DANCE
Pairing Ballet With a Bachelor’s Degree

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On a recent Sunday evening the lobby of the Hotel Pennsylvania in Midtown Manhattan was crammed with weary tourists weighed down by shopping bags and guidebooks, porters wheeling racks of overstuffed suitcases and a sight entirely alien: slim, graceful figures gliding to the elevator bank like swans.

It was a school night, and the lithe creatures passing through the lobby were dancers enrolled in the New York extension of Liberal Education for Arts Professionals, or LEAP, a much-lauded program established in San Francisco in 1999. Dancers, who receive credit for professional experience, can earn bachelor of arts degrees in performing arts from St. Mary’s College of California and prepare for a life beyond resin and sweaty leotards.

“I could do something to my body tomorrow and never be able to dance again,” said Ashley Bouder, 23, a principal with New York City Ballet, who is currently enrolled. “That makes me nervous. Also, I love teaching, and I would love to do something in ballet, but I don’t want to feel trapped, like I have no choice but to work in ballet.”

The New York version of LEAP is a rigorous academic program offered in partnership with Manhattan College in Riverdale, the Bronx. The draw is its relative brevity (the curriculum takes three to four years to complete) and affordability ($21,000 for the whole program), as well as its flexibility in terms of individualized study.

So far, 209 students have enrolled in LEAP, established by Claire Sheridan, a former dancer whose career ended early because of injury, and now directed by Mark Baird, a former dancer and ballet master who earned a degree in the program in 2002. He is also an academic adviser to each student and splits his time between New York and California. (The program also serves dancers in Los Angeles and San Francisco.) Forty-two dancers have graduated, and Mr. Baird said he expected that number to rise to 54 by May.

“It’s really the only comprehensive program for professional dancers that takes them from wherever they are, gets them through graduation and stays with them every step of the way,” Mr. Baird said. He works with company managers to schedule classes around touring because “you have to bring the college to the dancers,” he said. “It doesn’t really work the other way around.”

Opportunities for ballet dancers to attend college have greatly improved in recent years. City Ballet members, for example, have taken advantage of Fordham University’s proximity to Lincoln Center and tuition discount. Yet attaining a degree is a slow, arduous process. (Dena Abergel and Jenifer Ringer, rare cases of dancers who did, both received bachelor of arts degrees in English.) In 2005 American Ballet Theater began a relationship with Long Island University, in which a majority of classes are held in the company’s Manhattan studios; as in LEAP, students must fulfill general academic requirements outside the program to graduate.

In New York LEAP classes are held in a conference room at the hotel on Sunday evenings from 6 to 10 to accommodate performing and touring
schedules. In the first course, “Writing for the Major,” students compose and read aloud essays that draw on their personal and professional dance experience, discuss reading assignments and deliver oral presentations.

In terms of life experience, the class is a varied group. Among the students are Jill Johnson, a veteran dancer who now stages works by the choreographer William Forsythe; Heather McFadden, a cast member of “The Phantom of the Opera” on Broadway; Matthew Murphy of American Ballet Theater; and several New York City Ballet dancers, including Ms. Bouder, Sophie Flack, Stephen Hanna and Adrian Danchig-Waring.

Another student, James Fayette, 37, is a former City Ballet principal who is now the New York area dance executive of the American Guild of Musical Artists. While still a dancer he completed enough classes at Fordham to qualify as a junior, but his heavy workload prevented him from continuing his studies. LEAP affords him the opportunity, as he put it, “to knock off my last 10 classes.” He estimated that it would take him two or three years. “I have a full-time job,” he said. “So I’m not going to pile it on all at once.”

When Zachary Snider, an adjunct professor of English at Manhattan College, requested volunteers for the first oral presentation, focusing on time management, the air was thick with performance anxiety. It was hardly a surprise when Mr. Fayette brashly volunteered to go first.

“Should I go to the head of the class?” he asked jovially.

His question was met with a resounding and horrified “No!” Ignoring his classmates, he proceeded to deliver an oral report so detailed that he could have been lecturing dancers as part of his union job. But his self-assurance rubbed off on the others. What seemed to be a harmless, even tedious, assignment had an ulterior motive: to show, by Mr. Fayette’s example, what every successful student needs, namely confidence.

Also in the New York group, Ms. Johnson, 38, explored several Ivy League options before deeming them impossible, both in terms of cost and time. (She travels extensively in her work for Mr. Forsythe.) “I couldn’t and didn’t want to drop my working life completely in order to go back to school,” she said.

Mr. Danchig-Waring, 23, who is interested in exploring environmental architecture, also imagined that he would someday attend an Ivy League university, as both his brothers and his parents did. “As my career progressed, I realized more and more that what was essential was going to graduate school,” he said, and for that he would need the bachelor’s degree first. Many others feel the same way; one-third of the program’s graduates have gone on to pursue master’s degrees.

Certainly times have changed since Mr. Baird was a dancer with the Joffrey Ballet in the 1980s. “We weren’t even allowed to bring a newspaper into the rehearsal studio without getting yelled at,” he said. “Now dancers know that they’re probably going to dance until 35 at the latest, and they don’t want to go into the world unprepared. I panicked in my last five years. I think the biggest gift that LEAP can give dancers is that they can enjoy those last years of their career, knowing that there’s something wonderful when it’s over.”