Ivy League Ballet

Getting an Ivy League education no longer means you have to give up performing. Several top universities, including Columbia, Princeton and Harvard, host student-run companies for classically trained dancers. And they’re more than just clubs for amateurs—they boast professional-caliber dancers and distinguished choreographers.

“I like that I get to be in an academically challenging program—but also dance as much as I want,” says Harvard Ballet Company’s current director Harri Lever, a sophomore majoring in history and science with a secondary major in global health and health policy.

None of the companies offer training as rigorous as an official dance major. But members receive regular open classes and biannual performance opportunities, often dancing in work set or created on them by esteemed choreographers. Harvard Ballet Company—which currently has about 50 active members, including dancers who’ve performed with Zurich Ballet, Boston Ballet, Los Angeles Ballet and ABT—performed a new ballet by Peter Pucci and brought in Deborah Wingert to set Balanchine’s "Walpurgisnacht" Ballet this fall.

Columbia Ballet Collaborative has danced premiers by Matthew Neiman, Emery LeCrone and Adam Hendrickson, and the 24 dancers have been joined by guest artists such as New York City Ballet principal Amir Ramen. Princeton University Ballet’s 15 dancers have performed work by Christopher Fleming and Susan Jaffe. All three companies also offer opportunities for students to choreograph.

If you’re visiting campuses this spring, catch the companies in action. Columbia Ballet Collaborative performs April 9 and 10. Harvard Ballet Company performs April 15 and 16. Princeton University Ballet will perform the week of May 2. Find out more at dance101.com.

Get Discover

The end of the school year means exciting performances. That can be a chance to impress company directors. But what signals to them that an advanced student is ready to be a professional? Joffrey Ballet artistic director Ashley Wheater shares his advice as students from the Academy of Danes, Official School of The Joffrey Ballet in Chicago prepare to perform "Sleeping Beauty May 20–22.

PT: When you attend a student performance, what do you want to see? AW: That they understand the ballet they’re performing. The classics are hard and demanding because if you make a mistake, we all know it. But you can’t forget that technique is just a means to an end. Aurora should burst onto the stage with joy, knowing that everyone is there to celebrate her 16th birthday. Think about why those particular steps are in there. Doing them nicely is just the beginning.

PT: What do you look for in students you’re considering hiring? AW: You’ve got to be able to apply the style the choreographer is asking for. I don’t just look for talent, but how dancers learn—both the steps and the music. They have to know how to be a corps dancer. Are they aware of where they are on the stage? Do they remember corrections? I also look for people who are really versatile, and who show they understand that all movement comes from the spine.

PT: What makes your eye gravitate to one student over another on stage? AW: My eye always goes to the dancers who really know how to breathe with the music. Even if it’s moving absolutely together with a corps of 32 people, she always stands out.