The Art of Choosing a College:  
Tips for Visual and Performing Arts Students

Students who wish to study visual or performing arts have some unique challenges and options during their college search. If you’re considering a major in music, art, dance, or drama, read on for some advice from the experts.

A Difference of Degree
Prospective arts majors have two degree options: a bachelor of arts (BA) degree with a major in the arts and a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) for artists/performers or bachelor of music (BM) for musicians. The BA degree is the typical liberal arts degree—students who major in English, history, and other humanities majors also earn BA degrees. The BFA or BM degree is more focused and intense. “There is a world of difference between a BA in music and a BM in music,” says Anthony Celentano, school counselor/military advisor at Pope John XXIII High School (NJ), who holds a BM and MM (master of music). “A BA in music will be pretty much like any other BA degree—lots of courses outside of your major with approximately 12 or so courses in your major. That’s not a lot of music for the student who is looking for an intense musical experience. A BM in music essentially is a professional degree. Within my 120+ credits for my BM, only 36 were liberal arts courses. The remainder were music or degree-related courses: private lessons, conducting classes, music history, music theory, etc.” Which degree you choose depends on your college and career goals. If you have a high degree of commitment to your art and desire an intense, often competitive college experience, a BFA or BM might be right for you. If you would rather study a variety of subjects along with your arts major, a BA may be the way to go.

Types of Colleges
Visual and performing arts students have several types of colleges to consider. Conservatories and stand-alone arts schools offer an immersion-type experience for students earning BM or BFA degrees. All of the students you meet at this type of school will be artists, and the atmosphere is often highly competitive. Some larger universities offer BFA/BM degrees as well as BA degrees in the arts. You may find somewhat self-contained music or arts schools within the larger university. In this atmosphere, you could pursue the more specialized degree while still keeping the door open to taking a few liberal arts courses (which would be unavailable at specialized music or arts schools). In addition, a university-based arts program might give you the option of pursuing a double degree, such as a BM in music and a BA in history. (A double degree would require more than four years, however.)

The Application Process
In addition to completing a typical college application, students in the visual or performing arts should prepare a portfolio or audition. Each arts program has different requirements, so you should contact the schools as early as possible to obtain their portfolio or audition requirements. Although your portfolio or audition is an important part of the application, arts programs do consider your academic record and test scores. “Some [colleges] place greater value on academics, while others lean more toward the student’s portfolio or audition,” according to a workshop on arts programs presented at several NACAC meetings (compiled by Kavin Buck, UCLA; Jane Buckman, Cornish College of the Arts; Ed Schoenberg, Otis College of Art and Design; and Jenny Woo, UCLA). “Most colleges balance the student’s creative talent with their academic achievements.”
Assessing Your Abilities
If you’re interested in pursuing an arts major and career, now is the time to seek objective opinions of your abilities in the field. James Gandre, dean of Chicago College of Performing Arts, Roosevelt University (IL), offers this advice to young musicians: “In addition to asking for honest advice and evaluation from high school ensemble and private teachers, students can get outside assessment from musicians at a local symphony, dance company, theatre, etc. Of course, everyone doesn’t live in a big city, so this may require driving one to two hours or more to get this advice, but it’s worth it.” Visual arts students can receive portfolio evaluations and college information at one of the National Portfolio Days sponsored by an association of arts schools and art departments at universities. For more information, talk to your guidance counselor or art teacher or visit www.npda.org.

Other Considerations
All students benefit from visiting the colleges that interest them and asking questions about academics, student life, and other facets of college life. As an arts student, you may have different or additional things to consider.

Location
The location of your chosen college may be more important to arts students than to students in other majors. “There may be many factors to consider when choosing where to study,” notes the workshop authors. “For art students, these should involve access to professional venues such as museums, galleries, theaters, and concerts. Also, do these venues attract regional, national, or international talent to inspire and educate the students? Additionally, the opportunity to perform, exhibit, and have active internships is vital to a young artist’s education.”

Facilities
In addition to checking out dorm rooms, classrooms, and athletic facilities, art students should look at a college’s studio space or practice rooms, performance or exhibit venues on campus, darkroom facilities (for photographers), computer resources, and any other resources specific to your field of study. And ask questions about how accessible these resources are to students: attractive studios are of no help if there aren’t enough to go around.

Reputation and Philosophy
Talk to your art, music, drama, or dance teachers about the reputation of the colleges you’re considering. Ask the colleges about career opportunities for graduates and about what their alumni are doing. The goal here is to get some idea of how the program is perceived by professionals in your career field and what career opportunities you might have when you complete college. Also, ask each college about their philosophy. Different fine arts or music programs can have very different emphases. For example, one music program may emphasize classical music, while another specializes in more modern forms, like jazz. Similarly, the intensity of competitiveness, workload, and pressure can vary from school to school. During your visits and talks with students and faculty, try to get an impression of the daily pressures of being a student in that particular program.

A Good Fit
Finally, as for any student, visual and performing arts students need to find a college that fits their personality, interests and goals. Especially for very ambitious students, it’s easy to be dazzled by the prestige of a top professional school or arts department and overlook the question of whether the program is right for you. “When working as dean of enrollment at New York City’s Manhattan School of Music, I would run across the occasional unhappy student who came to New York City because someone
else had told them that New York or Manhattan School of Music or a particular teacher was perfect for them. They listened to those mentors instead of their gut and made a wrong choice,” says Gandre. “No matter how talented the student and how wonderful the school, fit is always crucial.”

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