

To the Muhlenberg Dance Department,

Just over a week ago, an email petition was sent out by Maereg and additional student co-authors that addressed the omnipresent injustices as well as demands for creating a more equitable space in the theatre and dance department. However, we, various current and former dance students listed for reference below, wanted to create a conversation that addressed the nuanced needs of dance that are separate from that of theatre. While we recognize that there have been meetings to address the work to be done, we worry that most of the changes will only be experienced by the first half of the department's title as not a single vlog or email has come from any representative in the dance department.

We additionally begin by noting the delay in gathering our voices in a combined forum. We wanted to watch and see the approach the department would take as per broadcasted via Facebook and email for all to see. We waited to see if a dance professor would also physically appear in these vlogs to talk about the specific stance the dance half of the department would take. As we find ourselves out a week since the theatre petition was sent and see no brevity of dance, we have decided it was best to carve a space of our own. This email is less a petition and more a few gears that we hope will aid movement and change in the department going forward. We do want to honor that the department is undergoing many changes. We hope that in shifting leadership, discriminatory policies will too change with it. Below are references to personal experiences/soft demands written in various diverse voices of students and alumni verbatim in hopes that change can be implemented throughout the department.

**1) In the summer transition of department chairs, there needs to be a review of disparities of curriculum versus practice.**

It is one thing to teach in dance history that black dance is the norm or to take students on trips to view “concert” hip hop pieces, however, not including it on stage domestically and discouraging exploration of composition techniques outside of modern dance vernacular begins to create pseudo us/them mentality. That the ambiguous “they” may make works like “that” but that “we” here will stage the “more traditional.” We urge the department to review policies, practices, and traditions that uphold this cognitively dissonant us/them paradox and find ways to dismantle it.

**2) Incidents concerning racism that happen within the department should no longer be treated or solved solely through public relations.**

In the past when professors have done racist things in class, word has spread from student to student quickly. However, when made to address such situations, the department has only sent out one email. Though this can clarify some things, it can also divert important conversations at large. While we do not condemn Scott for doing his job, we have been disappointed that formal conversations have come directly from marketing. Additionally, when working on creating conversations due to reformatting and addressing a controversial Masters piece in 2019, the only conversation that was held was to keep the image of Master Choreographers clean through creating advertising videos about each piece in the concert instead. We encourage the department to consider when addressing race that the conversation need not only

circulate around the department's image at large, but rather the bodies, more specifically the BIPOC bodies, that are often systematically harmed within it during times of crisis.

3) **The work of exalting BIPOC dance and culture must not fall solely on the hands of BIPOC faculty and students.**

The following questions are questions students often ask themselves and discuss amongst themselves. Why is it that Randall Anthony Smith is the only one made to publicly exalt black choreographers outside of the classroom? Why must BIPOC students be assigned to make pieces of their oppression while white students can make works about whatever they choose? Why are discussions about black dancers and choreographers in class explained mostly by black students who are there to learn? How come Master Choreographers falls on Black History Month every year but **no** conversations about the contributions of black choreographers and dancers ever occurs unless a black student mentions it off hand? It is not the sole work of black people to explain and teach their experiences, struggles, and the biographies of artists who share the same skin tone to those who are not black themselves.

4) **Master Choreographers and Friday Master Classes need to diversify both its guest artists and its dance styles.**

Masters Choreographers, to our knowledge in the past five years has virtually remained unchanged. Oftentimes the work of creating "a less traditional concert piece" falls on Randall. He should not be the only person doing the work nor should the show continue showcasing the same stylistic forms of modern and ballet. Sammy Reyes has taught Hip Hop classes for years as well as choreographed for various theatre productions, why has he not been given an opportunity to create a piece for Master Choreographers? If Masters claims to want a diverse audience then it needs a diverse stage. Master Classes are usually only required or created to cater to Modern classes and occasionally Tap or Ballet classes, why have there not been master classes for other dance styles as well? As you take your students to ACDA yearly, you too have watched other collegiate dance programs present works and teach dance styles outside of Muhlenberg's dance vernacular. Schools in our LVAIC system, such as Lehigh University, offer dance styles outside of Muhlenberg's dance vernacular so what are we waiting for? It is time for Hip Hop, African, Caribbean, Hispanic culture, and more to exist on our stages and in our spaces.

