

**Trainee Programs – What They Are and What They Could Be**

by

Olivia Rick

Submitted to the Department of Arts Management  
School of the Arts  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

March 2020

Sponsor: Lawrence Tamburri

Second Reader: Michelle Thompson-Ulerich

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	2
2. Training Level Explanations.....	3
3. Audition Process .....	5
4. Daily Trainee Schedule.....	5
5. How Trainee Programs Have Changed the Dance Field .....	6
6. Oklahoma City Ballet's Trainees.....	9
7. Trainee Program Comparison.....	11
8. Qualities and Responsibilities of a Trainee .....	15
9. Preparing Trainees for Company Life .....	16
10. Likelihood of Getting a Company Contract.....	18
11. Trainees in Outreach.....	21
12. Creating a Safe Space .....	23
13. Funding the Ideal Program.....	27
14. Conclusion .....	30
15. Works Cited .....	31

## 1. Introduction

It is a ballet dancer's job to make their dancing look effortless, to allow audience members to sit back and marvel at the performance without realizing the hard work behind the scenes. But how did the ballet dancer make it to this point? What kind of training did they endure to end up with a leading role? How could their training program have been improved to get them a professional contract sooner or make their career last longer?

In the 1950s and 1960s, ballet dancers were hired when they were 18 years old, some as young as 16 years old. Post high-school ballet training was rare and usually meant the dancer was not good enough to dance professionally at all. Nowadays many ballet dancers, especially women, must undergo extra training in trainee programs or second companies before receiving a main company contract. The bar is set higher now that ballet technique has advanced. These high-level, pre-professional trainee programs are the dance field's equivalent of an internship. They are programs designed to help ballet dancers learn on-the-job skills and further their dance education. Also like an internship, it is a way for dancers to investigate companies and for companies to further consider dancers, to see if they would be a good fit in the workplace.

Dancers are turning to another leg of training to bridge the gap between their student and professional years. This allows them to gain professional experience and polish their technique and artistry, making them a more attractive hire to directors. It also gives dancers a look inside their dream company and a connection that could help make that dream come true. However, it comes with a price—sometimes more than \$5,000 a year (McGuire).

Training in modern day ballet usually follows this hierarchy - academy, trainee, second company, apprentice, then professional company. Of course each ballet company has their own level systems and differentiations, but this paper will use the following program explanations.

## **2. Training Level Explanations**

Academy or school programs provide classes for toddlers through high-school age dancers. Some dance schools or academies are geared towards recreational dancers who love to dance but do not want to make a career out of it. Other schools are considered professional track academies and follow more rigorous training curriculum, especially in the upper-level high school classes. In an academy, you still have a mixed talent level among the dancers in the class, and everyone is paying tuition unless a scholarship was awarded.

Following high school, some dancers might be talented enough to earn a professional company contract straightaway, but most female dancers will then transition into a trainee program contract. This is the first step to becoming a professional ballet dancer, and this is when recreational dancers drop off and pursue other interests. Trainee programs are still tuition based, but the tuition is usually less than the academy tuition. A typical trainee day consists of dance classes and rehearsals all day long as if it were a full-time job. Trainees usually have their own ballet class in the morning, separate from the professional company, which is followed by all day rehearsals with or separate from the professional company. Performance opportunities vary depending on the program and the company.

Above the trainee level is usually the second company; the dancers in second company are closer to being hired professionally and will have better technique and more expressiveness in their dancing than trainees. Most often second companies offer small stipends or are unpaid positions, but usually dancers do not have to pay tuition like the trainees. Second company dancers usually take morning ballet class with the professional company and are involved in the professional company performances more often than the trainees. While they might not be ready to be in a professional company yet, second company dancers are high level athletes and artists, and few make it to this level.

Yet another step up in rank are apprentice dancers. Apprentices are almost always tied to the professional company and spend all day with the company. Most apprentices are paid, maybe in stipends and maybe the same wage as company dancers. Apprentice is the last step before entering the *corps de ballet* of the professional company, so dancers at this level focus more on developing as artists rather than technique training for pure classical ballet. Apprentices are involved in all professional company performances and get the true professional experience.

A professional company contract is what all serious ballet dancers are trying to achieve. Contracts are few and far between, so the odds of getting to this level are slim. Some might even compare the level of competition to that of the National Football League (NFL). Company dancers spend all day dancing and rehearsing for performances throughout the year. Within the professional company, the ranks start at *corps de ballet* and end with the highest title of *principal* dancer. Some people sit at a desk from 9 to 5 for their job; artists in a ballet company are dancing from 9 to 5 for their job.

### **3. Audition Process**

In order to be invited to pre-professional ballet training divisions, like trainee or second companies, dancers must audition. Each year primarily January through March, ballet companies hold audition tours to find dancers for the professional company and pre-professional levels. Depending on the dancer, this could mean attending 5 to 20 auditions each year. After auditioning, dancers will receive rejection letters from companies who were not interested in their dancing or receive acceptance letters from companies who are considering them for a year-round offer. Companies might also ask dancers to visit and train for a few weeks during the summer in order to see them dance more and get a feel for their work ethic. In an interview with Penny Askew, school director and ballet master at Oklahoma City Ballet, she said that during the summer intensive, "Staff will be chatting about somebody and say this particular kid is so great, everything you say she fixes right away, she listens and learns, and her eyes are really focused. There is just this energy people give." ("Interview with Penny Askew"). While a single audition is an opportunity for dancers to show off their skills in front of directors, a summer intensive program will give directors a better feel for a dancer's personality and work ethic.

