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The Art of Teaching (Dance) Teachers to Teach

BY [CAROLINIANWEB](#) on [OCTOBER 11, 2018](#) • [\(o \)](#)

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For any education major, the scholastic apex of your college experience will be student teaching. You've built up your pedagogical skills for three and a half obstacle-ridden years to finally get the opportunity to begin passing on your wisdom to the next generation. It's the final step before getting your own classroom, having your own students and making your own rules. Thanks to Dr. Mila Parrish, the Director of Dance Education in the dance department at UNCG, this timeline can be fast-tracked for dance education majors.

Parrish identifies herself as a “teacher of teachers,” and her dedication to her craft is evidenced by her recent acceptance of the National Dance Education Organization’s “Dance Educator of the Year” award. Parrish is one of only nine recipients in the history of this award, and is the first educator from UNCG to be distinguished with this honor. Parrish is perhaps most notably recognized for her development of a university-based program known as Dancers Connect.

Dancers Connect is a community outreach based program in which community children can receive weekly, high quality dance education from college dance majors on a college campus, at a cost more feasible than a studio. Catering to both adolescent dance students seeking superb training and dance education majors seeking education experience outside of a



PC: Eden Landgrover

potentially restricting public school internship, this program trains future teachers in pedagogy and allows them to learn from experienced teachers. The program allows students to work up to eventually putting their observations into practice and developing their own teaching style long before graduation.

The program was developed and pioneered in 2007 at the University of South Carolina by Dr. Parrish, and was brought to UNCG in 2013 when she took over the dance education department. Parrish was hand-selected to fill this position by Dr. Sue Stinson upon Stinson's retirement. Stinson was the former Interim Dean of Music, Theatre and Dance and had established the foundations of UNCG's dance education department; the legacy to which Parrish largely credits the growth of the program.

Parrish notes that she developed Dancers Connect specifically with future dance educators in mind; she intended it to be a "laboratory in which new teachers can develop their teaching skills." The environment Parrish has established within Dancers Connect encourages instructional exploration and experimentation that can be limited in a public school setting, where teachers can only operate within the strict confines of a state-mandated curriculum. The Dancers Connect program "encourages future educators to create child-centered education," says Parrish.

Parrish heavily credits community parents and the Greensboro arts community for the exponential growth of this program. Having started with only 3 classes and 26 students at the University of South Carolina, the program has now grown to serve over 100 students, offering 16 classes. Parrish notes that the program has "grown beyond [her] wildest dreams," and that none of it would be possible without the support of parents who acknowledge the value in "good, child-centric expression and instruction."

At the conclusion of each instructional season (each semester), there is a program-wide "sharing" in which each class performs a brief routine to share what they have been learning in class. Dr. Parrish strongly believes in the power of labeling this event a "sharing" rather than "show" or "performance."

She recounts that placing the emphasis on sharing with your community what you have learned allows the child to focus on the joy of dance and truly build a community, rather than placing any stress on perfection. "This is what sets our program apart from other studios," Parrish says, "putting on a big flashy show doesn't drive our students to achieve- the love of dance does."

Aside from fostering the fellowship between young community dancers and rising educators within this program, Dancers Connect has been strategically incorporated into the education curriculum at the university to allow education majors to acquire practical and informed teaching experience. When dance education majors enter their teaching practicum courses,

they are immediately immersed in a collaboratively taught Dancers Connect class orchestrated by dance education professor Melinda Waegerle.

This allows students to ease into the process of teaching a dance class by observing a master teacher in action, working with classmates to develop thorough lesson plans, and synergistically beginning to lead classes alongside classmates. It is a learning process, and as Parrish points out, teaching teachers is, “the whole ballgame.” She adds that this degree of care for a holistic dance education for future teachers is why college students gravitate to UNCG’s dance education program- this program “puts teachers out there and lets them practice doing what they came here to do- teach.”

This program as a whole is a collaborative effort from the entire UNCG community. Undergraduate students, graduate students, and dance faculty all work together to create a high quality dance experience for the community, and the success of the program is best evidenced by the program’s extensive staff. Parrish expresses that “people are drawn here,” and this notion is indisputably indicated by the amount of volunteers and teachers within the program. Parrish notes that “everyone involved is supported, nurtured, and fed while they explore.”

Dancers Connect has exposed countless community children to dance and expression over the years, and has provided even more educators with the security and opportunity to find out who they are as a teacher and mover. “These people need to create together. That’s the only way that anything can work.”