Recognizing the benefits of attending a renowned research university, many students at Emory majoring in the natural sciences choose to complete an honors thesis. Working on an honors thesis can provide many benefits for all majors however Not only does it allow a student to stand out among other graduate school or medical school applicants, but it also provides an opportunity to establish close relationships with faculty members, hone writing skills, develop individual ideas, and explore creative methods to answer questions in a chosen field of interest. Here, Kala Seidenberg, a student in the class of 2012, discusses her experience with and the process of completing an honors thesis in Dance and Movement Studies, which explored the role that music and other external elements play in an audience’s perception of a dance. 

1. What was the topic of your honors thesis?
I did a dance honors thesis that investigated the effects of external elements on one’s perception of a choreographed work. I created three different dances (a solo, quartet, and large group) from the same four core phrases. I then completed a second version of each dance (solo B, quartet B, large group B) in which the movement was exactly the same as the original version The only difference between the two versions were the external elements (music, costumes, lighting, etc.). I wanted to see if simply changing the environment that the movement took place in would change the meaning and weight of the dance. I examined this question from the perception of the viewer (audience member), doer (performers) and maker (me, the choreographer). I created and distributed surveys to the audience, asking them to describe the differences between each version (solo vs. solo B, quartet vs. quartet B, and large group vs. large group B). I engaged in dialogue with the dancers and had them answer questions as well. Finally, I recorded my own observations.

2. Why did you choose that topic?
I originally wanted to do a project that somehow explored music’s role in dance. While I was at the American Dance Festival (ADF)held at Duke University during the summer of 2011, I had the opportunity to watch a lot of dance performances. Simply from being immersed in so many dances, that summer made me question and think about what I was seeing and was being exposed to. I remember watching a performance that totally disengaged me; while I was watching the piece, I realized that the movement was interesting. It was the environment that the piece was in (i.e. monotone music and dull lighting) that made me check out of the piece. In my mind, I was thinking that if this movement had been recreated in a different environment, perhaps with more dynamic music, costuming, and lighting, I would have felt differently. So, thinking about all of this, I decided I wanted to play with this idea of altering the environments of dance through changing the external elements, as well as really investigating what gives a piece meaning—such as how much weight the movement has, [in comparison to the external environment in which the dance was being performed].

3. Who was your adviser and how did they guide you in the process?
Anne Leo was my advisor and she was fantastic; together, we created a feasible timeline for the many, many steps involved in this process. I had to apply for grants, work with a costume designer, make programs and publicity materials,
follow the college’s honors thesis deadlines, make six dances, hold rehearsals, and more. [Anna] helped me stay on top of deadlines and provided me with clarity when I was confused. She also helped me talk through my ideas, offering advice when necessary. Finally, when it came to the written portion, she read over my work several times and gave me a lot of helpful feedback. When I got overwhelmed, she calmed me down. She offered choreographic, written, and emotional support.

4. What did you gain from the experience and is there anything you wish you had done differently?

Gosh, I learned so much from this experience. First and foremost, I learned how to follow through with an idea. I created an evening length performance, which is an accomplishment I am proud of. I also learned to ask for help. There was one point when I was working on my concert program—I had spent days working on it—and then I lost the computer version because I had saved it improperly. Anyway, I was mentioning this to one of my dancers, who happened to be a computer wiz. I had a print out version of my image, design, and text, and she helped me correctly put it together on the computer in a matter of minutes. Her skills and help saved me hours. I also learned how to exhaust an idea through this project. It’s so easy with choreography to just create new movement that has no thread line. The intent of my project forced me to only use a few phrases of movement, and therefore, not get carried away with the movement invention process.

5. How long did you work on your thesis? How did you manage and juggle your time on the thesis with your class workload?

I was at a dance festival during the summer when I came up with my idea, [so] I started really working on it in August and worked on it both semesters of my senior year. My senior year class schedule was not too crazy, which was helpful. I remember I scheduled thesis time into my schedule. I devoted a lot of time to the project each week. During the first semester, I worked on the quartet, and in the second semester I worked on the quartet, solo and large group. Each dance had two rehearsals that lasted two hours each week—so second semester, I had six hours of thesis rehearsal a week. I then had to spend at least 1-2 hours preparing for each rehearsal. Finally, I scheduled time in between my classes to be at my computer, read articles, and write reflections. I think the fact that I could shift back and forth between studio time and computer time was comforting. When I would get frustrated writing or reading, I would go to the studio and work on the movement, and vice versa. The mini deadlines I set up with Anna really helped me stay on top of things; we set up deadlines for [a section of the dance] being half done, journal entries, etc. I also worked over the winter break to create the majority of the solo.

6. What major conclusions did you draw?

I can’t remember exactly what I wrote in my thesis—part of me is not quite ready to look at it—but here is a watered down, bland idea: I learned that just like I had anticipated, the external elements did, for the most part, affect the makers’, doers’, and viewers’ perception of the pieces. There were general shifts in tone that were commonly noticed by a majority of the viewers. It was interesting because, for some people, musical choices put the dance in a time or place that was either familiar or unfamiliar. Some pieces felt more concrete because the music was more relatable, while others felt abstract. I also realized in reflecting upon my own work how much more I could have done to truly alter the external elements.

6. Any advice to students considering an honors thesis in Dance?

- Pick a topic that you are deeply interested and invested in ...
- Allow yourself to make mistakes and take bold risks .
- Create a timeline and set deadlines!
- DO NOT PROCRASTINATE OR WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE...It won’t work for this.
- Do a ton of research on your topic, dance, and dance-making if you are doing a choreography project, but also take time to read about the process of other artists and art forms Sometimes it helps to be inspired by things outside of your field.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for feedback or help.
- Sometimes just talking through your ideas can help you solve problems.
- Work collaboratively with the artists involved in your project.
- Be punctual: when doing a thesis in the arts, you usually are going to be working with many other people (i.e. casts of dancers, advisors, costume designer, professors, other choreographers, musicians). Being punctual and prepared for these meetings shows these individuals that you respect them, their time, the work at hand, and the help they are providing.
- Don’t freak out and panic. Even though this can be unavoidable at times, try to remember that despite the stress, you chose to do this.

Remember what motivates and inspires you.