

MDEA Grant Summary and Report
George Washington Carver Center for Arts and Technology
July 30, 2019

Grant Recipient – Maria Royals
Project Name: Male Dancer Development Program

Carver Center's MDDP (Male Dancer Development Program) was first implemented in the 2016-17 school year. A variety of supports were put in place to address concerns with low male enrollment and an unusually high percentage of male dancers entering but not completing the program at Carver Center. The MDDP was discontinued in the 2017-18 school year due to staffing and funding cuts, and reinstated last year with funding from the Maryland Dance Educators Association and The Education Foundation of Baltimore County Public Schools.

The numbers of male dancers in any dance program can fluctuate from year to year. After not having any males enroll for the Class of 2018 and 2019, and after losing 2 of 3 male dancers from the Class of 2017, and 1 of 4 from the Class of 2020, we searched for possible causes of this problematic trend and worked hard to create a stronger support system for our male dancers. Immediate causes for student dismissal varied from academic failure, to behavioral/conduct issues (suspension and expulsion), to overwhelming health concerns. These issues could be present among any student in the dance prime, but they had not led to dismissal of any in our female population. During the same period between 2014 and 2019, none of our female students were similarly dismissed.

All students enter high school with their own set of challenges, however, the male dancer enters with a decided disadvantage. While they are celebrated, sought after and highly valued within the dance environment, they face gender bias, discrimination, and social exclusion in their everyday lives. Even in a 'safe environment', such as Carver Center, where diversity and respect are held in high regard, the insecurity and fear that comes with challenging social norms can make socialization difficult. The MDDP is our attempt to build confidence, a vital support network, dance skills, and leadership capacity in our male dancers.

There are several components of the program which engage the dancers socially, physically, psychologically, and academically. Those components include:

- Parent Meeting/Discussion – to discuss program goals, initiatives, and family support for the MDDP program.
- MDDP participant meetings/discussion (3x/year) – time for the male dancers to meet, talk about their shared and individual experiences, and experience comradery.
- Men's Class with male dance teachers (5-6/year) – area professional male dance teachers provide a positive role model and instruction specially tailored to meet the needs of male students.
- Men's Ensemble – choreography from staff and guest artists made available to all male students for performance in Winter and Spring concerts.

- Men's Ensemble Outreach – student created lecture/demonstration entitled, “Men in Dance.” Performances for area middle and elementary school students to provide exposure of males dancing to young students.
- Teacher/staff counseling (2-3x/year or as needed). Teachers arrange periodic meetings to address immediate student needs, check on academic progress, refer students to other professionals in the building (counselors, social workers, health professionals, etc.), advise students on further study in dance, summer programs, and scholarship opportunities.

The Male Dancer Development Program had a positive impact on the participants' development in many areas. One of the most important goals of the program is to build support for these young men through a sense of community. Their community consists of the 8 male dancers, families, teachers, peers, the mentors/teachers they were introduced to through the year, and the young students they reached through their outreach presentations. Student surveys completed at the end of the program revealed the degree of value they found in each component and those which they found most valuable. Every component of the program helped to build and strengthen their community.

The dancers identified the challenging classwork and choreography posed by guest artists and resident teachers to be among the most valuable components of the program. In the environment of the “all male” dance class, students felt comradery, competition, and cohesion as a group. They also came away with important realizations. Student T. stated, “I learned to embody the strength of a male dancer.” Student H. stated, “I learned the importance of always raising your personal ‘bar’, and to give 100% to every class.” Within the all-male class, the absence of women/girls enables the young men to focus more intently upon the class objectives and build their artistry with fewer distractions. Similarly, in the guest artist choreography, the students were challenged tremendously. They found, “It took me out of my comfort zone” and “I learned the importance of learning quickly” (Student Q.) Although this choreography required physical intensity, stamina, and high skill level it was the component of the program which they valued the most. They felt accomplished after working long hours to perfect the movement and appreciated the challenge. The participants ranked this activity as the most valuable component of the program receiving an average score of 9/10 on the student survey for value gained.

In the area of health literacy, the benefits of the program were multi-faceted. Both the teacher counseling and group meetings were seen as a positive by the young men. In regard to the men's group meetings, Student Q stated, “We were able to connect and share our experiences as male dancers.” This connection started from the first month of school and “set a foundation” (Student H) for the experiences which followed. The participants appreciated that the counseling was “non-judgmental” (Student X) and supportive. They also found within these supports a forum for voicing their concerns and a safe place to “open up” about common experiences. Student grade checks were of particular importance for freshmen male dancers who had the very common problem of adjusting to high school expectations. Helping the students to recognize weaknesses,

regroup, and address problems enabled them to make positive changes and turn their grades around.

One of the most impactful components of the program was the community outreach lecture/demonstration performances. All of the dancers felt that they contributed to the audiences they reached. They conceived and organized the presentation themselves and took the lead in every aspect of the demonstration. Each student chose a well-known male dancer/choreographer to research and then choreographed a solo or duet inspired by this dancer. The presentation included group dances, individual student demonstrations, audience interaction, and a question/answer period. It was obvious that having an opportunity to lead others, collaborate on a presentation, and then experience the joy and admiration of an audience made a lasting impression on our dancers. Where dance is sometimes seen as ‘inappropriate’ for boys, they demonstrated the communicative, emotional and physical, power of dance to an audience who was eager to learn. From Alexa Saunders, dance teacher at Deep Creek Middle School,

“This performance not only brought life back to our dance room, but it also inspired my dancers to push themselves to their fullest potential. Many times, the public eye sees dance as a ‘female only’ sport. Seeing the male dance troupe showed not only my dancers, but other students in the school, that it is ‘acceptable’ and encouraged for males to dance.”

Leadership
Communication
Collaboration
Responsibility

All of these 21st Century skills were enhanced by the Male Dancer Development Program. The young men became stronger as dancers, as leaders, and as a group through connection and support. Happily, all of the male students in our program, will continue at Carver Center for the coming year. We are hoping to continue our work with and for these young men and expand our community outreach to include more schools. In the words of our dancers, “It (the lecture/demonstration) made me realize that I can make an impact on the community” and “...it allowed us to share what we do at Carver with other dancers and you never know who you might inspire.” Just so, these young men inspire us to continue our work with the MDDP, giving them the opportunity to make a positive impact on our community and to find a sense of purpose in their dancing.

The array of supports provided by the MDDP accomplish 3 goals: provide a supportive community with resources for male dancers; enhance social, emotional, leadership, and technical dance skills; break down barriers which disable males in dance. Ultimately, we hope not only for the success of our male dancers, but, to awaken a sense of responsibility in these young people – looking beyond themselves, to the communities we live in and working toward acceptance, excitement, and wholesale involvement of boys in all forms of dance.

