



## Collaboration, Faith, and Dance at Belhaven University

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Krista Bower, dean of the School of Fine Arts and professor and chair of Dance at Belhaven University, has had a journey with Belhaven's Dance department that began when she was a young dancer and evolved into a transformative leadership role. Since becoming department chair in 2016, Bower has fostered a culture of collaboration, growth, and holistic education.

Her experiences as both a student and teacher have shaped her approach to the dance program, emphasizing academic excellence, student health, and community involvement, all while encouraging a Christ-centered perspective on art and dance.

Bower's passion for dance was ignited at an early age, leading her to pursue dance through childhood, her teenage years, and beyond, eventually earning her a degree and a career in the field. She says that her parents recognized her love for dance and enrolled her in classes when she was four years old. Her wonderful teacher inspired her to continue, and she participated as a teen in two summer intensives with Ballet Magnificat!, a Christian ballet company that hosted their summer program at Belhaven at the time. These experiences led her to earn a B.F.A. in Dance at Belhaven, and she returned to teach there in 2007, subsequently completing an M.F.A. in Choreography at Jacksonville University.

### Comprehensive Dance Program

As Dance department chair, Bower has overseen the expansion and strengthening

of Belhaven's Dance program, which offers a diverse range of opportunities for students at various levels. Bower says it has been rewarding to lead a department that had such a transformative impact on her own life. This academic year marks the 30th anniversary of dance programming at Belhaven, which began with a dance minor in 1994 and the major in 1997. Last fall, they hosted a reunion of alumni from around the world, allowing current faculty and students a cherished opportunity to hear the inspiring stories from their varied careers.

Belhaven's Dance department offers three undergraduate degree options: Bachelor of Arts in Dance, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance, and Minor in Dance. Each term, students ground their studies by taking core dance technique classes in ballet and modern dance. They can also choose additional courses from an extensive list: partnering techniques, pointe, variations, pas de deux, men's technique, tap, jazz, hip hop, conditioning for dancers, yoga, and Pilates. As Kellis Oldenburg, assistant professor of Dance, notes, the dance degree

programs give students a broad range of skills and experiences. The program also covers dance history, performance, choreography, teaching methods, and dance production.

The department emphasizes the physical health and well-being of its students, integrating courses on dance health, kinesiology, and conditioning to ensure long, healthy careers. Every student is required to take Principles for Dance Health and Dance Kinesiology classes, and they can also take conditioning and Pilates courses. Students may also choose to earn a Pilates teaching certification during their time in the department. Another indication of the depth of the department's commitment to its students' health is the employment of a full-time dance athletic trainer; Belhaven's program is one of very few in the nation to provide this level of care for its students.

Belhaven's Dance program prepares students for a variety of professional paths. Many graduates dance in professional ballet and modern companies, while others become



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dance educators in studios and schools. Some pursue ministry or overseas missions, while others focus on healthy movement as dance physical trainers. Some students enter dance production roles in choreography, administration, and other behind-the-scenes work. Because the students go into such a diverse array of professional positions, Belhaven's Dance program gives them varied experiences to open their eyes to the realm of professional possibilities in the world of dance.

The department's academically rigorous curriculum combines technique classes with opportunities to explore choreography, teaching methods, and dance production. Classes across the curriculum rely on academic scholarship, and students conduct rigorous research alongside their technique and performance work. As a result, Bower says, students develop a wide skill set: they learn to think critically, collaborate, and integrate their faith with their studies and artistic work.

Belhaven also offers a Master of Fine Arts in Dance degree, unique for being one of the only Christian institutions with such a program. Introduced in 2013, this three-year terminal degree offers graduate teaching assistantships, providing students with the opportunity to prepare for academic careers. Students also reflect critically on their identities as Christian dancers, performers, and educators.

### Teaching Practices

Bower's teaching approach emphasizes both technique and deep care for students' personal growth, helping them connect their dance practice to

a broader purpose. As Lily Bishop, a junior earning a B.F.A. in Dance, says, "Mrs. Bower is such a joy—she is intentional in everything she does, especially her teaching." Bishop appreciates Bower's intelligence and skills as a teacher. In their pedagogy class, they discussed typical content, such as classroom management, but what Bishop values most is Bower's emphasis on students as "humans first."

Bower's care for her students' health and well-being is very intentional. Bishop notes that Bower is especially focused on teaching future dance educators to prioritize their students' wellness. Bishop is inspired when she considers that multiple cohorts under Bower's tutelage will follow her example—over time, these efforts can really change the broader culture of dance instruction. Bishop reflects on how her own motivations for dancing have changed under Bower's mentorship—shifting from focusing on imperfections to recognizing dance as a way to glorify God.

### Community Engagement

Bower's commitment to community engagement is evident in the department's partnerships where students use dance to connect with the local community. Bower's own graduate studies included a collaboration with a local Methodist children's home. Arianna Marcell, specialty instructor of Dance and co-director of the Dance Ministry Ensemble, sees this emphasis continuing in Belhaven's current outreach. A prime example is the Dance Ministry Ensemble's involvement with Stewpot, a local service organization which serves those in

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need, offering food, shelter, legal services, and after-school programming. Belhaven Dance Ministry students work with children in Stewpot's after-school program, and the children participate in the Dance Ministry's annual performance.

