

Dancing on College Campuses

by *Jenny Beer and Joanna Reiner*

Why start a dance group on a college campus?

- P Dancing is social, athletic, noncompetitive, musical, social and participatory — not many other activities offer this combination.
- P People who think they can't dance or aren't athletic turn into dancers.
- P For local dance leaders — it's great fun to teach an enthusiastic, high-energy, mostly able-bodied group.
- P Opportunity to “grow” your own musicians.

Tempering your high hopes

- P College students will probably not stay in the area or become a part of your dance community. You are giving them the gift of dance that they may take and use elsewhere or at any point in their lives. And for the enthusiasts, you are giving a gift to some other dance community when the student moves on.
- P Teaching students to do your favorite kind of dancing may not perpetuate it into the future. Dance styles are always changing and your students who love your kind of dance today may latch onto another kind tomorrow. That's okay. Teach them for today.
- P Students don't all become good dancers and may not particularly care about learning to dance well. Some may, but for the most part they come to dance because they want to have fun right now — not to wait for the fun to begin when they achieve a certain level.
- P Folk dancing is not cool. In fact it is way uncool. It is not easy to overcome that for some students.
- P Some students may have parents who dance — few will bless your dance group with experience and enthusiasm. However, most go miles out of their way to avoid an activity associated with their parents.
- P The college or university won't love your group because folk dance is a nice, wholesome activity. It brings zero prestige or benefits to college administrators or faculty (unless they personally like to dance). In fact, colleges are structured to keep their students away from the dozens and dozens of outside groups that would like to have a campus foothold.

What works?

- P Repeat after me: Teenagers do things in clumps. Wooing individual students, especially if you are trying to get a group started, is not worth your time. Look for groups of students who might be interested (most likely are Society for Creative Anachronism, musicians into early music, folk music or ensemble playing, sci-fi/gaming types, students who are already doing other kinds of dancing).
- P Help the students attract more students. Publicity and persuasion coming from them will be much more effective than anything you can do. Encourage them to bring a friend or two. Give public dance demonstrations whenever there's an opportunity. Dance on the lawns or while waiting to get into the dining hall. Keep the doors and windows open during your regular dances. Put up snazzy posters. Keep an up-to-date website (run by students).
- P Don't call them “young people”! Students can feel as if they are a category not a person.
- P If your dance is officially on campus, you need to have good connections to help you deal politically with

college administrations, dance departments, physical education departments, space schedulers, etc. The struggles for space, for credit, for funds never end.

- P Dance community support can make your campus group survive. However, this support needs to be consistent and sustained. Liberal arts college students in particular are isolated from the world. Anyone from outside the campus is a “stranger.” Ask your community participants to come often and become part of the group, a resource for students and a link to the outside world, whether they are callers, organizers, community dancers and/or musicians.
- P Students respond best to adults who provide steady, affectionate, playful support. College can be an emotional time and students are still figuring out relationships, career, how to be an adult. They may develop strong attachment to adult dance leaders. Be prepared to handhold, to cheerlead!
- P Student dancers tend to have different energy levels and different needs than your local dancers do. They are also incredibly scheduled up and burdened with schoolwork. This may mean that your dance should have more aerobic dances, a greater variety of dances to help avoid boredom, more frequent water breaks and the dance evening may need to be shorter, etc.
- P Food! Food! Food! Especially home-prepared goodies, since students live in cafeterias and pizza shops. Guaranteed to attract participants and to create a cared-for feeling.
- P Grad students are in a very different place than undergrads. A dance that might attract one group may not attract the other group.
- P Dance events off campus seem very far away to a liberal arts college student, even if it's only a few blocks from the college. Students have their own lives on campus, and unless they are diehards, will not likely be interested in coming to your community dances. What can you do? Offer rides! (We can't overemphasize how important this is). Offer them food as a further incentive, if you like, but leave it at that.
- P Finding and keeping a space on campus is a major headache, even when the dance group is well established. Large empty rooms with wood floors and decent acoustics are rare and someone else has more clout than you do in reserving them. Be flexible. Be creative. Be willing to move furniture and haul your own keyboard.
- P Students who have been dancing a number of years can sometimes dampen the spirits of newer dancers. Make sure that the group is run in a participatory, open manner that brings new students into the loop. Encourage seniors to mentor and teach rather than project a jaded and bored attitude.
- P Collaborate with other groups/departments on campus — theater, music, other dance.
- P Sponsor events so that the group has a project to work on together and a reason to learn to dance better.
- P Look for devices to draw in students: Jane Austen, medieval things, Scottish tartans, etc.
- P Build a link with an academic class — literature classes, music classes, linguistics (here at Swarthmore a popular connection).

