

SPATIAL DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR COMPETITIVE HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGIATE  
DANCE TEAM ROUTINES

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	2
Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Purpose .....	3
Research Question.....	4
Literature Review.....	4
Dance Team Competition Values and Aesthetics.....	4
Dance Team Choreography Staging and Musicality.....	6
Dance Team Staging and Musicality Pedagogy for Competitive Routines.....	8
Summary.....	10
Limitations.....	11
Methodology.....	12
Analysis and Findings.....	12
Process of Analysis.....	12
Finding 1: Competitive Choreography Values Transition.....	13
Finding 2: Transitions and Formations Have Purpose.....	15
Finding 3: Formations Must Breathe.....	15
Finding 4: Transition Speed and Formation Size Contribute to Narrative of Song.....	16
Finding 5: More Negative Space Provides the Opportunity for Intricate Formations.....	17
Conclusion.....	18
References.....	20
Appendices.....	22

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all high school dance team coaches and choreographers that strive to better themselves in their choreographic craft for the ultimate improvement of their students' dance technique and educational opportunities.

## ABSTRACT

Kristianna Hogan's research entitled "Spatial Design Strategies for Competitive High School and Collegiate Dance Team Routines" discusses what spatial design strategies dance team coaches might use in an effort to improve scores for competitive dance teams at the high school level, and prepare high school dancers for the collegiate level. Through deep analysis of two winning dance routines performed at the Universal Dance Association Nationals competition and their various spatial design strategies, Hogan provides five formation and transition strategies for dance team coaches to utilize along with a list of formation examples she hopes those in the dance/drill team field can use in their dance-making processes to both enhance the competitiveness of their choreography and potentially better prepare high school dancers for the realities of collegiate level dance team choreography.

## INTRODUCTION

I consider the element of space in dance choreography to have the power to tell stories when intricately manipulated. Proximity, pathways, directions, and groupings of bodies can create a journey for the audience to follow during a performance. After six years as a competitive dance team coach, I have worked to gain a deeper understanding of how to use space in my own choreography when preparing students for competition. However, in speaking with other dance team coaches, they share that dance routine staging, or spatial design, is an element of choreography with which they often struggle. I have found that teaching how to use spatial

design when choreographing for dance teams is often not taught in dance undergraduate degree programs. Thus, I suspect that graduates of dance programs who intend to become dance coaches are often left with a gap in choreographic knowledge needed to be successful.

In the world of competitive high school and collegiate dance teams, I consider the utilization of advanced spatial design as a key to winning competitions because a significant portion of a team's scores is for choreographed pathways and spatial design, while scores for dance moves/choreographed movement are sometimes smaller. This led me to consider, what spatial design strategies are most commonly utilized by top-scoring teams at national competitions? How might I supplement my choreographic knowledge to deepen my understanding of spatial design and improve my dance team's competition choreography? And then, in what ways might I share these spatial design techniques with other dance coaches? These questions motivated me to complete a project in which I investigated spatial design strategies and organized them according to their characteristics. My intention is to share this information with others in the field of dance team coaching.

#### PURPOSE

- Identify and analyze the spatial design patterns and strategies of two first-place collegiate dance teams in the hip hop category at the Universal Dance Association National Dance Team Championships – one from 2018 and one from 2020.
- Name, categorize, and list the spatial design patterns and strategies identified for usability.
- Create a visually descriptive card deck of spatial design strategies for use by dance team coaches when choreographing.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What spatial design strategies can be used by dance team coaches in an effort to improve scores for competitive dance teams at the high school level and prepare high school dancers for the collegiate level?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Through the below literature review, I identify discussions and published resources that outline choreographic elements that may impact spatial design to create visually engaging and highly competitive dance team routine choreography. I used the question ‘What spatial design strategies increase the competitiveness of dance team choreography at the national level?’ to help guide my search for resources. Interestingly, as I searched for resources in the areas of choreography, drill/dance team, and marching band drill, resources discussing *how* to specifically create dynamic spatial formations, transitions, and choreographic strategies for competitive dance teams were non-existent. I acknowledge that these kinds of resources may exist, but I was not able to find them in my search during this project. In the following sections, I outline for the reader three areas of literature that helped to guide this project; competition values and aesthetics, staging and musicality, and pedagogy for staging and musicality.

