce myself as a double major in dance and human biology, it almost always elicits the same few reactions, such as, “Wow, dance? What is that like?” or simply, “Why?” People are never surprised by the human biology degree, only by the dance major. Another common response is, “Well, it's always good to have a backup plan.” I find this rhetoric particularly frustrating because I have never considered either of my degrees a fallback.

I have been fortunate to grow up with a family that has always encouraged and supported me to pursue my passions both artistically and academically. I was never told that I should major in something other than dance in college. It was something I wanted to pursue on my own. I know this is not the same for every artist who pursues higher education, and they may be coerced to cast their true interests aside in pursuit of obtaining “a real job.” However, double majoring is not just for artists seeking a backup plan; students across all disciplines benefit from the arts and humanities.

Instead of discouraging artists from pursuing their passions, we should encourage students in other fields to engage with the arts as well. An interdisciplinary education fosters creativity, collaboration, and adaptability, producing more innovative and empathetic graduates. Prioritizing holistic learning, especially in STEM, nurtures well-rounded individuals and a more forward-thinking society. Despite this reality, the arts have been increasingly devalued in all levels of education in recent years, with institutions prioritizing STEM and business programs over humanities and the arts. In his first term as President, Trump became the first ever President to propose dismantling the Arts and Humanities endowments, claiming them to be a waste of taxpayer money (Deb).

Add to that, the fact that these are unprecedented times when it comes to federal funding for education in general. In an NPR article by Jonaki Mehta and Cory Turner, they discuss how “President Trump has repeatedly said he plans to close the Education Department, which employs more than 4,000 people and has an annual budget of \$79 billion” (Mehta and Turner). With intense budget cuts in education looming, programs in the arts are often the first on the chopping block as they are often deemed unnecessary. The loss of these programs prevents everyone, from children to young adults, from exploring all aspects of education and creativity. They miss out on the opportunity to learn new skills, express themselves, have an outlet for stress management, and ultimately on becoming empathetic, well-rounded members of society.

The decline in arts funding is largely due to the misconception that the arts are non-essential or lack economic value, despite evidence that creative thinking and interdisciplinary skills are highly sought-after in the job market. Survey results collected by PricewaterhouseCoopers

(PwC), one of the world's largest accounting firms, found that "77% of CEOs struggle to find the creativity and innovation skills they need" (PwC and Stubbings). Additionally, in 2020, LinkedIn, the world's largest professional networking platform, conducted a survey analyzing data from over 20 million job postings to determine which skills were most sought after by employers. The survey found that creativity ranked as the most sought-after soft skill followed by persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Van Nuys).

These five skills considered so valuable are utilized and cultivated pretty much every day in the dance department, but I've rarely had to use them in my massive 300+ person lecture hall courses outside the arts school. Students with an arts background demonstrate and practice more regularly stronger problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and collaboration, skills that are critical across all industries. Summarized perfectly by Edward B. Fiske in the Champions of Change federal research report, "A company is a company, whether producing an opera or a breakthrough technological service" (Fiske). This underscores how soft skills, which can be hard to develop but are invaluable in the workplace, are transferable and beneficial in both artistic and technical fields.

When arts education is neglected, institutions risk producing young professionals who are technically proficient, but lack the creativity and adaptability needed to drive progress in their fields or become hireable applicants. I have personally benefited from an interdisciplinary education throughout my entire academic journey, and I believe my early exposure to STEAM-based programs rather than just STEM, made a profound difference in how I approached my passions. Unlike STEM, which focuses solely on science, technology, engineering, and math, STEAM incorporates the arts as an essential component of education, recognizing creativity as a critical skill alongside technical expertise.

I was first introduced to this concept in my middle school computer lab course, which was specifically designed as a STEAM-based program. This course emphasized that the arts should be integrated into technical education, not treated as an afterthought. We learned to code our own visuals for simple video games, collaborated on intricate Photoshop and movie-making projects, and, in my favorite activity, used graphite pencils and alligator clips to connect a hand-drawn piano to a computer, allowing us to play music by tapping on the sketched keys. Before this experience, I had always viewed my time dancing at my hometown studio after school as separate from my academic education, but this program was my first introduction to an interdisciplinary approach to learning that merged creativity with technical skills during the school day.

In high school, I was again fortunate to attend a school that valued producing well-rounded students. I took AP courses, sang in choir, and enrolled in dance as a physical education class, never feeling pressured to choose between my interests. Instead, I was able to find communities of like-minded individuals in each of these pursuits, reinforcing my belief that both academic and artistic passions could coexist. Growing up in schools that celebrated both intellectual and creative growth inspired me to pursue a double major in college. Being part of the dance department at University of California, Irvine is something I will treasure for the rest of my life. The friendships I have made, the experiences I have had, and the love and support I have felt are incredibly meaningful to me. I am surrounded by brilliant minds and talented artists who inspire

and encourage me daily to chase my true passions. Some of my closest friends are also double majors in dance and biology, and I truly don't know how I would have survived undergrad without them.

Dance has not only given me a strong community but has also equipped me with invaluable life skills. It has made me more empathetic, instilled in me exceptional time management and self-discipline, and taught me how to set and achieve goals. I have learned how to work well in a team, follow directions, and even absorb information by observing rather than always needing hands-on practice. These are just a few of the many skills I have gained, and the list could go on and on. As I move forward in my pursuit of a career in medicine, I know these skills will be applicable. The discipline and resilience I have developed through dance will help me navigate the rigorous demands of medical school, while my ability to work collaboratively and think creatively will allow me to approach patient care with empathy and innovation.

Further supporting the benefits of arts education, researchers examining the impact of arts education in U.S. public schools found that arts education enhances mental health, self-confidence, life skills, and creativity, highlighting the need for further research and support in this area (Roge and Kim). Another study, sponsored by the Arts Education Partnership and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, compiles extensive research demonstrating how arts education enhances academic performance, critical thinking, and personal development (Fiske). The report highlights that arts education is particularly beneficial for students in lower-income areas, helping to "level the playing field." For many, it provides a newfound reason to attend school, re-engaging those who feel disconnected from traditional coursework. It also helps students who "act out" due to lack of engagement, giving them something to feel passionate about and thus motivated to pursue.

However, arts education benefits not just disengaged students, but high-achieving students who can find intellectual challenges and opportunities for growth beyond conventional academics. As the report states, "for those young people who outgrow their established learning environment, the arts can offer a chance for unlimited challenge" (Fiske). Ultimately, this research reinforces the idea that developing artistic skills strengthens academic success. The cognitive, creative, and problem-solving abilities cultivated through the arts make students more engaged, adaptable, and well-rounded learners. Therefore, schools should prioritize arts education, recognizing its role in reshaping a child's education and its ability to set them up for success, regardless of socioeconomic background.

As technical skills take priority in education, the value of arts alongside STEM cannot be overlooked. Interdisciplinary learning fosters creativity, adaptability, and critical thinking which are skills essential for both individual success and a more innovative, empathetic society. Educational systems must promote programs that encourage students to explore multiple fields, recognizing that ultimately at a college level, double majoring is not a fallback but a strategic choice. By valuing both the arts and sciences, we can cultivate graduates who are not only career-ready but also have the tools to create lasting change make meaningful contributions to the world.

Brenna Farrell graduated from UCI in the Spring of 2025 with a BA in Dance and a BS in Human Biology. After a gap year to study for the MCAT and to gain more clinical experience, she plans to apply to medical school to pursue her dream of becoming an OBGYN. She also hopes to keep dancing, performing, and teaching throughout her journey.

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