

The University of Akron

IdeaExchange@UAkron

Williams Honors College, Honors Research
Projects

The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors
College

Spring 2020

A Look Inside The University of Akron Dance Team

Kristen Dauber

kmd179@zips.uakron.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects



Part of the [Film Production Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Dauber, Kristen, "A Look Inside The University of Akron Dance Team" (2020). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1165.

https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1165

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

A Look Inside The University of Akron Dance Team

Kristen Dauber

School of Communication

Honors Research Project

Submitted to

The Honors College

Approved:

_____ Date _____
Honors Project Sponsor (signed)
Juan Contreras

_____ Date _____
Reader (signed)
Dr. Rhiannon Kallis

_____ Date _____
Reader (signed)
Maegen Pruitt

Accepted:

_____ Date _____
School Director (signed)
Dr. Heather Walter

_____ Date _____
Honors Faculty Advisor (signed)
Dr. Kathleen Clark

_____ Date _____
Dean, Honors College

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Goals and Objectives	4
Methodology	4
Filming and Editing	6
Content	6
Literature Review	7
Crafting a Story	7
Ethical Responsibility	9
Filmmaking Techniques	11
College and Dance Teams	12
Method	13
Reflection	14
Opportunities	16
Challenges	16
Academic Impact	17
References	18
Appendix: Link to Video	19

Introduction

Video is one of the most media-rich forms of content. When the elements of production come together, it can shed light on issues, provide information about a cause, and bring about an opportunity to connect with the world. One of the most informational forms of video is a documentary film. Documentaries that are focused on the stories and experiences of people bring a sense of reality to matters that may otherwise seem distant and irrelevant. Having a visual to relate to can help bridge the gap between a disconnected viewer and the issue at hand, and create awareness, empathy, and possible action.

This documentary is centered on a sector of the Athletic Department at the University of Akron. The University of Akron Dance Team is a part of the Spirit Program responsible for providing game day entertainment, an exceptional fan experience, and positive publicity for the University. With a miniscule budget, zero scholarship dollars, and low-prioritization within the Athletic Department, members of this program are still expected to train, compete, and attend games just as any other on-scholarship athlete would. This documentary explores the experiences and opinions of the team members and takes a look into how their passion, commitment, and respect for each other override any odds that are against them.

Goals and Objectives

This documentary was created with the intent to achieve the following two goals:

- (1) capture raw footage, as well as conduct interviews that illustrate the authentic experiences and opinions of members; while
- (2) create a clear and meaningful storyline that accurately sheds light and generates empathy toward an unexposed topic.

The motivation for this project was a result of personal experience regarding the Akron Dance Team, and belief that their hard work and perseverance through adversity deserve showcasing. If done correctly, benefits of this work will be increased knowledge of subject matter, generation of rapport from audience to the program, and possible action being taken within the administration. Below are the outlined objectives for reaching these goals:

Objective 1. To enhance awareness of matters surrounding the inside of the Akron Athletics Department, specifically, the Akron Dance Team.

Objective 2. To inform and educate the audience while maintaining an objective point of view.

Objective 3. To showcase the thoughts and opinions of members of the programs, who have not often expressed their thoughts publicly.

Methodology

Success of this project has been dependent on the acquisition of necessary production equipment. This includes cameras, tripods, light kits, microphones, and programs for editing footage, specifically the Adobe Creative Cloud Suite. This equipment was acquired from the School of Communication.

Additional requirements for success of this project included obtaining permissions to interview, scheduling interview times, securing an area to interview in, as well as obtaining permissions to film at events such as team practices and University of Akron held athletics events. All of these requests were granted. The initial timeline of these events is as follows:

October 11th, 2019- Receive permission to film the team at a home football game.

October 19th, 2019- Film the team at the football game on this date.

October 21st, 2019- Begin obtaining permissions and scheduling for interviews.

October 28th-November 11th, 2019- Conduct interviews with members of the
program/film practices.

November 1st, 2019- Begin obtaining permissions to film at home basketball games.

November 12th, 2019- Additional filming at the football game (if necessary).

November 15th, 2019- Possible filming at the basketball game(s) on this date.

