



Mentoring for a Lifetime

By Greg Chandler

Professor Linda Graham has a simple philosophy that has driven her teaching of dance at Hope for more than 25 years.

"I feel the world is a better place when more people experience dance," said Professor



Linda Graham's work as an educator is informed by her experiences as a dancer and award-winning choreographer.

Graham, who chairs a dance department that has grown to include 120 majors and minors and more than 420 students overall who take classes each semester through the program.

Hope's dance program is one of only a handful at liberal arts colleges in the nation fully accredited by the National Association of Schools of Dance. The program is also unique in requiring its students to take courses in four major forms of dance: ballet, modern, tap and jazz.

"It has opportunities that large schools envy, such as the (opportunity to pursue) dual majors, the (various) companies, off-campus programs, and we have the Christian atmosphere," Professor Graham said. "If someone is looking for that combination, we are a great fit for them."

She says that the college's dance program offers students the ability to grow not only as dancers, but also from an intellectual and spiritual perspective.

"We all feel, without a doubt, that when people study dance, they not only gain technical understanding, but the creative side, the risk-taking, the problem-solving aspect, the ability to work with an ensemble, as well as physical expertise comes out," Professor Graham said.

Professor Graham came to Hope in 1983 after performing professionally with both regional and New York-based companies. A graduate of the National Academy of Dance, she completed her Master of Fine Arts degree in choreography and performance at the University of Illinois, where she had also earned her undergraduate degree in acting. She has set works nationally and internationally on major dance companies such as the Joffrey Ballet.



Dance students applaud Linda Graham for her dedication and skill as a teacher, the lessons they receive in their art enhanced by her commitment to them as individuals and her emphasis on helping them succeed not only in the program but after graduation. Here she is working with the improvisation class.

In 2000, she won the statewide Maggie Allesee New Choreography Award from the Michigan Dance Council for her work "Red Wolf," choreographed for Aerial Dance Theatre (now known as dANCEpROJECT), which she had co-founded in 1986. Her work locally has also included choreographing the opening season of the Emmy Award-winning children's television

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program *Come On Over!*, filmed at Hope.

Beyond her achievement as a dance artist, however, she earns praise from her students for her dedication and skill as a teacher.

Lindsay Roberts '08, who is now pursuing a career in dance in New York City, recalls one of her first classes at Hope – a jazz class that Professor Graham taught.

"I was simultaneously terrified, nervous, and excited, but after that class I knew that I was in the right place," said Roberts, who graduated with a degree in dance performance and choreography.

Roberts went on to add that Professor Graham helped her develop discipline and determination, along with honing in on her technique, and is grateful for her development.

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Sarah Williams '09, who now teaches

English as a language assistant at a school in Laval, France while she continues to study ballet, calls Professor Graham "an ideal mentor."

"Whenever I had a question or was worried about something, she was there for me," Williams said. "She's kind, always has an interesting story to share, and most importantly, genuinely cares about the success of the dance department students."

Hope's dance program dates back to 1965, when Maxine DeBruyn started the program with a single course. By 1974, Hope established a dance department, and a dance major was created in 1984. Professor Graham says she owes a great deal of the program's success to Professor DeBruyn's early efforts and continued nurturing.

"She laid the foundation of who and what we are, and what we do here at Hope," she said.

One of the advantages Hope dance students have is the opportunity to be part of affiliate companies that provides an outlet for students to perform, including Strike Time Dance Company, which Professor Graham currently

directs. The company specializes in introducing elementary-age students of diverse backgrounds to dance through an interactive production that teaches elements of time, energy and space, as well as various forms of dance.

Other companies affiliated with Hope's dance program include not only dANCEpROJECT, which specializes in contemporary dance, but IDT (formerly InSync Dance Theatre), which specializes in tap and jazz; as well as a sacred dance group that performs in local churches. Students can also perform in various student choreographed and performed concerts through the academic year, as well as audition and perform in the annual faculty choreographed concert each spring.

Another unique aspect of Hope's program is that it gives students an ability to pursue a second major in a variety of disciplines, including engineering, English, history and psychology. For example, students who complete a dual major in dance and psychology can go on to work as a dance therapist.

"You don't have to be a great dancer technically to be a great dance therapist," Professor Graham said.

Sarah Williams, for example, finished her career at Hope with majors in dance and French, and minors in accounting and management.

Professor Graham has also played an active role in bringing in nationally-renowned guest artists from around the world to teach intensive courses in specific disciplines. Last May, during the college's May Term, the program brought in a lineup of top ballet performers that included Trinette Singleton, the first dancer ever to be featured on the cover of *Time* Magazine, and John Gardner and Amanda McKerrow – former principals with American Ballet Theatre.

"They come in with a very current knowledge, and they bring that to our students," Professor Graham said.

This spring, Hope will offer a May Term intensive course in jazz studies, supported by the Dorothy Wiley DeLong Endowment for Dance.

While Hope offers a great deal of opportunity for students interested in careers in dance, as well as incorporating dance into other pursuits, Professor Graham says the success of the college's program comes down to the quality of its people.

"(Students) don't enroll in a program, they enroll in people. I believe that's why students come (to Hope)."

She's not thinking of herself when she makes that statement—she's thinking of her colleagues, whose skill as dance professionals and teachers, and commitment to students, shine forth in everything they do. But it applies to Linda Graham equally well. 🦋

