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Teaching Politically Engaged College Dance Students



BY BETSY BRANDT

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How politically engaged are today's college dance students? And how are faculty responding to and evolving with shifting needs?

As a teaching associate professor of dance at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, these questions have been at the top of my mind especially as election day is right around the corner. I spoke with three fellow college professors—all department heads from different dance programs—to compare notes, share best practices, and

ideate new strategies.

Defining “Politically Engaged”

In the middle of a tense election season, you might expect students to focus on presidential politics. But, in fact, an entire constellation of events and conditions have been continuing to shape their sense of political engagement.



PETER CARPENTER. PHOTO COURTESY CARPENTER.

“When I think about students and [their level of] political engagement, the highwater mark was George Floyd’s murder [in 2020], not an election,” says Peter Carpenter, chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance and Z. T. Scott Family Chair of Drama at the University of Texas at Austin, who was teaching at University of Florida at the time.

With such a high level of activation coming from the students, many college dance programs responded to the Movement for Black Lives with concrete changes within their institutions. “We really focused on building systems for what happens if there is a student complaint or concern. How do they raise it? How do we ensure there is no retaliation for that? How do we promote communication and access? How do we build diverse perspectives and representation in the curriculum?” Carpenter asks.

Student-led Palestinian solidarity movements on many college campuses have also brought political engagement close to home in the past year. “I walked past a rally calling for the college’s divestment from Israel on my way home tonight, right in front of the library,” says Balinda Craig-Quijada, professor and head of the dance program in the Department of Dance, Drama, and Film at Kenyon College.

COVID protocols, union organizing, climate change, transgender rights, and many other issues also resonate with our students and shape their worldviews. Gerald Casel, a professor at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and chair of its Dance Department, shared that a recent labor strike on campus was a catalyst for broader conversations. “An event like that opens up dialogue around what it means to be a political citizen. What are your responsibilities? And what does it mean to remain silent?” he asks.



GERALD CASEL. PHOTO BY KATHERINE HELEN FISHER, COURTESY CASEL.

In 2020, Casel developed the “Dancing Around Race” program, an engagement series that activates communities through candid discussions around racial equity. “I was invited to many places to speak about it, and it didn’t feel political. It felt like a healing project, a space for people to process difficult conversations around race.” In 2024, however, as DEI initiatives at many campuses are being dismantled, Casel notes that the program’s political dimensions feel different. “Now it feels like a tool, like this could actually help address those really difficult systemic, maybe invisible, changes that are happening.”

Conversations are happening on stages, too. A recent work by Craig-Quijada incorporated imagery around migration and climate change, initially sparking some trepidation among the cast. However, taking the time to discuss and process student concerns ultimately deepened their experience of the work. “If dance or art can make you think about these things in ways that you wouldn’t normally juxtapose, I think that’s a discussion worth having,” Craig-Quijada says. “It’s okay if you feel uncomfortable. Growing happens in discomfort.”



BALINDA CRAIG-QUIJADA. PHOTO BY TERRY THURSTON, COURTESY CRAIG-QUIJADA.

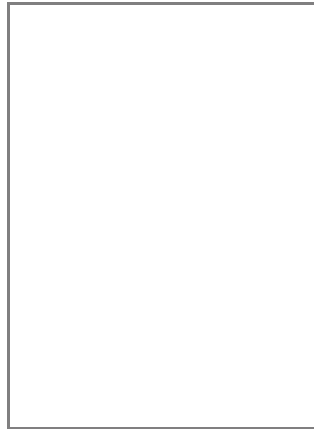
Three Key Takeaways

1. No college dance program, no student population, and no student is the same as any other. Avoiding generalizations can help cultivate space for students to engage in constructive dialogue. Modeling this in the faculty, letting them know that it’s okay to have different opinions on various dance-related topics, empowers a

student to apply and expect that agility outside of the classroom, as well.

2. Consider proactive versus reactive approaches to engaging with student concerns, especially around acute political events like the upcoming election. “We are holding the day after the election as a special space, a container for conversation or even to provide support. We are asking our mental health professionals to be on standby just in case,” says Casel. None of us know what November 6 will feel like, and we are not political scientists or psychologists. Learn about and share campus and community resources that could provide deeper education, context, and conversation around politically charged topics.

3. When referring students to campus-level resources like big town-hall events, visiting speakers, or large student-support offices, move with care. Especially on a larger campus, a dance class may be the most intimate space in a student’s day, and drowning a student in institutional resources may make them feel more alone. As the director of a nonmajors program at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, I regularly hear “This is the only class where the professor knows my name.”



CASEL WITH STUDENTS
FROM MASON GROSS
SCHOOL OF THE
ARTS/RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
AT CAMPING AT CENTRE
NATIONAL DE LA DANSE IN
2023. PHOTO BY MARC
DOMAGE, COURTESY CASEL.

While professionalism and boundaries are critical, it is also important that we hold space for students to explore how their dance studies connect to the world around them. As Carpenter says, “I encourage students to draw connections between work happening in the studio and the real world, so political content undoubtedly emerges.” This is not about asserting a political view; it is about creating, centering, and protecting space for the student’s experience.

Carpenter adds, “I think dance trains us to be attentive to bodies around us, and I see the benefit of that in the combination of passion, insight, attunement, and openness my students bring to their studies and their lives outside of dance.”