November 16th, 2019-November 30th, 2019- Film additional footage at practices and
conduct additional interviews (if necessary).

December 16th, 2019-April 24th, 2020- Edit footage.

It is important to note that this schedule wasn't followed precisely. As events unfolded, dates were rescheduled and reworked. For example, additional filming dates were scheduled if it was felt that additional content was needed. Recent changes in world climate have also impacted the filming and editing processes. Following review of the film, additional footage was unable to be captured. This footage, while not crucial to the project, could have contributed to the visual impact. Additionally, the post-production process was slowed.

Filming and Editing

Filming for interviews was conducted in three locations: James A. Rhodes Arena, a dance studio in Guzzetta Hall, and in a classroom. The significance of these locations is that they are places the dance team spends its time, either in rehearsal, performing during games or attending class. These locations are meant to create a personal connection between audience and dancers by showcasing them in areas they are not typically seen by fans—on the court or field. For example, the locker room is where dancers prepare before a game. This correlates to the topic of physical appearance that was discussed by interviewees. The dance studio is where the dancers train, correlating to the physical capabilities of these athletes. Lastly, the classroom signifies that, above all, these athletes are students first.

Filming of games was conducted at James A. Rhodes Arena for basketball, and InfoCision Stadium for football. Practices were filmed at James A. Rhodes Arena and the dance studio in the Student Recreation and Wellness Center.

The documentary consists of establishing shots, interviews, b-roll, sound bites, and ambient music. Editing footage for this project was done using Adobe Premier Pro. Adobe Audition was also utilized in the alteration of background music that was used throughout the documentary.

Content

The documentary answered the following questions:

- (1) How is the overall experience of being on the Akron Dance Team?
- (2) What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- (3) Why do members continue to dedicate themselves to the program?

- (4) What changes in outside perception need to be made for the program to flourish?
- (5) What should the public know that they don't already?

Review of Literature

When planned and distributed correctly, documentary films have the opportunity to reach, inform, and inspire audiences to bring about a change. To reach these objectives, the filmmaker must be meticulous from conception through planning, and all the way through post-production. Throughout this process, many factors must be considered.

This literature review will discuss the filmmaking process, including scriptwriting, production techniques, and distribution. In addition, it will also explore ethical responsibilities and privacy concerns among subjects being filmed.

This study will further advance filmmaking research by exploring the responsibility filmmakers have to truth and ethical implications while creating content. When filming a short-form documentary, it is crucial to conduct studies that will help further the knowledge of how to convey information appropriately in the time allotted.

Crafting a Story

A script is typically something that most people would not think is part of the documentary filmmaking process, due to its spontaneous nature. Jouko Aaltonen addresses this issue in his work titled *Script as a Hypothesis: Scriptwriting for Documentary Film* (2017). He notes that many people believe a script cannot be written, because you cannot know beforehand what is going to happen (Aaltonen, 2017). A script, in many cases is seen as a restriction to artistry and creativity during the filmmaking process, and is a hindrance to authenticity.

Aaltonen argues several reasons for a script being a useful tool for a filmmaker. Creatively, a documentarian sketches and tests ideas by writing. Also, a script is needed for project development, budgeting, production planning, and communicating inside and outside the crew (Aaltonen, 2003). However, the *nature* of the script is different than it would be for a fiction film. For a documentary, a script would have to serve as a plan, not as a definitive instruction for filmmaking. For a documentary's purpose, a script would be useful for working out the form, structure, story, characters, and arguments prior to filming. It is not to say, however, that you shouldn't be open to changes during the filming process.

The first step to crafting a documentary is, obviously, finding a matter that you want to change or create awareness of. John Gelardi (2003) writes about documentary filmmaker Evan Vetter and his experience filming *Daylight Come*, a film about a handful of Congolese women and their growth in the aftermath of the war in the Congo. Gelardi's writings follow Vetter's experiences from the beginning stages of filmmaking.