### **4. Daily Trainee Schedule**

Once dancers are accepted into the trainee program from the audition or summer intensive, they can start their pre-professional ballet careers. The daily schedule for trainees differs between ballet companies, but the following will cover a typical program. Trainees have a morning ballet class starting at 9:30am; this class can be anywhere from an hour and fifteen minutes to two full hours. After technique class, trainees will have a pointe or variations class or even jump right into rehearsals for the day. Aside from an hour lunch break, trainees at the Oklahoma City Ballet typically dance from 9:30 until 4:30 pm. Trainees might also be required

to take additional academy dance classes at night, usually in other dance forms such as Modern or Jazz. For example, trainees at BalletMet dance 30 hours during a 6-day work week under the following typical schedule: (“BalletMet Trainee Program”)

*Ballet Technique 1 hour 30 min-1 hour 45 min daily (Mon-Sat)*

*Male Ballet/Variations 1 hour daily (M-F)*

*Pointe/Variations/Repertoire 1 hour daily (M-F)*

*Pas de Deux 1 hour per week*

*Jazz 1 hour 30 min per week*

*Modern/Composition 4 hours per week*

*Pilates 1 hour per week*

## **5. How Trainee Programs Have Changed the Dance Field**

Trainee programs serve both the ballet company and the dancers who participate in them. However, the creation of trainee programs seems to be more company-driven than dancer-driven. Ballet companies see so much talent each year in company auditions, but do not have a paid position for every dancer they wish to hire. Trainee programs were created to give an intermediary, unpaid position to dancers who the artistic director liked, but could not pay at the moment due to company funding. As physical therapy science improves, ballet dancers’ careers last much longer. Decades ago, ballet dancers were lucky to be on stage past their mid-thirties, similar to Olympic athletes. Nowadays dancers have more knowledge about injury prevention and are able to lengthen their professional dancing careers. This has effects further down the pyramid structure. With fewer dancers injured or retiring each year, there are fewer company contracts being given to up-and-coming dancers down the line. Trainee and second company

programs can give aspiring professional ballet dancers a position to further their training and get closer to their dream company job.

The creation and rise of trainee programs has changed the dance field in numerous ways. Around 50 years ago, ballet dancers were hired at 16 or 17 years old to start their professional careers. Ballerinas were much younger when they had to move away from home to start working, some even touring with performances around the country as a minor. In today's dance field this rarely happens anymore, and that might be a change for the better. Askew said, "Now you are usually a little older and more mature when you get your first job, so it is easier to handle the pressure at the company level." ("Interview with Penny Askew"). Even a decade ago, ballet dancers were chosen for professional contracts right out of high school, but that is becoming less common as the years go on.

Artistic directors of ballet companies are looking for more artistic and technical polish when hiring for their companies, so today's directors tend to hire dancers with more experience and pre-professional training under their belt (McGuire). Trainee programs and second companies were created to fill this need for artistic directors. The extra layers of dancer ranks before reaching a *corps de ballet* contract result in older, more mature artists in professional companies. Many directors and trainee program coordinators, including Amanda Popejoy, feel dancers start off stronger in a company if they have experienced a trainee program. Popejoy started her career at 16 years old, and while she would not change her own experience, she acknowledges how extra training can result in "an easier transition for dancers" ("Interview with Amanda Popejoy"). Trainee programs have had a second effect on the dance field, more post-collegiate dancers in ballet companies.



When I first started dancing in a company, it was surprising when people got contracts after going to college. But that happens more often now. Before this time, you started a professional job right out of high school; if you were not going to start right after high school and went to college instead, you probably were not going to have a contract. Now I feel those ideas are changing, and it may be because dancers are older when offered a contract since the creation of trainee programs and second companies (“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”).

With the creation of trainee programs in the United States, a dancer going through a collegiate conservatory and a dancer going through a trainee program and second company will be of similar age when auditioning for professional company contracts. A decade ago, when dancers were hired straight from high school, a collegiate dancer in professional company auditions seemed a little surprising and maybe out of place.

On the other hand, Askew points out that dancers do not need degrees to work in the field. Unlike more conventional professions, dancers might forego college programs because the piece of paper at graduation has no effect on job placement when it comes to ballet (“Interview with Penny Askew”). Having a dance degree will not make your audition experience any easier, since ballet is a subjective hiring process. Both a BFA dance program and a trainee program are additional formalized training for dancers. Popejoy says, "I feel either one is going to push you towards a career if you want it." (“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”).

**Figure 1 – Pros and Cons of Trainee Programs**

PROS		CONS	
For Dancers	For Directors	For Dancers	For Directors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More training – Extra years and hours per week</li> <li>- Experience company life</li> <li>- Time to transition between student and professional work ethics</li> <li>- Time to mentally and physically adapt to company life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Train dancers under the specific aesthetic of the company</li> <li>- Free labor – solution to low arts funding</li> <li>- Use the extended audition period to test work ethic</li> <li>- Opportunity to teach more dancers and effect more lives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Costly - pointe shoes and/or tuition.</li> <li>- Not fully treated like professionals</li> <li>- Not always the best performance opportunities</li> <li>- Unsure of your standing with the company/director</li> <li>- Added stress of an extended audition period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can lose favorite dancers if other companies make better offers</li> <li>- Lose studio space for other rehearsals</li> <li>- Cannot have ideal program due to low funding</li> <li>- More dancers means more attention and support</li> </ul>

## 6. Oklahoma City Ballet's Trainees

The trainee program at Oklahoma City Ballet is becoming more established year by year. In an interview with Askew, she explained how the program has evolved. In the fall of 2016, there were seven dancers who were not chosen for second company contracts but still wanted to stay and train in Oklahoma City. Each dancer individually asked if there was a way for them to

stay and be around the company during the school year, and so the Oklahoma City Ballet created a place for them to continue their training. So they took company class, came to rehearsals, and did a few outreach, academy, and company performances. The next season the number of trainees increased from 7 to 22, and Askew thought, "we need to be more; we need to do something with it and provide a better experience and provide them with more artistic staff time." Askew knew, as the trainee program was growing, a few aspects were important to implement to keep a good working environment at Oklahoma City Ballet.

We love having dancers who want to be here. We hear a lot of the time that people like the environment we have created here. We want to keep that positive. Ballet is hard. It is a hard business, and there is a lot of competition for jobs. So while anyone is here with us, we want it to be as positive as possible. We want to give them as much information as possible and as much help for them to become their best self in terms of dancing and their best self in terms of being an artist ("Interview with Penny Askew").

Askew also knows that not every trainee will receive a company contract at the end of their training, so she wants to help dancers by giving as much information and life experience as possible whether they make it into a company or whether the Oklahoma City Ballet trainee program is a pit stop on their journey to other things in life ("Interview with Penny Askew").

