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## The Creative Student's College Search

Selecting a college is a difficult decision for any student. There is so much to consider—location, number of students, quality of education, campus life and much more. For creative students like you, the decision can be even more complicated. In addition to the usual factors is how well the college will prepare you for a professional career in the arts, how you may select a double major including the arts or even how you can participate in the arts while majoring in a different subject. That's a *lot* to have running through your mind!

You have several options! You might decide to attend a professional training school or conservatory that will prepare you for a career in your discipline. If you haven't decided that you'd like to pursue a professional career or if you want to explore academic subjects during college as well, you can consider a university or liberal arts college.

Right now, you are probably asking, "But how do I know which school is right for me?" This chapter will help guide you through some self-analyzing. It's for all types of creative students—actor, artist, dancer, musician or writer—you'll want to take time to consider what campus setting you'd thrive in best.

### The Artistic Component in the Admission Process

Unlike many of your college-bound peers, as an artist you have a different angle on the college application process. For many of you, college may be the final step in preparing for a professional career. And for you, the selection of your college is not just a choice for the next four years because where you attend can have a profound impact on whether or not you will have a professional career in the arts.

The artistic component of admission to college affects you in another way as well. Not only do you have to prepare college applications like any other student by obtaining teacher recommendations, including a writing sample and possibly taking standardized tests (depending on where you apply), but

you also have the artistic component, which can be an audition or a portfolio. Many independent art schools, conservatories and artistically competitive liberal arts colleges and universities view your audition or portfolio as one of the more important—if not *the* most important—component of your college application. Because the artistic component of your college search will likely be a critical factor in your admission result, you can't be prepared enough for your audition or for creating your artistic portfolio. But not to worry—these are addressed in detail in the chapters for specific arts disciplines.

### Doing Your Research

One of the most important things in making the best college choice is to *do your research!* This is especially true for student artists. You have already spent a substantial amount of time pursuing and mastering your art so you can reach for the fullest potential. Finding the right college program to advance your training to the next level may be the last step in the process of becoming the artist you want to be.

Other questions you'll need to start thinking about include geography. Do you want to stay close to home? Does it matter? Would you like to live in a particular region of the country?

Campus size is an important factor because it can have a lot to do with your comfort level. Do you want to know most everyone on campus or in your department? Then smaller might be better for you. Do you want to interact with graduate students and never meet the same person twice? If this is the case, a larger school might be right up your alley.

Consider what you want your college years to be like. If you want the traditional trappings of college life—like sporting events or Greek life—then maybe a more conventional atmosphere like a university or college would suit you better than a professional school.

This book can help you, but there are also several other ways to find the information that you need. (See the appendix for publications and Internet sites that can assist in your college search). The National Association for College Admission Counseling hosts Performing and Visual Arts College Fairs across the country each year. At these events, you can learn about various schools and programs and ask admission officers questions. A trip to a college fair is a great first step in narrowing down what you want in a school.

The Internet has made it easier than ever before to find out details about specific college programs. Visiting the school or department websites of schools that interest you can give specific details about that school's offerings and help you determine if you'd enjoy being a student there.

## **The Campus Visit**

If you decide a school merits serious consideration as one of your college options, you need to talk to people on campus—students, professors and office personnel can be the ultimate source of information. Of course you can talk by phone, but talking in person is even better.

For most creative students, the campus visit can be paired with an audition or a portfolio review, which is usually part of the admission process for students of the performing arts. However, if you live a long way from a school you like, you may be able to audition via videotape or send in your portfolio for review without visiting.

While a campus visit can give the best insight into whether or not you would enjoy being a student there, the admission office might be willing to arrange a phone interview to answer any questions. Ask if you can talk to a few students on the phone to learn more about their experiences. Getting a student's perspective of campus life can help you determine if the school would be a good fit for you.

## **Standardized Tests**

As you probably know, most four-year colleges and universities require test results of either the SAT or ACT. However, some conservatory arts programs do not require these tests. Check with the admission office of any institution you are considering to find out if you are required to take one of these exams.

If you plan to apply to a wide range of artistic programs—including conservatories, liberal arts colleges and universities—you will need to take at least one of these standardized tests. Liberal arts colleges and universities almost unilaterally require test scores as one of the key factors in admission decisions, and your application will not be considered without a test score. You should plan to take one of the college entrance exams during your junior year of high school, or at the very latest the fall of your senior year.