### People-First Leadership

Bower's leadership style is rooted in empowering others, ensuring that faculty and students feel supported and valued. Marcell says that Bower seeks ways to offer opportunities to others, "allowing everyone to rise together." Oldenburg has enjoyed having Bower as a leader, noting that she ensures the department functions well and that faculty and students maintain high academic standards while producing excellent artistic work. She admires Bower's ability to balance teaching with administrative duties, always making time to mentor students one-on-one.

Belhaven's School of Fine Arts, which includes Dance, Theatre, Art and Design,

Creative Writing, and Film Production, is one of only 39 schools in the U.S. accredited in all four major arts disciplines. Bower values the "wonderful group of arts chairs" she works with and emphasizes the uniqueness of this Christian institution that celebrates the arts.

Describing Bower as "balanced" and displaying "grace and poise" even under pressure, Oldenburg notes that Bower is dedicated to bringing out each faculty member's unique gifts to improve the department. Oldenburg recalls when she was hired at Belhaven, Bower asked, "What are your strengths? What can you bring to the department that we don't have?" Bower's desire to expose students to diverse forms of dance led to the addition of hip hop classes to Dance department offerings, as Oldenburg had trained in this style. Bower is known for encouraging faculty members to use their strengths to improve the department's offerings in these ways.

### Strengths in Collaboration

As dean of the School of Fine Arts, Bower fosters a culture of collaboration both within the department and across disciplines, encouraging students and faculty to explore intersections between different art forms. For example, Belhaven's musical theatre performances involve students from the Dance, Theatre, and Music departments. Additionally, Oldenburg, though a dance faculty member, has served as choreographer for multiple theatre shows.

Allison Schwab, a junior at Belhaven earning a B.F.A. in Dance, appreciates Bower's promotion of collaborations within the arts, noting the department's involvement in Theatre's Night of Broadway revue, where the Dance department contributes dance pieces. Schwab enjoys performing in the Theatre Department's Black Box theatre, noting the different experience it provides compared to the Dance department's studio theatre.

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Another way that Bower has cultivated cross-department collaborations has been by encouraging faculty to have their classes meet across departments to foster interdisciplinary creativity. This initiative has led to collaborations like an aerial dance class working with a 3D design class and a photography class collaborating with a dance class.

Marcell worked with an art and design colleague in such a collaboration. In her production class, the first unit focused on design elements, and she appreciated the ways the design students offered her students insights about design that could inform their choreography and costuming decisions. Schwab, who participated in the class exchange, enjoyed the experience of sharing expertise with students from other fields.

Bower sees that Belhaven students are eager for cross-disciplinary collaborations. With about a third of Belhaven's enrollment being in the School of Fine Arts—and with the

Dance department housed in the Visual Arts and Dance Center—students are continually inspired by the artistic environment.

Oldenburg praises Bower for being an excellent listener who values feedback from faculty and students. At faculty meetings, Bower encourages colleagues to share their experiences and ideas so that everyone feels valued. While Bower can't always fulfill every request, Oldenburg says, "Knowing that what we think and value is important to her makes us buy in even more."

Similarly, Schwab, says that Bower makes a point of developing individual relationships with students. Even though Bower has an active role with many facets, she makes herself very available to students on top of her other responsibilities. Schwab says that this willingness to be accessible is very comforting; Bower wants to make sure students are "in a good place."

Dance itself is a collaborative art form, and many experts are needed for its success. Belhaven's Dance department has a full-time staff to support the department's operations, including a director of dance production, director of dance costuming, an administrative assistant, and the aforementioned full-time athletic trainer. Thanks to this capable team supporting faculty and student endeavors, Belhaven's Dance Department is able to produce an impressive six productions each academic year. These include Fall and Spring dance concerts, a February concert by the Dance Ministry Ensemble, a student-choreographed concert, senior project performances, and a community dance concert. Students also participate in composition and choreography courses, and they travel to performances at dance festivals such as the American College Dance Association and Project Dance.

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At the helm, Bower's influence also extends to directing recruitment efforts, building relationships in the broader dance community. Marcell notes Bower's creative approach to recruitment, which includes hosting the American College Dance Association's Southern Conference and facilitating Project Dance this fall. Bower's approach, focused on "hosting with generosity," has helped expose more people to the department's unique curriculum.

Bower's leadership in Belhaven's Dance Department exemplifies her commitment to collaboration, personal well-being, and academic growth. Her influence has shaped not only the department's success but also the lives and careers of countless students. Through her passion for holistic education, care for her students, and dedication to community engagement—all guided through the Christian faith she shares with those in the Belhaven campus community and beyond—she has made a lasting impact on Belhaven's Dance department and its future dancers and educators.



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