This past year, Popejoy became the trainee program coordinator for the 2019-2020 season. Starting in late May 2019, Popejoy thought about her own trainee experience with Pacific Northwest Ballet as well as doing further research to start designing the new trainee program with the resources available to her at Oklahoma City Ballet. Through her process

Popejoy knew she wanted her trainees to have longer hours in the studio with more rehearsals on their own as well as rehearsals with the professional company. She also wanted to involve more dance styles in her program, including contemporary, modern, and jazz. Popejoy says, "Contemporary can be one of the hardest things for a classically trained dancer....Contemporary connects to your movement quality; if you know how to dance in a contemporary fashion, you can use it in your classical work." Most importantly, she wants good job placement for all of her trainees, and will help prepare them and teach them any skills needed to get their first company contract ("Interview with Amanda Popejoy").

## **7. Trainee Program Comparison**

Pointe Magazine encourages dancers to research trainee programs before auditioning for them; a ballet company's website can reveal a lot of about their trainee program – number of trainees, a typical weekly schedule, performance opportunities, etc. Are the trainees paid or provided housing and/or transportation? Will the company provide pointe shoes or health insurance? What is the job placement rate within the company and outside of the company? Are the directors of the trainee program or company willing to assist with the audition process by using personal connections, recommendation letters, and resume or video preparation? In the same article, Next Generation Ballet's Artistic Director, Phillip Neal, says to consider the non-monetary benefits and the experiences you can gain from a particular program (Larsen). Each program will have their own set goals and valued skills they want to pass along to their trainees. Sometimes trainees are encouraged to try choreography, like at Cincinnati Ballet. Sometimes trainees have seminars in topics such as injury prevention, how to make audition videos, or resume building, like at Joffrey Ballet and Oklahoma City Ballet. Sometimes trainees are encouraged to further their education at nearby colleges, like at Ballet Austin or Richmond Ballet

(McGuire). Information like this is important for pre-professional dancers to know when auditioning for a trainee position, and it also reveals how each trainee program is unique to their own ballet company. This essay will compare the programs as described on the websites of Oklahoma City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, BalletMet, and the Joffrey Ballet.

As published on the website, "Students accepted into Oklahoma City Ballet's Trainee Program focus on perfecting their technique while discovering what it takes to transition into a professional dance career." Classes in this program include ballet technique, pointe, variations, partnering, modern, and Pilates. Trainees have performance opportunities in a Fall Concert, Spring Concert, the academy's spring recital, outreach shows, and depending on casting the main stage productions alongside the company. The program also includes seminars in nutrition, life skills, and audition preparation with advice from Trainee Program Coordinator, Amanda Popejoy. In order to be invited to the trainee program, a dancer must attend the Summer Intensive and have graduated high school or make arrangements to continue their high school education during the program. Dancers must provide their own housing and transportation during the season. This program is a one to two year pre-professional program ("Trainee Program" - Oklahoma City Ballet).

Similar to Oklahoma City Ballet and many other programs, San Francisco Ballet's trainee program is also a one- to two-year pre-professional program. Students are invited by the School Director to be trainees from the academy's advanced levels as well as from auditions each season. Trainees at San Francisco Ballet do not pay tuition and receive housing scholarships to help relieve some of the financial burden. Classes include ballet technique, pointe, and pas de deux as well as workshops in pedagogy, choreography, and stagecraft. Performance

opportunities include outreach shows, the school's spring festival performance, and understudying the professional company productions. Statistics on company placement were provided on the San Francisco Ballet trainee webpage; 65% of professional company dancers at San Francisco Ballet joined through the trainee program, and 100% of trainee program graduates went on the dance professionally (“Trainee Program”, San Francisco Ballet).

At BalletMet there are two levels of trainees in addition to a separate boys training program. Classes for BalletMet trainees include ballet technique, pointe, jazz, modern, character dance, pas de deux, repertoire, and variations. They also have lectures in nutrition, anatomy, and marketing. BalletMet does not provide housing for their trainees and the tuition is \$7,450, which is more expensive than the previously mentioned programs. Dancers are invited to become trainees at BalletMet through Summer Intensive auditions or video submissions. Trainees are considered for casting in professional company productions at BalletMet as well as an end of the year Spring Performance (“BalletMet Trainee Program”).

Joffrey Ballet trainees must be at least 17 years old to be invited by the artistic director or trainee program director after auditions held each spring. Trainees take classes in ballet technique as well as other dance disciplines.(“Joffrey Trainee Program Catalog”). Their performance opportunities include a Fall Production, a Spring Production, and a year-end presentation with pieces from company repertoire as well as new choreographic works. If trainees stay and graduate the full two-year program, they receive a certificate of training from the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago. There are 35 trainees listed for the 2019-20 season (“Trainee Program”, Joffrey Ballet).

Figure 2 – Trainee Program Comparison

Company	Technique Classes	Tuition Costs	Number of Trainees	Opportunities to Perform	Special Aspects
<b>Oklahoma City Ballet</b>	ballet, pointe, variations, partnering, modern, jazz, and Pilates	\$1,500 per year – no housing or transportation offered	35	Fall and Spring Concerts, Spring Recital, Outreach shows, and some company productions	Seminars in various life skills and audition preparation
<b>San Francisco Ballet</b>	ballet, pointe, pas de deux, pedagogy, choreography, and stagecraft	No tuition and potential housing scholarships	30	Outreach shows, Spring Festival, and understudying company productions	100% of trainee program graduates went on the dance professionally
<b>BalletMet</b>	ballet, pointe, variations, jazz, modern, character dance, pas de deux, repertoire	\$7,450 per year – no housing or transportation offered	60	Spring Performance and consideration for company productions	Multiple levels and lectures in nutrition, anatomy, and marketing
<b>Joffrey Ballet</b>	ballet technique as well as other dance disciplines	\$7,500 for domestic and \$8,500 for international students	35	Fall and Spring Productions, and a year-end presentation	Can earn a certificate with completion of the full two year program

## 8. Qualities and Responsibilities of a Trainee

What qualities make a dancer a good trainee? What qualities get you into trainee programs, and are they the same qualities that will get you promoted within a ballet company? Miranda Silveira told *Pointe Magazine* her confidence and interest in communicating with directors was helpful when trying to track her progress (Thompson). Askew said she wants to know that a dancer wants to be at Oklahoma City Ballet. If dancers do not actively want to show up and dance every day, then it is hard to maintain a strong positive work environment in the ballet studios ("Interview with Penny Askew"). Popejoy appreciates strong ballet technique, receptiveness to corrections, and expressive movement quality. She said, "Movement quality is the biggest part of dancing professionally. Everyone has been dancing since they were little, so the difference between a professional and a student is knowing how to move between positions and steps." ("Interview with Amanda Popejoy"). In both interviews with Askew and Popejoy, the two women mentioned how important it is for dancers to be smart and open to learning new things and applying the corrections they receive in class or rehearsal.