Gelardi says, "spontaneity...one word that encompasses all that a documentary is perceived to be and what marks this genre of film as uniquely organic" (62). He is saying this in regard to the shift in focus that Vetter's film took on whilst emerged in the process of filming. This flexibility and open mindedness is an incredibly important trait to have while creating a documentary. Being open to possible changes in direction as a story develops could potentially lead to a better storyline. With this in mind, it is equally as important to remain organized. This allows things to be put into motion; it increases efficiency and allows handling a larger project to become much more manageable (Gelardi, 2003). Changing focus to better a story is fine, but one must keep in mind what

it is that is trying to be achieved. Be aware of developments and be adaptable, but having a plan is what will keep the process on track.

Interviewees play a huge part in crafting a story. After all, their journeys and perspectives provide a first person account that makes a story intriguing and believable. In Vetter's documentary, he says, "...there exist people who are so aligned with the cause, whatever it may be, that they naturally lend themselves into the mix" (Gelardi, 2003). The people who are invested and passionate are definitely the ones to follow, as they will provide a deeper insight into the subject at hand. Alternatively, you must be sure that the interviewee is capable of effectively conveying their thoughts, feelings, and stories. So, while one person may seem like a good highlight to your storyline, it is essential to make sure they can also convey that emotion during the interview process.

Ethical Responsibility

While documentary films must maintain an audience's attention with entertaining content, they still have an ethical responsibility to the subjects being filmed. In Ellen Maccarone's paper titled *Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking* (2010) she says we need to, "consider some behaviors that are morally significant in the making of documentary films." First and foremost, she argues that the commitment to excellence in filmmaking is virtuous in itself. Upholding standards and rules, such as the commitment to telling the truth, frames the practice of documentary filmmaking. She argues that most documentaries rarely follow a story as it happens, but rather while it happens. One may argue, "is it really a documentary if you are not capturing the event as it happens?" However, it is important to keep in mind that dramatizations are sometimes necessary to tell the whole story.

Having the consent of people appearing in your film is an obvious necessity. Documentarians have side-stepped issues regarding ethics in filmmaking (Maccarone, 2010). Legally, consent in documentary is simply seen as a form of contract (Winston, 1995). This type of “consent,” which can merely be referred to as a “release,” do not typically meet the standards of informed consent where ethics is concerned. To truly inform a potential subject would take more time and would require discussion, opportunity to ask questions, and a non-coercive atmosphere (Maccarone, 2010).

In Frederick Wiseman’s work titled *Privacy and Documentary Filmmaking* (2001), he states that he, “ask[s] the person whose picture and voice I want to record or have already recorded for permission to use their image and voice,” he goes on, “I tell them that the tape recorder is recording and that I am going to explain to them the nature of the film I am making, the technique that I use, and where the film will be shown” (41). This is an example of extreme transparency when filming a documentary. Wiseman makes sure each person being filmed feels comfortable with the process, mission, and distribution of the film.

Some might wonder if imposing emotional labor on behalf of a filmmaker who is filming intense subjects constitutes as “ethical.” In Kym Melzer’s paper titled *Vicarious Trauma and Emotion Work in Documentary Filmmaking* (2018), she urges the consideration of a filmmaker’s emotional health and wellbeing as a part of documentary ethics. Melzer admits that emotions and filmmaking have not been extensively addressed in scholarship (2018). When dealing with heavy subjects and people with emotional stories, their emotion can be passed on to and shared with the listener, who is also the filmmaker. This is not surprising due to the close proximity and time spent between

characters and filmmaker, however it is something that is often overlooked in scholarly research. It is probably very easy to imagine that you will remain neutral and detached during the filmmaking process, but one must be wary of their own emotions emerging as an issue.

So this begs the question: How do you ensure that emotional trauma does not occur? The first step would be to recognize this issue more in scholarly research. There is already framework in place for the ethical responsibility to participant wellbeing, but this needs to be extended to the researcher as well. This would mean implementing strategies to reduce the risk of researcher trauma would be included as part of the methodology and ethics submission of a research project (Melzer, 2018). Preparatory work could be done to increase awareness, the development of self-care plans can be stressed, and access to support services can be provided.