### **Dance Team Competition Values and Aesthetics**

In doctoral candidate research completed at the University of California Riverside by Alexis Arnow Weisbrod, she comments that “In agreeing to participate in the structure of competition, these subjects, competition bodies in particular, consent to being determined by the systems that instruct and influence competition...[and are] agreeing to...the hierarchy of competition...” (Weisbrod 2010, 191). When dance coaches enter their teams into dance competitions, they are agreeing to the judging structure of the contest and are presenting routines

that align with the preferred dance team contest cultural aesthetics in the hopes of winning the competition. It is up to the dance coach to provide routines, either self-choreographed or through a hired choreographer, that not only adhere to the preferred values and aesthetics of dance team competition culture, but that also produce a “wow” factor to help them win the contest. For the purposes of this project, a “wow” factor will reference choreography that produces moments of shock and/or awe for the audience. The preferred values and aesthetics in dance team culture are numerically represented on competition score sheets that are completed by judges for each dance routine.

The point value breakdown on a dance competition score sheet indicates how dance team routines are evaluated. Some routine elements are given a higher point value than others, thereby creating a culture of preferred dance team aesthetics. “The evaluation criteria are typically organized around four vague areas: performance, technique, choreography, and overall impression.” (Schupp 2018, 59). For the purpose of this review, I am honing in on the third category aforementioned -- choreography. I continued working to find resources that would help me understand how the staging of that choreography was created. For most dance team choreographers, they described their process as beginning with selecting the music for the routine.

Karen Schupp, an assistant director of dance and associate professor in the Herberger Institute School of Film, Dance and Theatre at Arizona State University, describes dance competitions as “ a multilayered phenomenon centered around dance as entertainment...” and cites music as a driving force of inspiration for dance team choreographers (Schupp 2018, 58-62). When Schupp conducted interviews with dance team coaches and choreographers, many discussed how the *music* is the foundation of storytelling in their competition routines (Schupp

2018, 62). The routine music is often what dance team coaches are using to create the choreographic movement, staging (formations), and overall structure of the routine.

Twenty-five percent of a dance team's routine score is categorized as "Choreography" at the Crowd Pleaser Dance (CPD) competition circuit that serves Texas, California, Hawaii, and Florida. On the CPD score sheet, the "Choreography" category has the following notable subcategories: "focus on visual impact; formations; musical interpretation; transitions; use of space" (Crowd Pleaser Dance, n.d.). With these listed values culminating into a quarter of a dance team's overall routine score, it is justifiable for a choreographer to spend a quarter of their routine creation time focused on these specific choreographic elements.

From this literature review, I identified important aesthetics and values for competition dance culture as the concept of a "wow factor," visually dynamic choreography via its formations and transitions, and music serving as an inspiration and as a driving force for the choreography.

### **Dance Team Choreography Staging and Musicality**

For the purposes of this study, the term *staging* will refer to all formations, groupings, pathways, facings, visual impact, spatial design, use of levels, contagions, cannons, ripples, repetitions, and pick-ups within a dance routine. The term *musicality* refers to the idea of musical interpretations by the choreographer that is translated into movement. First, I will discuss staging and with each paragraph, I offer questions that arose as this information was gathered.

In her book *Creative Dance for All Ages*, Anne Green Gilbert categorizes all dance movement pathways into three categories: "straight, curved, [and] zigzag" (Gilbert 1992, 137). In dance team routine staging, the choreographer can have the dancers take direct pathways from formation A to formation B (straight), an indirect or arched pathway (curved), or a more

intricately designed pathway (zigzag) that creates a visual effect in relation to the music.

Additionally, Gilbert also discusses “movement maps” -- a way to physically draw out on paper the pathway the dancers will follow during a dance routine from start to finish. In their choreographic process, many dance team coaches will sketch formations, or use formation generation computer software, to map out the routine formations and pathways prior to teaching the dancers the routine. How can this mapping technique assist the choreographic process when creating dance team routine staging?

Cathy Roe is a professional dance coach, choreographer, adjudicator, and the founder of CRU National Dance Competitions -- a competition primarily advertised to and attended by dance studios rather than dance teams. She discusses the importance of mapping dance routine formations in her digital class titled *The Anthology of Staging and Formations for Dance* (Cathy Roe Productions., n.d.). Roe utilizes Gilbert’s previously mentioned movement maps to create dance studio routines for the stage. Roe emphasizes first creating the staging of a routine and *then* the choreography, for it is the staging that ultimately determines what the choreography should be (Cathy Roe Productions., n.d.). If the staging determines what the choreography should be, could staging also determine the emotion and/or storyline of a routine?