Wanting smart dancers begs the question about the responsibilities of the dancers versus the responsibilities of the directors leading them. Because trainees are still technically students, they might share training responsibilities with their instructors. Askew believes her main responsibility is to enter the room as focused as possible on the current day and the dancers in front of her. Her ability to read the room each morning allows her to find the right energy and approach that will push the dancers as a whole group and as individuals. Askew wishes to give dancers "the most information as clearly as possible to make them better." However, much work must be put in on the dancer's side, physically and mentally, especially at the trainee level.



Ballet is a difficult art form, an aesthetic sport if you will. The physical feats that dancers perform are hard enough on their own, but in addition to the physical demands everything has a certain form and must look a certain way. Askew contrasts this to catching a football. A wide receiver has to catch a ball, but nobody is demanding that his feet are pointed and each limb must be in a certain position when he catches said ball. So the work of a ballet dancer is heightened and takes time and effort from the dancer themselves to improve their movement. "If a dancer is not willing to look inside, dig deep, and put in extra time and energy towards reflecting upon the things told to them in class or being said to them in rehearsal...If they do not ponder, and work, and spend those extra moments in front of the mirror looking at their tendu, then it is not going to happen," says Askew. If the most excellent teacher is at the front of the room sharing their knowledge, it is wasted unless the dancer themselves is receptive and uses their mind and body to investigate the given dance steps. On the other hand, Askew acknowledged how difficult it is to overcome bad training in a dancer. It is important for teachers to not allow students' bad habits and not give them any bad information or misleading corrections. Ballet is an art form based on perfection, and that perfection all ballerinas are trying to achieve can only happen if good energy comes from both sides. Askew closed by saying, "I think you have to have good teachers giving information and dancers who are ready for that information." ("Interview with Penny Askew")

## **9. Preparing Trainees for Company Life**

Being a trainee and being a professional company ballet dancer are different experiences, yet a trainee program is usually said to help prepare dancers for company life and expectations. When you are a trainee, you are half-student and half-professional; you continue to learn and perfect your ballet technique while also displaying your individualism as an artist. As a company dancer, perfection is always at the back of your mind, but a certain base level of ballet technique

is always expected from of you. Popejoy strives to hold her trainees to a higher standard of work ethic and technique, similar to what would be expected of a professional company dancer. She feels it is her responsibility as the trainee program coordinator to prepare her trainees as much as possible for company life so they will not be shocked when they enter their first professional job. Popejoy said, "I want them to realize how it really will be with a company. There is less forgiveness, because it is a job now. They pay you for something specific, so it is less training and more responsibility." ("Interview with Amanda Popejoy").

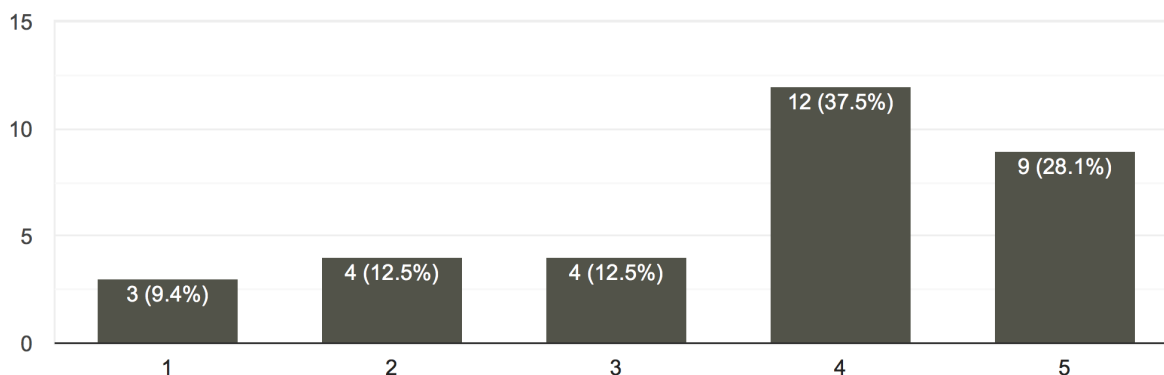
Because the two levels are so different in terms of expectations, trainee programs should do their best to provide a dancer with a smoother transition into company life. In *Dance Magazine*, San Francisco Ballet trainee Jeanette Kakareka said her first year as a company member with all day, every day *corps de ballet* rehearsals was difficult on her body and mind (McGuire). Some *corps de ballet* skills can be taught in trainee programs including learning choreography quickly, observing other dancers for stylisms and musicality, and staying in perfect formations while dancing with your fellow ballerinas (Peters). When trainees and second company dancers are more heavily involved in the professional company classes and schedules, more skills and etiquette can be learned through example. Patrick Yocum spoke to *Pointe Magazine* about his fear of accidentally standing in a soloist's spot for company class; dancers sometimes have certain spots in the room where they prefer to stand, and hierarchy is respected when it comes to these preferred spots in the room. While intimidating at first, participating in daily company life as a trainee or second company dancer can help to demystify a dream company or role model ballerina (Peters).

A survey was conducted, using Google Forms, for dancers who have recently participated in a trainee program in the United States. The survey was distributed through ballet Facebook groups, friends, and trainees currently at the Oklahoma City Ballet. The survey opened on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and closed on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. One section of the survey utilized a rating scale of 1 through 5, 1 being very unlikely and 5 being very likely. In regards to how trainee programs prepare dancers to join a professional company with all skills required to do that, here was the response (see fig. 1).