Our personal experiences

We have been involved with several college dance groups. Here's what we find helps sustain the dances at Swarthmore, Haverford and Bryn Mawr today.

- P Even though our dances are taught by local musicians and dance leaders, the *students* are in charge as much as possible — it is their club, their evening, their group of friends, their choice what kind of dance they want to learn.
- P The colleges have Anglo traditions so that English/contra/Scottish are not as foreign to the administration or students as they might be on other campuses. Swarthmore's Folk Dance Club has been around for decades — we have strong alumni and community support.

- P The Club puts on a ball, a musicians' workshop, a contra series, demonstrations and sometimes a guest workshop. This gives them something to work toward.
- P We have had steady and wise faculty advisors who are willing and able to go to bat for the group when necessary, and who come dance/play music as one of the group.
- P Two events a year (English Scottish Ball and Hogmanay) draw many returning alumni, sometimes from great distances. Graduating students look forward to coming back for those dances. Current students are awed to meet someone who started dancing in their club thirty-five years ago.
- P Our dance groups are part of overlapping social networks — sci-fi groups, SCA, round singing, early music.
- P Dance is offered for credit — PE, music ensemble, etc. This guarantees us about ten dancers a night, even when the semester heats up. (Our attendance this year has been between twenty and thirty a night.)
- P Students help talk through or even teach the dances. Students also play for the dance.
- P We plan our dance teaching loosely to respond to the mood and numbers of who shows up. Generally, the attention span and the time they can get away to come dance is much shorter than at our local dances.
- P Students have favorite dances and we do them often.
- P We help students find dance groups in their home towns, introduce them to dancers or musicians who can mentor them, help them get scholarships to dance camps, and in general connect them to the larger worlds of CDSS and RSCDS.
- P We organize effectively to have events and advertisement at the beginning of the semester before students get engaged in other activities. In the fall, we do whatever we can think of to attract freshmen during the first weeks. (This requires planning during vacation time.)
- P We hold a dance as soon as students come back to campus, before the official start of PE classes. It's a good hook and gives students who may not want to commit to a weekly dance some exposure to it.
- P Bagpipes! Men in kilts! Morris dancers! Irresistible. Or at least attention-getting.
- P While it is politically regrettable, our attractive, energetic, experienced male teacher is a strong draw for students of both genders.
- P Live music has helped us increase attendance. It adds to energy levels, gives musicians a reason to come participate, attracts attentions from passers-by, improves dance quality.
- P Our college dances are not open to the public. We ask people to consult with the leaders before coming. We welcome anyone who can keep up with students' mental and physical pace and can blend into the group while keeping the mood and leadership in the hands of students. We watch for men who are out looking for younger women.
- P The groups maintain an email list and regularly update websites. Student leaders send out a weekly email of on and off-campus dance events.

"Dancing on College Campuses" is based on notes taken during a discussion, led by the authors, at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) in Natick, Massachusetts in April 2002. Jenny and Joanna welcome comments; you can reach them through <http://germantowncountrydancers.org/campus.html> which is the Germantown Country Dancers' website. This article was published in the Summer 2002 issue of the NEFFA News and was reprinted with permission in the CDSS News, issue #168, September/October 2002.