STEEZY, an online dance education platform featuring celebrity choreographer master classes, created a list of staging strategies commonly utilized by competitive hip hop dance crews that perform on a stage with the *why* and/or meaning behind each formation. Here are a few notable mentions: “Columns” frame the stage and create lanes for other dancers; “Clumps” concentrate the bodies and energy of the dance into one spot; “Holds” are when all dancers hold a shape while a soloist performs accent movement within the group to highlight a skill. STEEZY also recommends what they call “workshopping” -- similar to Gilbert's movement map strategy.



Draw out the formations and pathways on paper and/or use formation-making computer software to plan your formations/pathways ahead of time (STEEZY 2019). Next, I will briefly discuss musicality.

In the British magazine *Dancing Times*, Mary Goodhew describes musicality in the following way: "Musicality incorporates rhythm, melody, harmony and tone colour. Musical dancers perform phrases of flowing movement that respond to the music as a whole" (Goodhew 2007). Dance team choreography with a "wow" factor can have exciting musicality that keeps the audience engaged throughout the routine. Exactly *how* does a choreographer respond to the music as a whole in the context of a competitive dance team routine, and *how* is that musicality taught to a dance team so the choreographer's interpretation of the music is accurately communicated by the dance team to the audience? Next, I will share pedagogical perspectives from published literature on how to teach the choreographic elements of staging and musicality to a dance team.

### **Dance Team Staging and Musicality Pedagogy for Competitive Routines**

As I embarked upon reading published literature in this area, I entered with specific questions in mind. After a dance coach has choreographed a routine incorporating the staging and musicality they want, what is the most effective pedagogy for teaching these elements to a dance team? What is the recommended procedure? Should the coach teach all the staging from beginning to end so the pathways and formations are understood and *then* begin teaching the choreography? Should the coach teach the staging *and* the choreography simultaneously? Should the coach teach all the choreography first and *then* the staging? Once the routine is completely taught and understood by the dance team, what is the procedure to clean and clarify (polish) both the staging and musicality aspects of the routine for competition performance? While not all of

my questions may have been answered, this list of inquiries helped me to choose important texts to bring with me in this project.

In the context of a ballet class, Mary Goodhew has a few recommendations regarding training dancers to be more musical in their movement: “First instruct the students without [music]; Teach the rhythm...; Work on the timing; Mark the movement clearly as you demonstrate it, giving the meter, accent, highlights and tempo; Your voice should sound as smooth and calm or as strong and staccato as the movement you are making” (Goodhew 2007). Goodhew emphasizes speaking with the same qualities you want the dancers to move with -- speak softly if you want soft movement; speak quickly/staccato if you want quick sharp movements, etc. (Goodhew 2007).

DANCE TEAM MASTERCLASS, an online blog resource specifically for dance team coaches, provides “...Tips for Training Musicality and Timing in Your Dancers” where they advise the following: “When it comes to timing for a specific routine, have your dancers listen to their routine music any chance they get. Not practice, just listen. On the bus, walking home from school, brushing their teeth – anywhere and everywhere! Make sure they have easy access to the music on their phones and computers. The closer it gets to competition, the more I make them listen to it – sometimes 10 x per day. They will begin to hear things they hadn’t noticed while dancing – different instruments, accents, lyrics and mood changes. That familiarity will come through in their dancing” (DANCE TEAM MASTERCLASS 2016). This information provides a helpful way to improve a dance team’s overall musicality skills after they have learned the choreography but does not specifically describe the pedagogy of *how* to teach musicality within a dance team routine learning session. While searching for pedagogical approaches to musicality

and staging, one type of performance kept coming to mind -- marching bands. Thus, I began a search for marching band drill pedagogy strategies.