Filmmaking Techniques

The way you choose to shoot footage can greatly impact the meaning in the viewers' mind. In a journal article written by Chris Robe (2017), he explores the many filmmaking techniques used in various short-film documentaries. In one particular sequence, when a university president is addressing students, the president is framed in a medium shot which showcases the perspective of the students. When the camera cuts to the students watching, the camera stands with them, looking over the shoulders of students. The way these shots were framed, in solidarity with the students, gives the viewer more of an insight from the students' perspective, as opposed to the faculty, which is the purpose of the documentary. Framing your shots a certain way can change the way the viewer interprets or even feels about the subject you are bringing awareness to.

Besides knowing the right ways to aesthetically frame your shots, knowing proper camera technique will greatly impact the outcome of your final product. An article written by Rajib Mukherjee (2018) highlights many of the techniques you should master before making your first film. For example, using the right microphones are imperative to your film. Bad audio is almost untreatable in post production, so it's important to get it right the first time. Other techniques include coordinating your shutter speed and frame rate, selecting the right aperture and ISO, maintaining focus, white balancing, and camera stabilization.

College and Dance Teams

Understanding the way college dance teams operate is essential to this documentary. In an article written by Allison Feller (2018), she explores the physical capabilities required to be a member on one of these teams. She interviews six coaches from dance teams around the country to explore what is required of dancers to make the team, how practices operate, and how they prepare for games and competition.

The most notable thing about her findings is the dedication that these teams show year after year. Most teams perform at anywhere from 50-65 games, up to 75 community and fundraising events, attend a national competition, and practice anywhere from 3-7 days a week.

She goes on to ask the coaches about skills required to make the teams. Most coaches explain that they are looking for solid pirouettes, technique, skills such as aeriels and headsprings, extensive turn combinations, flexibility, and good stage presence.

Background information about similar teams in the realm of college dance is necessary to form an accurate storyline. Furthermore, it provides a base on which to ask questions.

Method

The methods of crafting a story, maintaining ethical responsibility, and filmmaking techniques mentioned above have been taken into consideration when crafting my own short-form documentary. To begin, a script was implemented to outline the way I intend for the storyline to progress. Of course, any events that unfolded which were out of the ordinary and aligned with the purpose of the documentary shifted the focus of the documentary when necessary. To clearly convey the subject of the documentary, specific people were chosen to highlight within the story. These same people were interviewed to keep consistent with the storyline. Interviewees were asked for consent and notified of their presence within the documentary before filming began. Interviewees (and all of those featured in the documentary) were made aware of the film's process, mission, and distribution plans before involvement in the documentary persisted.

Framing and shots for the documentary were aligned with the documentary's objective of informing the public of the subject at hand. Some shots were from the viewer's objective standpoint, with other's taking the place of the subject's perspective. All shots, however, aligned with the interviewees' perspective of the issue at hand. The interviewees told the story how it is seen from their perspective, as they are the most knowledgeable of the subject.

As far as technical elements of filming, road microphones were used for most field shoots, as I recorded the scenes as it was happening. Lavalier microphones were used for interviews. Natural lighting was used for most shots, besides interviews. To combat the unpredictable nature of weather, I had to continually adjust camera settings and white balance to maintain a consistent and clear picture.

Lastly, the finished documentary will be saved and uploaded for submission to the Williams Honor's College, where it will be viewed for approval.

Reflection

Going into the filmmaking process, I knew it was going to be challenging to stay objective given the fact that I already had first-hand experience and opinions on the subject matter. Therefore, my biggest priority was to ensure that interviewees felt comfortable talking about subjects that were important to them, personally. I encouraged the interviewees to speak openly about their personal experiences and topics that they felt were important to showcase. I found that all of the interviewees' responses were extremely congruent. This not only shows that their general feelings about specific topics are similar, it suggests these feelings are most likely shared by many people, both on past and present teams. I felt it was my obligation to share these findings.

Moreover, something I didn't expect was the interviewees' extreme transparency in the disclosure of personal experiences. They opened up not only about their thoughts and opinions, but personal experiences that have affected their journeys on the team. They showed they are real people dealing with the effects of certain situations—many of which, people wouldn't even think of when viewing this team from the outside. I believe

this vulnerability will allow the audience to really connect with the dancers and their stories.