**Figure 3** – from Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

**My program taught me new skills and professional company etiquette that can only be learned through experience**

32 responses



## 10. Likelihood of Getting a Company Contract

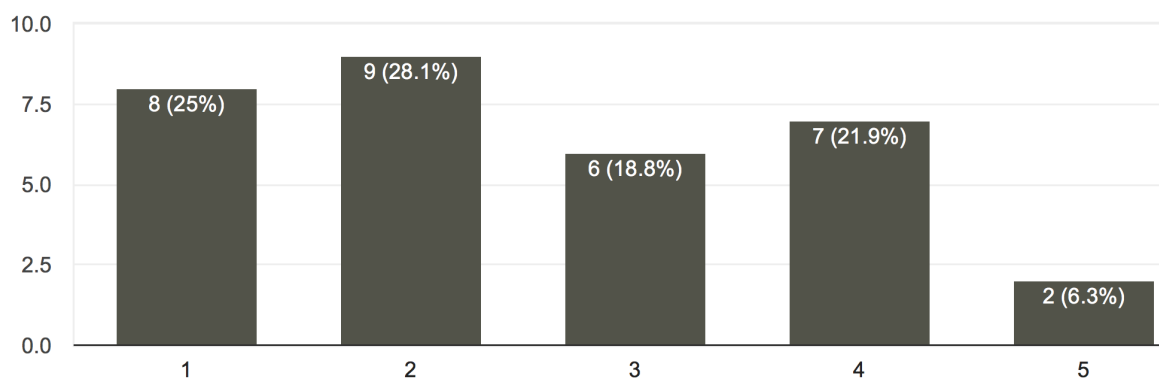
Getting a paid contract in a ballet company is a difficult task, and sometimes it is all about timing, the connections you have, and a bit of luck. This stress is only heightened within the pre-professional levels of trainee and second company. Because ballet company contracts are usually on a year-to-year basis, directors must wait until professional company contracts are given and received back from dancers before offering to the next levels down. This can be hard

to accept for aspiring dancers who might get impatient with this waiting game (Thompson). In the survey, dancers were asked to rate the likelihood they felt they could get a professional company contract; here are the responses (see fig. 2 and 3).

**Figure 4** – from Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

I feel I could get a main company contract with the same company I attended the pre-professional program under.

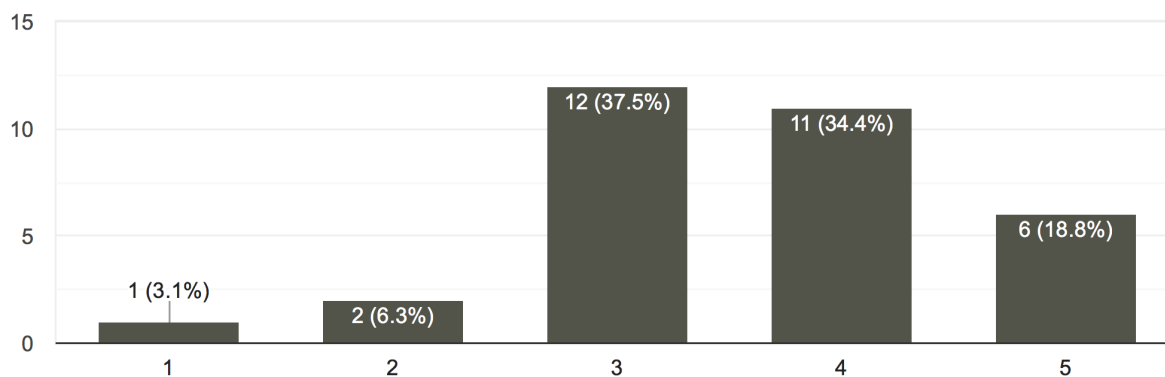
32 responses



**Figure 5** – from Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

I feel I could get a main company contract with a different company than the one I attended the pre-professional program under.

32 responses



In her interview Askew reacted to the dancers' feeling it was "very unlikely" they could get contracts under the same company they attended a trainee program under. She spoke to the likelihood of getting a company contract in general as well as potentially unethical trainee programs. Ballet companies have to play a numbers game when promoting dancers through company ranks. Each level gets smaller and smaller, making it increasingly harder to get promoted the further you go in a ballet career. Similar to getting drafted in the NFL, getting a professional company contract is high stakes and hard to accomplish. Askew says, "We see talented dancers. We see smart dancers. We see expressive dancers. And you just do not have a contract to give them because of budgeting concerns. It is just a numbers game, and the higher you go the harder it is to break through." She says the number of dancers, even the number of good dancers, in the ballet world is always going to be greater than the number of contracts that open up each season ("Interview with Penny Askew").

However, at some companies there is a negative environment where trainees feel taken advantage of and underappreciated. Some companies seem to utilize trainees as free labor to fill *corps de ballet* spots in bigger productions, but these companies might not have any interest in cultivating the trainees as artists. This could be the reason for the more negative response about getting a contract with the same company as the attended trainee program than the response to getting a contract with a different company. In the interview Askew said she wants each trainee to know they have potential to be promoted to a second company position if they come in with open eyes. She tries to be as honest as possible with dancers in regards to their chance of promotion. When dancers come to Askew and ask about their chances of promotion, skills they need to improve, or where she sees them a year from now, Askew is mindful to be honest and to not feed them false hope. She says, "People will latch onto any opportunity that comes their way

even if it seems like it is not the greatest. I feel like a lot of times dancers are fed hope and have carrots dangled in front of them. I don't think people are always being honest and realistic with dancers." Being mindful and sincere with dancer feedback is one of Askew's goals; if she truly does not see the dancer in the company at Oklahoma City, she will be honest and tell them ("Interview with Penny Askew").

The pressure of getting a professional company contract is hard enough. The last thing a dancer needs is false hope from directors, who in some companies might only see their trainees as bodies in the room and not potentially hireable artists. Pointe Magazine warns aspiring dancers of these negative experiences. The publication advises dancers to research the professional company artists and see how many were promoted from within and how many were outside hires. Reading company bios off the website or in performance programs can give major clues about a company's hiring process. Then dancers are able to decide for themselves if spending that much time in junior ranks would be worth it (Larsen). Being in a trainee or second company program can be an extended audition process for dancers who are at their dream company. In a different Pointe Magazine article, Hitomi Nakamura said, "In a normal audition you have one class to show yourself, but in a second company you have many opportunities to show yourself. Even if you think you're not seen, people are watching, so give yourself to the role, no matter how small, 100 percent." (Thompson).

