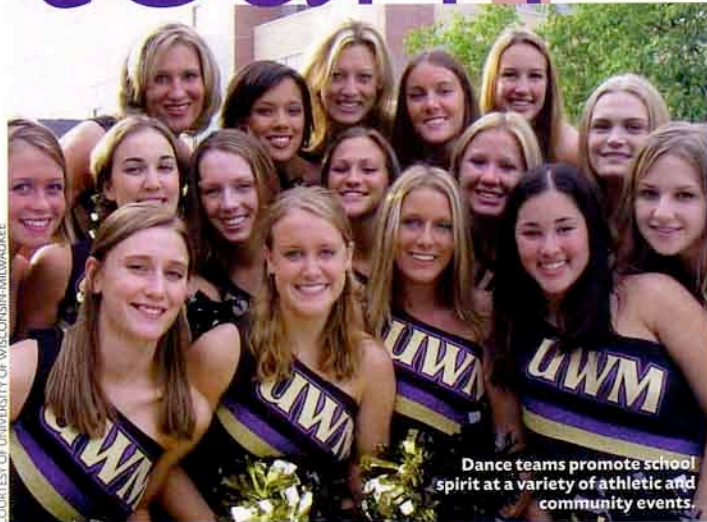


by Jen Jones

*Advice on starting a college dance team from those who've been through it with flying colors*

# dance team



Dance teams promote school spirit at a variety of athletic and community events.

**D**ance teams are becoming increasingly prevalent on college campuses and, even if a school hasn't yet established a team of its own, it may be receptive to starting one. Enter you, the college faculty member or the studio teacher who wants to experience the collegiate scene. No matter what your background is, your skills are in high demand and can be invaluable in getting such a program started.

Dance teams belong to the "spirit" family, supporting the sports teams on campus along with the cheer squad and booster club. Think the Laker Girls gone collegiate! While a cheer squad's main

purpose is to lead the crowd, a dance team sets itself apart by striving solely to entertain. Using jazz and hip-hop techniques in short, punchy routines, dance teams wow the crowd at sports halftimes and school and community events.

Nicole Hegge, head dance team coach at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, considers her team ambassadors of spirit and the school name. "Our main purpose is to promote school spirit at UWM and perform at men's and women's basketball, soccer, volleyball and club football games," she says. "We do a lot of public appearances around campus and the community. We're representing UWM and Milwaukee."

Dance teachers with studio backgrounds are a logical choice to work with college

dance teams, either as choreographers or coaches. They enjoy the fast pace and tend to be competition-oriented. Former cheerleaders and hip-hop dancers also transition well into this world of sharp and flashy choreography. If you're considering making the crossover, follow these guidelines from veteran coaches for a smooth takeoff:

1. Lay the groundwork. It's crucial when organizing a dance team to start off on the right foot with the university. Set up meetings with the athletic director and/or dean of student affairs to discuss your objectives, proposed time line and financial needs. (At some schools, the dance team falls under the jurisdiction of the band department, so you may want to meet with the band director as well.) After you emphasize the value and spirit such a team could add to the campus, you'll probably find the support you need. If the school doesn't fully fund the team, consider fundraisers, team dues or applying for grants.

As with starting and operating any collegiate activity, there will be a considerable amount of paperwork and red tape. Determine early on whether you'd like the dance team to be considered a club or varsity sport, which makes a huge difference in the amount of financial support it will be able to receive from the school. Varsity sports get more funding than club sports, which are considered recreational rather than competitive. You will be asked to present your case to the student funding organization, which will then allocate funds and approve the team as a recognized school sport or activity.

2. Gauge interest and assemble talent. Once you have the green light from the

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school, it's time to get the word out. Typically, dance team auditions are held in the spring for the upcoming school year—it gives dancers all summer to practice, hone skills and attend camp. Some schools also leave a few spots so incoming freshmen can try out in the fall.

Cindy Freeman, head dance team coach at Avila University in Kansas City, Missouri, takes a different approach: recruiting. Since she founded her team in 2000, Freeman has spent a great deal of time each year observing dancers at local studios and high schools, handpicking talent. "Though many schools just count on the enrollment coming in, my main focus is recruiting," says Freeman. "Because I had a history with the dance studios in the area, I was able to draw really strong dancers as the nucleus of the program and build it around them." Studio teachers, take heed: Your background can help you woo a talent pool and hit the ground running.

Freeman also has an innovative take on auditions, adding members gradually throughout the year as she recruits. In April, instead of holding tryouts, she offers a one-day clinic during which veterans and newcomers can get to know one another and start training for the following year.