Opportunities

I feel as if I have a unique opportunity to share the stories of people who have never really spoke publicly about their concerns before. You don't really think about it, but when you go to basketball or football games, you just expect the dancers and cheerleaders to be there cheering the teams on. You expect them to have high energy, be pleasant to look at, and be the entertainment. Does anyone ever think about the work that goes behind these teams, though? Do people think it's any more than just showing up and yelling chants to a crowd? I have found that many people are not aware of what all exactly goes on behind the scenes. So, if people don't know the extent of it, why would they think it's an important topic? I wanted to display everything that goes on that people don't typically see. This way, with a broader perspective, the audience can decide for themselves whether they see this issue as important.

Overall, with this documentary I have the opportunity to bridge that gap between the viewer and the issue at hand. I came into this project with the intent to cultivate awareness, inform an audience, and possibly create change within the administration.

Challenges

The biggest hindrance to this project has, of course, been the COVID-19 pandemic. All necessary footage was captured prior to the pandemic. However, upon review of the footage, I would've liked to go back and get additional b-roll. This b-roll is not crucial to the completion of the film, but it could have contributed to the visual impact. Additionally, the closure of campus and all campus facilities required me to work

remotely. This meant that I had to download the necessary programs and edit them from my personal computer. This has been difficult, primarily for the reason that the large file size has caused the editing software to run extremely slow. Working through frequent computer freezes and lagging of the software has slowed the process dramatically. Additionally, I had to abandon all of the post-production work I had completed up until that point and start completely over. This was due to the discrepancy between the program version provided at the school compared to the version I was able to download onto my personal computer.

Non-technical challenges included piecing the story together in a way that was fluid and easy to understand. I interviewed three people, and each of their interviews over an hour in length. I was tasked with finding the best parts of each of their stories and fitting them together to make a consistent storyline that was about fifteen minutes in length.

Academic Impact

The Honors Research Project is a culmination of my education as a Media Studies major. Using all the skills learned through video production and visual communications courses was necessary in the completion of this project. The project serves as an enveloping experience for my undergraduate involvement by containing academic principles, video production techniques, and elements of the Akron Dance Team—all of which have been key components of my undergraduate career. This production has furthered my videography, editing, and storytelling skills. Learning to create a comprehensive story from the beginning steps of conceptualization to the final touches in postproduction is something I hoped to gain better understanding of during this process. I

have learned how to assemble a story in a way that will touch an audience, create conversation, and excite the need for change. Overall, this project is the apex of production and communication skills learned throughout the years.

References

- Aaltonen, J. (2017). Script as a hypothesis: scriptwriting for documentary film. *Journal of Screenwriting*, 8(1), 55–65. https://doi.org/10.1386/josc.8.1.55_1
- Feller, A. (2018). The best college dance teams in the country: and what it takes to be on each of them. *Dance Spirit*, 22(4), 38.
- Mukherjee, R. (2019). DSLR video shooting tips (20 amazing must know video tips). Retrieved from <https://www.photoworkout.com/dslr-video-tips-20/>.
- Frederick Wiseman. (2001). Privacy and documentary filmmaking. *Social Research*, 68(1), 41. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.40971436&site=eds-live>
- Gelardi, J. (2014). Documentary filmmaking: from concept to distribution. *Film Matters*, 5(1), 61–63. https://doi.org/10.1386/fm.5.1.61_1
- Maccarone, E. (2010). Ethical responsibilities to subjects and documentary Filmmaking. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 25(3), 192–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2010.497025>
- Melzer, K. (2019). Vicarious trauma and emotion work in documentary filmmaking. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 13(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2018.1535685>
- Mukherjee, R. (2019). DSLR video shooting tips (20 amazing must know video tips). Retrieved from <https://www.photoworkout.com/dslr-video-tips-20/>.
- Robé, C. (2017). Field of vision: an expedition in short-form documentary filmmaking. *Cinéaste*, 42(2), 36-39. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/26357008

Appendix

Link to Video: A Look Inside The University of Akron Dance Team

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tgNRbTkLBiXy7dYJoQmVlSd7lSIDT9yh/view?usp=sharing>