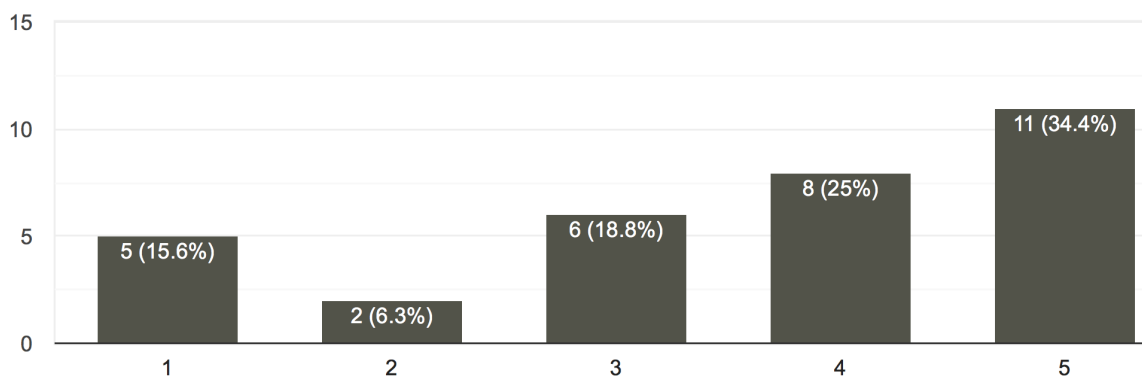
## **11. Trainees in Outreach**

Outreach is a big part of many non-profit organizations. Outreach programs are included in many mission statements and can help organizations apply for more grant money. Outreach also relates closely to trainee programs in ballet companies. Popejoy says, "I think the two

programs go hand-in-hand really nicely together." In designing the 2019-2020 trainee program at Oklahoma City Ballet, Popejoy knew she wanted trainees heavily involved in outreach performances because it benefits both programs ("Interview with Amanda Popejoy"). When ballet companies get requests for mini performances in corporate offices or Nutcracker sneak peaks at downtown Christmas events, trainees are there to help. Professional company dancers might still be involved in outreach programs, but their schedules are usually packed with production rehearsals during the season. The time needed to devote to outreach is more easily allotted in a trainee's schedule ("Interview with Penny Askew"). (see fig. 4)

**Figure 6** – from Rick, Olivia. "Senior Project Research." Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

**Trainees were more involved in outreach programs than the main company**  
32 responses



However outreach is never a burden, because trainees benefit greatly from the performances and experiences of being on stage in front of an audience. The extra opportunities to perform outside of professional company productions and trainee showcases can only enhance a dancer's training. Lillian DiPiazza in a Pointe Magazine interview said, "Getting individual

coaching and performing in front of smaller school audiences helped me get stronger and more comfortable in terms of performance.” (Thompson).

I also think there is a special feeling you get when you are performing and know you are doing something good. I think it opens dancers’ eyes to what else is out there. Doing something for people in need is a nice experience for someone in their early 20s.

(“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”)

Trainees gain the added life experience of helping others and the added artistic experience of performing on stage. Ballet companies benefit from having more dancers to send out into schools, offices, downtown events, etc. With trainees involved, ballet companies are able to touch more lives and be more involved in the surrounding communities. Popejoy says, "It is a two way street, helping the company reach out to the community and giving dancers opportunities to perform." (“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”).

## **12. Creating a Safe Space**

Trainee programs need to be an optimal learning environment for the young aspiring dancers participating in them. When Popejoy was creating her program for the 2019-20 season at the Oklahoma City Ballet she said it was important for her "to make a safe space where the trainees thought they could all learn and improve and be challenged." (“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”). What does a safe space mean for ballet companies? How is it similar to more conventional educational environments, such as college classrooms? What guidelines can trainee program coordinators follow to optimize the learning of their dancers?



In an article about nursing students and their learning environments and practice teachers, the writer states that meaningful learning only comes out of an environment where all opportunities are available for learner engagement. The article uses a four-stage approach to building rapport between student and teacher and Maslow's hierarchy of needs to display how learning environments could be optimized for nursing students (Sherwin and Stevenson). Both of these tools can and should be applied more often in trainee programs and the ballet field as a whole.

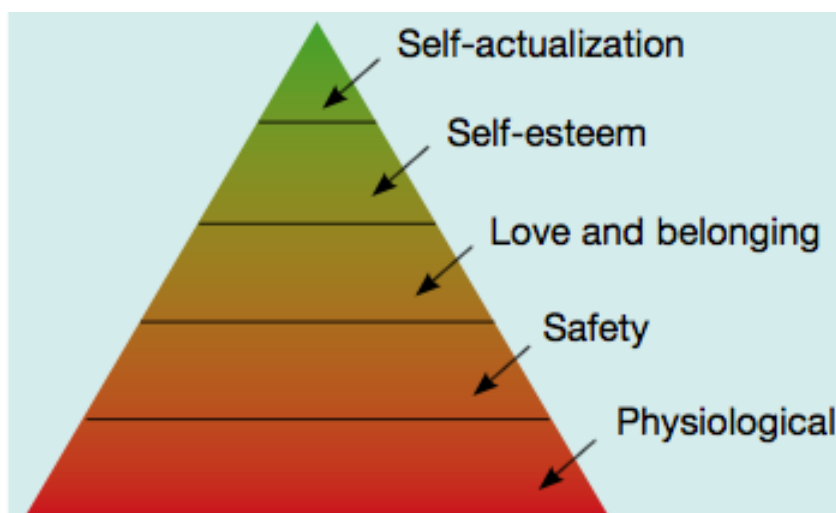
The four-stage approach goes through how a relationship between a student and teacher builds from strangers to network associates. The first stage, "strangers", is described as both parties recognizing that they do not know each other yet and start communicating. This stage could be displayed during a dancer orientation at the start of the season, maybe even as far back as the start of the summer intensive or initial audition for the ballet company. The second stage, "explorers", is described as when student and teacher explore ways of learning and further communication. This stage could be the first month of the season when dancers are still getting to know their director and other artistic staff members, and vice versa. Each person begins to understand the other through learning their pet peeves, artistic preferences, teaching/learning styles, etc. Stage three, "companions", is described as developed and established roles as student and teacher with respect for one another. This stage happens for most dancers by the end of the season, unless their personal trainee experience was negative or toxic. After many months of long days in a ballet studio, a director and dancer get to know each other fairly well and build a good working relationship by the end of the season in May. The last stage, "network associates", is described as "they continue to communicate after the placement has ended". (Sherwin and Stevenson). This stage is rarely reached in the dance field unless a dancer had a particularly