Competitive marching band is a performance art with a well-documented pedagogy of exactly how to teach staging and formations in a very precise and effective manner. Their performances typically have numerous and incredibly complex formations/pathways that are intricately woven together into a show. Therefore, marching band directors must have a clear and effective staging pedagogy to produce a show. Terry Williams, a retired high school band director and drill designer since 1999, describes the “Best Way To Teach Drill” in an article on [banddirector.com](http://banddirector.com). He lays out “...a fast, efficient way to get the show on the field and start cleaning” (Williams, n.d.). “Your students will need a way to temporarily mark their coordinates on the field. If your practice field is on pavement, you can use chalk or duct tape...The best place for the director to be during this teaching phase, is on a scaffold or tower so you can see the formations...After getting the first set on the field, move on to the second [and]...Give the students the instructions for how to get from Set 1 to Set 2 and how many counts. Most drill moves are floats, rotations, or follow the leader” (Williams, n.d.). This pedagogy works for many marching band directors nationwide that are teaching the staging for a competitive marching band show. Could some of these practices be utilized by dance team coaches? Could this marching band pedagogy translate to teaching staging elements of a competitive dance team routine performed on a basketball court instead of a football field? Could the marching band drill designer profession be a creative job that is lacking in the dance team world?

## **Summary**

While this literature review presented aspects of two ideals, staging and musicality, within the context of other disciplines, none of them were concretely discussed within the

contexts of high school/collegiate competitive dance team routines. If these are choreographic elements that are valued as a quarter of a dance team's competitive score, where is the unique pedagogy to support dance coaches in this regard? I hope to create an artifact with this exact intention to be utilized by dance coaches worldwide, thereby enhancing the overall competitiveness of dance team choreography.

### LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this work is that the research rests upon the analysis of two videos. To expand the findings and the research, a more comprehensive and varied collection would be needed. A wider study of design elements such as musicality, use of levels, style, timing, shaping of the body, etc would also offer a more complete picture that was not possible in this study. Additionally, a wide and comparative analysis of high school and collegiate level dance competitions could reveal more nuanced findings.

It is also important to note that my analysis is limited to my viewing abilities alone. While I work to be objective in my viewing, it is never possible for my past experiences and aesthetic preferences to not color my analysis. I bring to this work my experience as a dancer, a choreographer of competitive dance, and as a dance educator. I acknowledge that these aspects of my identity support the work positively, but could at times shade my analysis. More research team members could offer a wider scope of findings in relation to competitive dance choreography strategies. Further, this research did not include interviews, live viewings, observations of rehearsals, or dancer voices. Future research could include these aspects to bring forward more complex understandings and perceptions of choreographing and performing these types of dances. My goal in this work is to offer an understandable and user-friendly artifact for

dance team coaches, however, I acknowledge that this information may not be applicable to all dancer populations, choreographic needs, or dance team coaching practices.

## METHODOLOGY

1. **Complete a literature review** in the areas of Dance Team Competition Values & Aesthetics, Dance Team Choreography Staging and Musicality, and Dance Team Staging and Musicality Pedagogy for competitive Routines.
2. **Choose** two Universal Dance Association (UDA) national hip hop competition winner videos for analysis. These videos are winning hip hop performances in the Collegiate Dance Division IA category: [2018 University of Nevada Las Vegas Team Hip Hop](#) (2018 UNLV) and [2020 San Diego State University Team Hip Hop](#) (2020 SDSU).
3. **Analyze and Document** spatial design techniques used in both dances videos.
4. **Analyze collected notes** in order to **name and categorize** the spatial design techniques that present themselves from the analysis. This step was done in relation to additional viewings of the videos.
5. **Create a list of formations and spatial design strategies to implement the formations.** This list includes my created names, categories, and basic depictions of spatial design strategies and formations used in these winning national dance routines.

## ANALYSIS and FINDINGS

### **Process of Analysis**

Using my personal experience as a dance coach and choreographer, I implemented the following steps of analysis to identify the spatial design techniques found in two first-place collegiate dance teams in the hip hop category at the Universal Dance Association National Dance Team Championships – one from 2018 and one from 2020.

Steps to Analyze each Video:

1. watched both videos approximately 20-30 times with sound on and 10-15 times with sound muted,
2. documented stationary formations, locomotor transitions, length/duration of transitions from formation to formation,
3. identified and mapped each 8-count of choreography,
4. sketched each formation on paper,
5. numbered each formation in order of occurrence,
6. notated timestamps of each formation and transition,
7. notated the exact counts of the choreography that had stationary choreography versus in-transit choreography, or choreography on-the-move.

Next, I analyzed all information collected from steps 1-7, which I call *data*. Below, for the reader, I separate the five ways in which I analyzed the data and the resultant findings which arose from the analysis which guided the creation of the final artifact.