5) **Dance Composition courses, as well as Mainstage Artistic Directors, should do more to protect BIPOC against harmful language used to describe how they look when in regard to a choreographer's artistic and aesthetic value.**

One example of this could be the implementation of useful language to know when lighting different skin tones on stage during the lighting week of advanced composition class. There have been various incidents where choreographers were upset with a black dancer because they could not light the stage as dark and ominous as they had wanted due to the dancer's skin being darker than the rest of the cast. Additionally, many BIPOC with textured hair have been told by both student choreographers as well as guest

choreographers, to alter (be it just by straightening or chemically) their hair in order to make it look “prettier” or “less messy.” There **needs** to be work done to address racism masked as preserving aesthetics.

6) **Mainstage dance concerts should be made more equitable.**

Similarly to preserving certain aesthetics, many BIPOC artists feel they are overlooked due to not only dancing different from the preferred Muhlenberg dance aesthetic from students but also because their own dance values are not brought to a composition or other classroom level. Consequently, students who make the choreography for these shows more often than not, pick their friends who dance in this taught and valued aesthetic, never giving people of color a chance to dance on stage. As a result, and as mentioned previously, every piece ends up having the same dancers in it and the same similar feeling to it.

7) **Dance History needs to teach dance history beyond Ballet and Modern and if a semester cannot meet that requirement there should be multiple dance history courses offered and required.**

A common principle that many of us were taught in Dance and Society (Dance History’s prerequisite) is that Ballet is not the source or foundation of all dance forms. However, in Dance History we study ballet history in the majority and how it influenced early American forms of Modern. This exhales as cognitively dissonant once again, the us them reappears, and ballet remains the source of most dance knowledge in the classroom and ultimately outside of the program. If the department believes and teaches that we need to decentralize ballet and modern as the main source of all dance then why are only ballet and moderns’ history being taught?

8) **The Muhlenberg Dance Association (MDA) needs an elected Inclusivity and Equity Position on the Board.**

BIPOC artists need a space where their needs get heard from a student to student position. Additionally, as we remain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are reminded again and again that dance remains within the realm of the political and yet without having a board position that addresses the world as it is, the organization loses this perspective. Some of us have not only served on the MDA but attempted in and were vetoed from creating this position due to the “existence of Dance & Society.” A single class cannot speak for an organization, the second largest student organization on campus at that. When will this position be given the green light? The Muhlenberg Theatre Association (MTA) has had a board position similar for years and the MDA models certain structures and rules by its sibling organization. Now more than ever is the time that MDA should join them in equity as well.

9) **Non-western dance forms, like Ballet and Modern in Dance, Technique, and Performance (DTP), should be required courses.**

At Muhlenberg just as many students have grown up on Hip-Hop dance culture as there are students who have grown up on Ballet. Moreover, there is a large value and culture

of Hip-Hop sensibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century “concert” dance world. Therefore, Hip-Hop should also be offered in more than two levels or broken into courses that would address the technique of different styles, it does not make sense that Hip Hop and the African dance course are taught as monoliths but that ballet and modern courses are more accessible with various levels, sections, professors, and styles. Additionally, and more specifically in regard to Hip Hop and African Dances and Cultures, the times of these classes should be made more accessible to students as they often coincide with mandatory courses such as Dance History and Dance and Society.

The work to be done is necessary, extensive, and never easy. We want to remind you that this provided list highlights only a few of the many issues and experiences students have faced while being a part of the dance department at Muhlenberg. With this said, it is imperative for the department to reevaluate itself now as the world outside Chew Street examines the systematic oppressions of BIPOC in the everyday, and continuously for the rest of its existence. Now more than ever is the time for the Muhlenberg Dance Department to rid itself of systematic practices. We end this email not with our own words but of the words of black dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild:

“The contact happens in many different arena, as mundane as clothes, hair, and food, and as ‘highbrow’ as art...Cultural expropriation, denial, insecurity, disenfranchisement, legislated inequality, anger, arrogance, stupidity, fear, hatred of self, hatred of others...they bring us back to the question of power: Who are the haves and the have nots, and how do they negotiate a contact zone or bordered meeting? When we strip the multicultural emperor of his elaborately worded, politically correct disguise, we find that [...] the naked issues of power and agency are the same old ones, now updated and masked in postmodern make-up. (from *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance; Dance and Other Contexts*).”

It is time you strip your mask.

Sincerely,

Nadia Ureña '19, Tatiana Lovera '20, Krystal Hall '21, Jaunice Vega '22, Shantell Cruz '19, Audrey Yan '19, Jalil Robinson '22, and Arianna Tilley '22.