strong relationship with a coach or teacher. Not all teachers, and certainly not all directors, keep in touch with their previous dance students. This does not necessarily mean there was toxicity in the learning relationship, but this stage could use some more attention and improvement in the dance field, especially trainee programs. Maybe it would reassure trainees to know that their director would reach out once or twice to get updates on their dance career or see how they are doing as a person outside of ballet.

Secondly, the article delved into Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see fig. 5) and how it applies to a nursing student's optimal learning environment. At the bottom of the pyramid, Maslow identified the base line needs of a human being - food, water, shelter, etc. Without these, a person cannot effectively focus on tasks at hand. For trainees this might come into place in terms of lunch breaks, a few minutes to fill up a water bottle, and a dance studio to come to each morning. The second layer of the pyramid is safety needs; Maslow says that a person cannot succeed in environments where they sense danger. This could apply to trainee programs through following code standards when building the studios or sexual harassment clauses in dancer contracts. If a dancer feels the studios and the people in the studios are safe, the dancer will be able to learn more easily. The middle section of the hierarchy is for love and belonging. The article said, "a sense of belonging drives much of the human spirit and to lack a sense of belongingness can be devastating." (Sherwin and Stevenson). This human need could be met for trainees by giving them their own rehearsals and letting them participate in professional company rehearsals as well. Giving trainees a full schedule with things to do could increase their sense of belonging within the ballet company. If you do not occasionally give specific attention to trainees, they will feel they are not wanted and this level of the hierarchy will not be met. Second to the top of the pyramid are self-esteem needs. Recognition of achievements, mutual

respect, and constructive criticism are ways to fulfill this need according to Maslow. This level is a way to differentiate between a trainee program with a healthy, safe-space and a trainee program without. Self-esteem in dancers is a long-term issue either coming from negative teacher-student relationships or simply having to stare at yourself in a mirror all day judging your every movement and how you look as a visual artist. If a program director is belittling or does not show respect for a dancer in their program, that dancer will suffer and have a harder time learning and growing as an artist. The last level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs is self-actualization, or the desire to be one's best self. In ballet, this shows up as a dancer's desire to do their best and get as close to the perfectionist standards of ballet as humanly possible (Sherwin and Stevenson).

**Figure 7** – from Sherwin and Stevenson. “Creating an Optimum Environment for Learning.”



The interesting thing about Maslow's hierarchy of needs is that each level can only be reached if all levels below it have been met. In other words, you cannot reach the self-esteem level if your safety needs have not been met yet. The pyramid structure, as seen in the image above, comes from the increasing difficulty to reach the next level up (see fig.5). Only a few

people reach the self-actualization level in the hierarchy, meaning few dancers believe in themselves enough to feel they can be their absolute best self. One of the main things dancers hear in trainee programs is the directors wanting more confidence from their trainees. This "fake it til you make it" approach is hard when the learning environment has not been optimized. Some confidence must come from the dancers themselves, but teachers should also analyze what they could do differently to facilitate more confidence from their trainees. The four-stage approach and Maslow's hierarchy of needs could help all directors in creating "safe spaces" for their dancers to learn, be challenged, and grow.

### **13. Funding the Ideal Program**

What is an ideal trainee program and what would it cost for ballet companies who already get little funding from the United States government? In the interviews with Askew and Popejoy, I asked what their dream trainee program would be like if they had no limitations. Askew's dream program would include a trainee program director who also had a couple of administrative staff members to help with day-to-day operations. She also mentioned potentially increasing the size of the trainee program to incorporate two levels within the program itself. On the contrary she did say, "I would not want it to be too large, because I like the personal touch – knowing everybody in the program, knowing what they need, and knowing where they need to be pushed." So even if finances or amount of talent are not a limiting factor, that does not mean the program would increase exponentially without end. Askew also believes the funds and extra administrative staff would allow the trainees to spend more time on outreach, going into the community and schools and showing more people the art of dance ("Interview with Penny Askew"). Similarly, Popejoy also said she would love for the trainees to perform more outreach. She also mentioned the trainees turning into more of a small touring company, taking the trainee-

specific productions to nearby cities with full sets and costumes. But her main priority would be to keep the program as one that helps dancers prepare for taking on company contracts or apprenticeships (“Interview with Amanda Popejoy”). Most trainees would say their ideal program would be tuition-free, around 20 dancers, include a full day of dancing, with a dedicated trainee program director and one administrative assistant for that director. The program would also provide a small amount of pointe shoes per season.

The perfect trainee program can be dreamt up all day long, but this ideal ballet world does not exist, especially in the United States, as the amount of government funding for the arts is significantly lower than other countries. For comparison, in Russia ballet stars are treated like royalty, but 1 in 50 Americans might not be able to name more than one current ballet dancer. The minimal financial support for ballet companies has many effects on how they are run as organizations. Askew said, "It is a difficult business, especially in our country. Financially it has to be run a certain way because we don't get much government support. So it creates these issues and these deficits in weird areas. Of course it is also hard because there are too many girls for not enough jobs." (“Interview with Penny Askew”).

