

Outcome Report: Developing Leaders Through Dance
Elyssa Fonicello, Third Year Arts Award



Credit: Jack Looney, UVA Department of Drama 2015

Last spring, I received funding for my proposed project: Developing Leaders Through Dance. The support of this Arts Award enabled me to attend the Now Next Dance Intensive for college students in the summer of 2015. Now Next Dance is a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit that endeavors to cultivate leadership skills “in and through” dance. As a Public Policy and Leadership major, I chose to attend this intensive because it offered a unique opportunity to develop as a dancer, educator, and leader. The intensive was an enriching experience that provided insight into connection between dance and the development of leadership skills.

The intensive involved mentoring and teaching middle school students local to the D.C. area. Along with my college peers, I was tasked with teaching part of a movement class for the students. Each day of the intensive focused on a specific principle relating to leadership. These included Action, Support, Curiosity, Challenge, and Resilience. The focus was Challenge on the day I was assigned to teach. With a partner, I developed movement that were intended to engage the students with “Challenge”. Though I did not have significant prior teaching experience, the intensive facilitators established a supportive environment in which I felt comfortable exploring new ideas.

I felt that the students emerged from each class with a different, more complete understanding of the principles. It was interesting to observe the ways in which each student engaged with the movement and activities. By the end of the intensive, I found that the students had developed a number of skills conducive to effective leadership. For example, the students had exercised their creative thinking and problem-solving skills through activities that asked them to think of their own movement or travel across the room in a specific way. Working in groups enabled students

to practice collaborating with different people. The students also developed non-verbal communication skills and listening skills. Additionally, the structure of the classes challenged students to adapt and improvise with change.

Another component of the intensive was technical training and repertory classes with professional dance artist Dante Brown of Dante Brown | Warehouse Dance whose work focuses on social justice. Dante and his dance company were in residence with Now Next Dance, which gave me a great opportunity to engage with professional dancers. The technique classes and repertory were challenging but extremely fulfilling. Dante's work focuses primarily around social justice. Over the course of the week, he created a piece with my group which we performed at the end of the intensive.

I emerged from the intensive excited to continue investigating the relationship between dance and leadership development. The intensive also allowed me to realize that I was less interested in teaching dance to young students than I was in performing and learning from other artists. While I did feel more confident in my ability to teach dance after the intensive, it was important for me to understand that I was less attentive and engaged when mentoring than being mentored. There is still an immense amount for me to learn about myself as a dancer, leader, and educator, but this intensive provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my progress this far.

In the Fall, I returned to the University to begin my first choreographic endeavor as an undergraduate student. My goal was to incorporate the tools I had learned for developing leadership through dance at the Now Next Dance Intensive into my choreographic process. I hoped to enable my dancers to become more embodied leaders. I was also interested in understanding my own leadership tendencies and habits as a choreographer.

While working with a group of six female-bodied dancers, I became interested in the exploring the movement tendencies of female-bodied leaders. By observing both male-bodied and female-bodied leaders, such as political leaders or leaders within the Charlottesville community, I developed a series of gestures I felt related to a component of leadership. I then abstracted these gestures into larger movement phrases. I also asked the dancers to generate their own abstractions of the gestures to develop a diverse movement language that included movement beyond that which I created on my own body.

The piece, titled *Diffident Direction*, was performed as part of the Dance Minor Program's Fall 2015 Dance Concert. To watch a compilation of excerpts from the piece, please follow this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5YFK-5iA7s>

I would like to thank all the generous supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinnie Miller and Evie and Stephen Colbert.