RE: Popular Dance in Higher Education–A Letter of Advocacy

[DATE]

Dear [Administrator],

Considering the ever-present global precarity facing academia, we believe that focusing on popular dance offers concrete, creative solutions. For these solutions to take root, however, a more robust popular dance presence is needed on campus at [insert institution]. The following recommendations emerge from ongoing conversations between dance faculty, researchers, practitioners, and students. We share them as a first step towards engaged conversation and collaborative investment in student learning. We encourage your feedback and project participation.

Popular dance programming directly benefits higher education institutions in powerful ways, but persistent sociocultural hierarchies (race, class, etc.) regularly exclude these fundamental movement techniques, even if unknowingly. Often, popular dance courses are taught by contingent faculty and are relegated to electives rather than integrated into dance programs.

This is a critical loss because popular dance forges interdisciplinarity. It generates cross-cultural understanding and responsiveness. It is a creative staple of important Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. Because forms like hip hop and salsa often emerge from marginalized communities, they can creatively foster sociality while encouraging those who face diverse forms of prejudice to shape their own identities. Popular dance practices also create space for manifold cultural communities to access dance in academia and, since popular dance invites participation from varied, underrepresented populations, it provides opportunities to attract increased resources and program funding. Broadly speaking, it populates courses with eager students from majors across the university and helps to retain them. Popular dance sustains social, scholarly, and artistic communities while promoting crucial lifelong learning skills.

For students entering the dance profession, popular dance study is fundamental. It supports their holistic well-being and is highly advantageous for performing in today's competitive market. For students studying other fields, this can be a gateway to knowledge and learning not readily accessible in, but complementary to, their studies and provides tools for flexible, resilient problem solving (increasingly necessary after the educational ravages of COVID-19).

In efforts to increase popular dance programming on campus, and to meet a spectrum of student, financial, and spatial needs, please consider the following three categories:

1) Dance Space: Popular dance often thrives outside frontal-facing or proscenium spaces and as such, may have unique needs that require space modifications. Just as ballet requires a studio, mirror, piano (or sound), and barres, tap, for instance, necessitates specific flooring, and hip hop uses street shoes (often prohibited on standard Marley flooring).

2) Hiring & Retention: Popular dance faculty across a range of styles are needed to maintain healthy academic cultures. Hiring practices must include expertise gained outside of degree-granting institutions as congruent with rigorous MFA and PhD standards. Recruitment practices and promotion criteria need to correspond as such to retain new, high-caliber faculty.

3) Institutional Language: The language used to advertise, describe, and categorize popular dance matters. Vernacular forms, even if rooted in particular racialized communities, are not homogenous (e.g. "black dance") and should be approached, presented, described, and scheduled as such. As with other dance techniques, cumulative learning across multiple semesters/years, rather than special topic modules, is imperative to valuing popular dance.

We urge administrative units to engage popular dance's inclusive artistic and cultural complexities. Crucially, popular dance embraces progress toward a more equitable dance industry, cultural field, and academic environment; its academic inclusion signals the same.

In addition to our advocacy, we kindly solicit your feedback and invite you to participate in developing an online repository for administrators, faculty, and practitioners supporting popular dance in academia. Please join us.

Sincerely,

[Names of advocates]

This letter was written by a small team of advocates, informed by contributions of the wider membership of the Dance Studies Association Working Group for Popular, Social, and Vernacular Dance, including full time professors, part-time faculty, independent scholars and practitioners, graduate students, and undergraduate students.

History and Intentions of the Advocacy Letter

This advocacy letter was created by members of the Dance Studies Association Working Group for Popular, Social, and Vernacular Dance* in response to a series of provocations and conversations about popular dance's role within institutions of higher education. Collectively, our goals are to 1) raise awareness about the value and benefits of including popular dance in curricula and 2) advocate for systemic and ideological change via multiple action points.

The letter is a template *and* a living document. As such, it invites adjustments for your specific circumstances and welcomes collective input. We encourage modifying language to reflect the current discourses of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access at your specific institution. We also encourage those who deploy the letter to share their experiences, responses, and recommendations for others by being in touch with popdancedsa@gmail.com. Thank you for your support of this important advocacy project.

*The template letter was co-authored and co-edited by Pritika Agarwal, Jen Atkins, Elizabeth June Bergman, and Clare Parfitt, with thanks to meaningful contributions from Meiver De la Cruz, Colleen Dunagan, Abdiel Jacobsen, Denise Machin, Julie Malnig, Val Meneau, Katherine Mezur, Dara Milovanovic, Christa Oliver, Kat Echevarría Richter, Max Winig, and others.