### **Finding 1: Competitive Choreography Values Transition**

This figure outlines the exact amount of each dance that was stationary and transitional. I provide for the reader a calculated percentage of these happenings within the dance. In my count-by-count analysis, I mapped out each 8-count, notated which counts were stationary formations as well as transitions between stationary formations. The calculations are listed below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Percentage of Total Dance in which Dancers are in Stationary Formations and Transitions Between Stationary Formations

	<b>2018 University of Las Vegas Team Hip Hop</b>	<b>2020 San Diego State University Team Hip Hop</b>
<b>Total # of Stationary Formations</b>	26 Stationary Formations	17 Stationary Formations
<b>Percentage of Dance in which dancers are in a Stationary Formations</b>	61% of dance performed in stationary formations	75% of dance performed in stationary formations
<b>Percentage of Dance in which Dancers Transition between formations</b>	39% of dance performed in transition between stationary formations	25% of dance performed in transition between stationary formations

Figure 1 concludes that a critical 25% - 39% of the choreography in these two winning nationals dance routines occurred in transit between formations (i.e. choreography “on the move”). Based on these calculations, transit choreography seems to have been a substantial portion of focus when creating these two winning dance routines. Another thing to note is the number of formations present in each dance -- 26 for UNLV and 17 for SDSU. My personal experience as a high school dance choreographer and collaborative conversations with my peers in the field revealed to me that there may be a correlation between a dance team’s technique level and the quantity of formations/transitions present in the choreography. Novice/beginner/intermediate teams seem to have fewer formations and transitions while intermediate/advanced/professional level teams seem to have a greater number. This supposed correlation could possibly have a direct impact on the more advanced teams’ ability to win national championship competitions. This could mean that high school students who desire to perform at the collegiate level should strive to progress their transit-choreography skills prior to auditioning for a competitive college dance team.

## **Finding 2: Transitions and Formations Have Purpose**

I documented every count each formation and transition and hand-drew the formations for both the UNLV dance and SDSU dance. With my sketches laid out on paper in order of performance, I made connections between choreographic movement choices and routine staging. I saw patterns of condensed formations, widened formations, pathways, and climactic moments. Then, I went through each formation and named them based on their shape. Once all formations were named, I started categorizing them by the choreographic actions displayed in the routines that allowed the dancers to arrive at each formation, and I landed upon six actions, or purposes, that allowed me to categorize the formations and transitions:

1. **Widen** - transitions that move outward and away from center of dance performance space
2. **Narrow** - transitions that move inward and towards center of dance performance space
3. **Highlight** - formations with the intention of focusing the audience's attention towards one dancer, skill, or stunt
4. **Reveal and/or Conceal** - transitions and/or formations that are unexpected or surprising
5. **File/ Symmetrize/ Diagonalize** - transitions and/or formations that create simplistically aligned formations to facilitate visually complex choreography; the formation or transition may do 1, 2, or 3 of the titled actions
6. **Climax/ Resolution** - formations that create a high moment of intensity or an ending point of the dance

The two categories that led me to my next finding are widening and narrowing.

## **Finding 3: Formations Must Breathe**

As notated in my methodology, I watched both videos 10-15 times each with the sound muted. I wanted to hone in on the formation floor patterns without the music influencing my



observation. This allowed me to notice something I never did before: the formations were breathing! The muted videos showed me that formations of the dance would widen--narrow--widen--narrow in a repetitive manner from the start of the dance to the end of the dance. The imagery of lungs inflating/inhaling and deflating/exhaling prompted me to name this phenomenon *formation breathing*. A clear example of this occurs in the 2018 UNLV video at the 1:05-1:42 timeframe. Once I noticed this detail, the realization deepened my relationship with the element of space as well as my overall appreciation for the ability of formations and transitions to tell an intricate story of their own. My observations revealed that choreographing with *formation breathing* could allow ample space for impactful stationary formations to continuously be followed by intensifying transitions. As I continued with my analysis, I continued looking for other elements that may impact the effectiveness of a transition or formation within the dance, and I noticed two items when looking across the data that bubbled up: speed of transitions and size of formations.