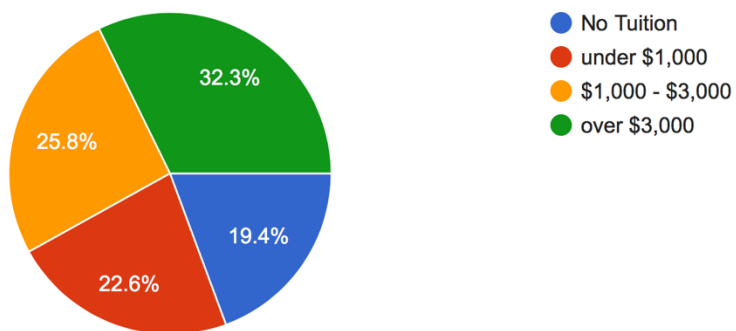
How much money would it take to fund the ideal trainee program? According to my survey, the majority of trainee programs cost around \$3,000 in tuition and had around 30 trainees participating (see fig. 6 and 7). For a ballet company to cover the tuition costs of 30 trainees, they would need \$90,000. Then the salaries of the trainee director and an administrative assistant would maybe cost another \$100,000. If each trainee got 6 pairs of pointe shoes per season (barely half the amount of shoes they use per season), this would cost \$18,000 because pointe

shoes cost around \$100 per pair. This brings our trainee program total to \$228,000 excluding the cost of the dance studio maintenance, costumes and set pieces, and any other potential costs.

**Figure 8** – from Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

### What were the tuition costs of your program?

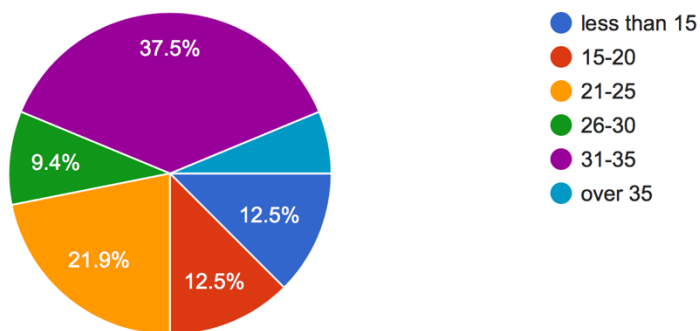
31 responses



**Figure 9** – from Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.

### How many people were in your program

32 responses



Ballet is an expensive art form, and the United States government does little to support the artists in this field. Many companies rely on big donors and grants for outreach programs. This is why an ideal trainee program does not exist at the moment; there is no way to financially sustain such an endeavor.

#### **14. Conclusion**

Because the perfect trainee program cannot exist due to funding, what can be done right now to improve the learning environment for young dancers? How can this new type of training program evolve and improve in the coming years? More conscious effort from directors and trainee instructors to provide a supportive yet challenging experience is the most helpful route. Ballet is physically and mentally demanding, and dancers without supportive environments cannot thrive. A positive space with optimized learning conditions is the most important element for classical ballet trainees. Each ballet dancer hopes they can fit in with a company somewhere; if they do not fit in, then they want help and suggestions on where to go next for the promotion of their dreams. Ballet training programs can teach dancers career-specific skills but also life skills - discipline, responsibility, and strong work ethic. Whether trainee dancers continue on to become professionals or if they test out company life and decide to pursue a different career, Askew wishes to be a valuable chapter in each trainee's life as dancers and as humans. She said, "maybe it is just a matter of being a good environment for young people to come, learn, grow, explore, and be curious about the dance world."

## Works Cited

- “BalletMet Trainee Program.” *BalletMet*, 2019, [www.balletmet.org/academy/specialized-training/trainee-program/](http://www.balletmet.org/academy/specialized-training/trainee-program/).
- “The Joffrey Ballet Trainee Program Catalog 2017-2018.” *The Joffrey Ballet*, [www.joffreyballetschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Joffrey-Ballet-School-Trainee-Catalog-2017-2018.pdf](http://www.joffreyballetschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Joffrey-Ballet-School-Trainee-Catalog-2017-2018.pdf).
- Larsen, Gavin. “Reading the Fine Print: Decoding What Trainee Programs and Second Companies Can Do For You.” *Pointe*, *Pointe*, 26 Nov. 2019, [www.pointemagazine.com/trainee-programs-second-companies-2638686929.html](http://www.pointemagazine.com/trainee-programs-second-companies-2638686929.html).
- McGuire, Kathleen. “Trainee Program Truths.” *Dance Magazine*, *Dance Magazine*, 16 Sept. 2019, [www.dancemagazine.com/in\\_training\\_trainee\\_program\\_truths-2306949599.html](http://www.dancemagazine.com/in_training_trainee_program_truths-2306949599.html).
- Peters, Jen. “The Truth About Trainee Programs.” *Pointe*, *Pointe*, 17 Sept. 2019, [www.pointemagazine.com/the-truth-about-trainee-programs-2412798909.html](http://www.pointemagazine.com/the-truth-about-trainee-programs-2412798909.html).
- Rick, Olivia. “Senior Project Research.” Survey. 5 Dec. 2019.
- Rick, Olivia, and Amanda Herd-Popejoy. “Interview with Amanda Popejoy.” 28 Oct. 2019.
- Rick, Olivia, and Penny Askew. “Interview with Penny Askew.” 15 Oct. 2019.
- Sherwin, Sarah, and Liz Stevenson. “Creating an Optimum Environment for Learning.” *British Journal of School Nursing*, vol. 5, no. 9, 2010, pp. 455–457., doi:10.12968/bjsn.2010.5.9.79775.
- Thompson, Candice. “Space to Grow: These 5 Dancers Share How They Stretched Themselves During Their Second Company Years.” *Pointe*, *Pointe*, 22 Mar. 2019, [www.pointemagazine.com/ballet-second-companies-2589565609.html?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5](http://www.pointemagazine.com/ballet-second-companies-2589565609.html?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5).



“Trainee Program.” *Oklahoma City Ballet*, Oklahoma City Ballet, 2019,  
[www.okcballet.org/school/trainee-program/](http://www.okcballet.org/school/trainee-program/).

“TRAINEE PROGRAM.” *San Francisco Ballet*, [www.sfballet.org/school-education/trainee-program/](http://www.sfballet.org/school-education/trainee-program/).

“Trainee Program.” *Trainee Program | Joffrey Ballet*, Joffrey Ballet,  
[joffrey.org/academy/programs-and-divisions/trainee-program](http://joffrey.org/academy/programs-and-divisions/trainee-program).