Shortly after auditions, it's crucial to set up a leadership hierarchy before moving forward. As coach, your job is to inspire,

support, mediate and guide. In light of these considerable tasks, many coaches name a captain, or several captains, to lead practices, serve as a liaison between the coach and the team and act as a peer leader. Some teams choose to elect captains by team vote rather than having the coach appoint them.

3. Deal with the logistics. As a dance teacher, you're accustomed to taking care of nitty-gritty details such as securing rehearsal space and costuming. Heading a dance team is no different. In the startup process, tasks such as buying stereo equipment, securing rehearsal space and ordering costumes and poms will fall on your shoulders. Take a deep breath if you're feeling overwhelmed—your captains will be helping you every step of the way.

How easy it will be to find rehearsal space depends on the circumstances at your school. Freeman's dance team has unlimited access to its own multipurpose room, which doubles as a dance studio, while Hegge laughs that at UWM her team has to share a small gym space with a fencing team after 9 p.m. As your team becomes more established, you'll likely find it easier to get premium time slots and a larger practice space. Until then, hang in there.

Also important is drawing up a rules and procedures manual so that your policies are clear from the start. Some coaches opt

For more information on dance teams and competition opportunities, contact the following national organizations:

**National Dance Alliance**

[www.nationalspirit.com](http://www.nationalspirit.com)  
877-NDA-2WIN

**Universal Dance Association**

[www.varsity.com](http://www.varsity.com)  
901-387-4360

to craft an inspiring mission statement as well. For the coed Hip-Hop Coalition at Arizona State University, the mission statement sets forth that "no matter what your body type, race or sex, we all come together for a common love of dance," says Kristen Nance, former director of the team and current high school dance instructor.

4. Carve out your team's niche. Most college dance teams focus on two main purposes: performance and competition. Because dance teams are considered support teams, they are often expected to perform at women's and men's sports events on campus. You can use these opportunities to feature daring choreography to dazzle the crowd; most teams typically use a blend of jazz and hip-hop steps. However, some teams center around cultural dance or a certain discipline, which can be a great selling



Dance team choreography usually combines jazz and hip hop.

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point for specialized dance teachers in landing choreography or coaching gigs.

Seasoned hip-hop instructor Susan Morton was able to parlay her experience into a consulting job with ASU's Hip-Hop Coalition. Impressed with Morton's background teaching at studios, team founder Leslie Scott brought her onboard to assist with the team launch in 1997. "My teaching abilities were really helpful in cleaning up the team's technique and transitions," says Morton.



As your team becomes more established, rehearsal space will be easier to secure.

Once a new dance team is ready to perform outside the comfort zone of home base, competition opportunities abound. Major regional and national competitions are held yearly by organizations such as National Dance Alliance and Universal Dance Association. Teams can qualify to compete by attending each organization's respective summer camps, where new skills and routines are learned and existing material can be presented for critique.

After AU's dance team launched in 2000, Freeman immediately got involved on the national competition circuit. "From the beginning, we saw that we had a lot of talent and a good future competitively and we built on that," says Freeman. "Our team is so competitive at the core that we do have a great deal of focus on going to Nationals." The team's competitive drive has landed them in the Top 10 in UDA's Open Division the past four years.

On the flip side, Hegge of UWM let her own team become more seasoned for a while before taking to the competition mat. Though the team had been in existence since the late 1970s, team reorganization and overhaul was necessary in 1997, and Hegge took the reins. "Once we established our team manual and rules and our purpose on campus, we started competing," she says. "It was a long road until we saw results, but it was worth it."

When preparing for competition, Hegge urges coaches to use their strengths and have fun—a strategy that landed her team first place in UDA's hip-hop division earlier this year. "Year to year, our focus is dependent on the talent level of the girls," she says. "This past year, we had a really good technical jazz-based group, but because they had more fun with the hip-hop routine, that pushed them the extra mile in a competitive situation to bring home the win."

5. Increase campus visibility. As soon as the team is established, make a name for it by setting up public appearances and performing charity work in your community. Many teams perform at college staples such as Homecoming, Parents' Weekend and holiday and fundraising events. This will help get the word out in the community about your growing dance program, boosting public support and garnering a loyal fan base.

Without a doubt, starting a college dance team takes a lot of hard work, dedication and patience. Calling on your background as a dance instructor, you'll be able to move the program from its inception to its full potential. **DT**

Jen Jones is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.