#### **Finding 4: Transition Speed and Formation Size Contribute to Narrative of Song**

While watching both videos, I notated and calculated the duration of each formation and transition from the UNLV and SDSU videos. While doing so, I also noticed the different impact that slower transitions had on the dance versus faster transitions. Slower-paced transitions often occurred during more melodic sections of the song and provided the feeling of an “easygoing” or “groovy” transition from one formation to the next. An example of this occurs in the 2018 UNLV video at the 2:04-2:08 timeframe. Dancers are walking and the music is softer in that section of the music. However, when there was a transition to a climactic moment in the choreography, the pace of the transition often occurred much quicker. The most visible transitions that had this trait were those that started in a widened formation and narrowed or those that started narrow and

then widened. During these transitions, the choreography called for the dancers to run either in an upright or table-top-like position. I felt that the running intensified the narrative of the choreography, then the running was followed by a sudden halt of some kind that would create a surprising or climactic moment. Competition dances typically attempt to parallel the narrative of the song lyrics, so mirroring transition speed and formation size with the music might be a method that aids in the storytelling aspect of the choreography and assists with the “wow” factor effect that could help dance teams be more competitive.

In both dances that were analyzed, the size of the formation often corresponds to the type of movement that happened in that formation. Numerous times in both dances, smaller formations showcased smaller movements that were more intricate and even character-like. An example of this occurs in the 1:38-1:51 timeframe of the 2020 SDSU video. This choice could have been made by the choreographer in an attempt to use the compactness of the formation to draw the audience’s eye to the small details of the movement. Oppositionally, larger or widened formations were often utilized to showcase bigger movements that utilized a greater portion of the dancers’ kinesphere and performance space. This choice could have been made by the choreographer to create a bigger general effect and presence on the performance floor. Perhaps utilizing the larger formations in conjunction with bigger movements could combine to create a more exciting section of choreography. In order to do big movements in widened formations, there must be enough space on the performance floor to work with and manipulate. This thought led me to my fifth and final finding.

#### **Finding 5: More Negative Space Provides the Opportunity for Intricate Formations**

At the Universal Dance Association College Cheerleading and Dance Team

National Championship, the rules specify that a minimum of seven dancers to a maximum of eighteen dancers can perform at one time (Varsity 2021). All routines must have a number of participants within this specified range. Both of the videos analyzed for this research have sixteen dancers present in the choreography. I found it interesting that both teams danced with two less performers than the maximum allowed per the competition rules. Why did the choreographer and/or dance team coach make that decision? I pondered this question as I watched both videos repeatedly and notated the spatial choices that were made. Then, I noticed that while eighteen dancers *could* fit into the performance space, the negative space that was created by limiting the number of dancers may have allowed for a greater opportunity to manipulate the negative space of the dance. For the purpose of this research, negative space refers to space that is unoccupied by a dancer, and positive space refers to space that is occupied by a dancer. Manipulating the negative space that surrounds the choreography could possibly be a part of the reason why there are so many spatial design possibilities. With so much negative space to manipulate, the ways a choreographer can maximize their use of positive space could be greater than if they had more dancers

## CONCLUSION

Choreography in both dances studied was intentional and methodical about how and when transitions and formations occurred, formed, and appeared to the audience. I argue that intentional dynamic spatial design techniques are a part of winning dance national championship routines. Incorporating varied approaches and methods of manipulating the positive and negative space of the performance area coupled with different speeds of transitions and formation shapes may offer the opportunity to increase competitiveness and earn higher scores at dance competitions. The transit choreography skills identified in this research from the 2018 University

of Las Vegas team hip hop and the 2020 San Diego State University team hip hop routines are skills that I may teach my high school students to help better prepare them for college dance team auditions and membership. To prep my high school dancers for the realities of a college dance team, I will intentionally and methodically craft my competition pieces in a fashion that more closely mirrors the spatial design rigor of collegiate dance team choreography. I offer this research to high school dance team coaches and choreographers as a tool and reference to assist with creating visually intricate spatial designs for choreography, potentially improving the skill of high school dancers, and perhaps better preparing those students to be successful at the collegiate dance team level. Personally, the findings gained from this analysis will forever be a part of my personal choreographic process as a competitive high school dance team coach. Now with this understanding, my hope is that if I provide this knowledge to my students via competition choreography in high school, that this experience and learning will contribute to their future success as a student dancer on a collegiate dance team.

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## APPENDICES

### **Competitive Dance Team Spatial Designs**

A list of competitive dance team spatial designs with depictions and descriptions is available upon request. Contact the author directly for details: [kristiannahogan@gmail.com](mailto:kristiannahogan@gmail.com)