

Payton Shepardson  
Argument and Advocacy  
Final Advocacy Project  
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## Letter to Ballet Directors

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Payton Shepardson, and I am a 19 year old female who has been dancing since the age of 2 years old. I have danced 6 days a week, 8+ hours a day, mainly focusing on the genre of Ballet and perfecting this style to the best of my ability. Since starting college in 2020, I have taken a step back from this level of commitment and in doing so, the realities of Ballet have shown through. There are serious steps and actions needed to be taken to alter what these stereotypes and expectations have done to thousands and thousands of humans passing through this art form.

Ballet is equated to appearance, an appearance/standard which is not attainable. Being constantly surrounded by this standard and expectation, makes dancers more vulnerable to disordered eating patterns. This is something that is extremely ingrained into dance society, and despite companies efforts to stray away from this concept, it is still extremely prevalent in numerous scenarios. From personal experience, I as well have struggled with disordered eating problems solely spurring from the dance world. I was fortunate enough to attend a performing arts boarding high school where I was able to further my education as well as my passion for dance at a pre professional level. However, I was faced with the constant feeling of failure when being in studios for up to 8+ hours a day surrounded by mirrors and students much smaller than me. Living in this environment for 2 years definitely left an impact on me in how I approached eating, exercising, and day to day tasks. I would not eat breakfast, despite exercising for 8 hours a day while dancing, I felt I still needed to work out outside of this to hopefully lose a few pounds to look more like my friends. Although the administration was very clear that they were an inclusive environment and never let things like size impact decision making, I still often felt that if I was smaller, I would have the better roles, or I would be in the higher level. Recent studies show that up to “66% of young dancers still struggle with body image and or disordered eating” as the “icon of the thin, perfectly lean ballerina has wormed its way into every corner of the ballet world”. Success is often associated with this standard, as certain costumes only come in certain sizes, or you need to be able to be lifted by men, all which have been associated to only work if you are a certain size or weight. Even in the media, this concept is perpetuated on outlets such as youtube, where there are countless workouts with titles such as, *“The Lean Ballerina Legs You’ve Always Wanted”*. Being constantly surrounded by these standards society places on dancers impacts all parts of our life, from physical to mental and to social.

As a dancer there is an extreme sense of competition and constant comparison to those around you. Being selected for lead or supporting roles, all comes down to the analysis of each dancer against the next, deciphering who has the best turns, leaps, alignment, etc. This constant comparison can seriously hurt one's mental health, as feelings of not being good enough can spiral in our heads into so much more. From a study performed on present and past professional dancers, via The Professional Counselor, there were many instances where participants expressed how dance has impacted their sense of self worth and overall positive mental being. One participant, Abby, stated, “In ballet, everything was just so competitive and mind twisting. I was raised with the idea that every day is an audition”. She added, “This could be your day, or if you

don't work hard today then 3 months from now it is going to creep up on you. So, it's this weird, like, permanence that is doomed upon us". According to Abby, there was a daily pressure to achieve greatness, which at times caused injury. Not being able to take proper time off without fear of losing your status or capabilities, makes for a dangerous and unhealthy routine that dancers place themselves in to hopefully combat these lacking feelings of self worth.

I would like to provide some possible actions and next steps you can take as a company to help alter the dynamic and environment of the Ballet world. Being a leading company in this community, you can set the example and aid others in doing the same. To start, it would be extremely beneficial to require a dietitian to be a part of your team throughout the season. Having this accessible for dancers to work with to maintain healthy eating habits and their overall approach to food, can help to keep dancers physically fit to perform their best, without hurting their body via starvation. Another service to take on would be to have a therapist onboarded to your team as well. Strongly encouraging dancers to meet with this person, even if they are not actively struggling with something, can help to keep everyone mentally in check and to potentially catch any issues earlier on before they escalate too far. Adding these measures to your company will not only make you look better as a business, but will also make your dancers look and feel better and overall shape the look of Ballet in a new light.

Sincerely,

Payton Shepardson