Test preparation books and free sample tests are available at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) for the SAT and at [www.act.org](http://www.act.org) for the ACT. You can get a feel for this type of exam by taking the practice tests offered. If you are still nervous about taking your college entrance exam or if you have trouble setting your own study schedule, consider working with a study group or taking a test preparation course from a reputable company like Kaplan or The Princeton Review.

Although many schools permit you to submit either SAT or ACT scores, you may want to take both tests. One test format may be better for you than the other, and as a result, your score on one of them may be higher.

Even if you plan to apply to conservatory-based college programs or professional training schools that usually don't require standardized test scores, you should consider taking them anyway. If at the last minute you decide a conservatory or professional arts program is not for you and you want to apply to a liberal arts college or university artistic program instead, you'll need standardized test scores to apply. If you don't have them as a backup, you may have to defer college for a year so that you can take the test required for admission to one of these schools. The same logic applies to having an SAT or ACT score on your transcript in the event of a transfer to another program or school. Having test scores under your belt affords you many more college options if you discover a program isn't right for you and you want to transfer. Just look at college entrance exams as "insurance" if you change your mind at any point in the admission process or once you have already enrolled in college.

### **Financing Your Education**

Weighing the cost is no small factor in making your final decision. At first, consider colleges purely from an educational point of view. Ask yourself, "Does this college offer what I need?" Narrow your choices to a short list of favorites. Then add in the cost factor as it can be quite significant in making your final decision. Although many professional schools, colleges and universities offer substantial financial aid packages—including grants, scholarships and loans—these are not always enough. Only you and your family can decide how much is too much.

If your parents are willing to help you pay for your college education, consider yourself lucky. The cost of higher education is a substantial amount of money, and their support can make an enormous difference in your life after college. Parental support can eliminate or reduce debt that you might otherwise incur due to taking out loans to pay college tuition.

### **Have a College-Cost Talk With Your Parents**

Before you get ahead of yourself and count on your parents to share your college expenses, find out just how much they are willing or able to contribute. Just because your parents have said they will pay for college—or help you pay for it—does not mean they have the resources to pay for 100 percent of it. Realistically, they may not be able to pay as much as they promise. It's

very important to sit down and have an open, honest discussion about the financial aspect of college. Find out the following:

- How much of your college expense do your parents plan to provide?
- How much do they expect you to contribute?
- Will there be a need to take out loans?
- Will they pay for all four years of an undergraduate program?
- Will they give you additional money for books, clothes and recreation?
- Are they considering the fact that college costs tend to rise each year with tuition increases and that the possibility exists for decreased financial aid since funding varies from year to year?

## **Federal Aid and the FAFSA**

For many students, the greatest source of financial aid for higher education is the federal government. To be considered for federal grant and loan programs—including Stafford loans and Pell grants—students must file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The earliest you can apply is January 1, so make it your New Year's resolution to complete it as soon as possible. Because colleges and universities determine financial aid packages on a rolling basis, it is most advantageous for you to file the FAFSA as soon as possible after the January 1 deadline in the year you plan to attend college. Completing the FAFSA earlier may increase your chances of getting a better financial aid package. And you have to file the FAFSA each year you want financial aid.

After filing the FAFSA, you will receive a student aid report (SAR), which determines how much money you and your family should anticipate paying for your college expenses. The expected family contribution (EFC) listed is what college financial aid offices use to determine how much you and your family will have to pay toward your education. The EFC is based on income and the assets belonging to you and your parents.

If your parents aren't willing or able to pay for all the EFC or only a portion of it, you—the student—are responsible for the cost unless you meet the very narrow guidelines of being an “independent” student. There are only a few

ways that students can be separated from their parents financially for consideration as independent students. You must be one of the following:

- a student at least 24 years of age
- a student pursuing a graduate degree
- an orphan or ward of the court
- a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces
- a married student or a person with dependent children or other dependents who live with the student and who receive more than half of their support from the student.

You can see why it's so important to have a frank conversation with your parents about college costs. Unless you fit the independent student status each year, you will still need their income figures to report on the FAFSA, and each year, your financial aid package will be based on those numbers. Obtaining parental support about which college you attend and agreeing how much both they and you will contribute to the expense is critical in making the best financial plan for college, a plan that is likely to span the entire four years of your education. And keep in mind that many students do not finish college in four years. Some degree plans or certain college programs (like picking up an education certification credential) can stretch your college years past the traditional four. Other possibilities, like switching majors, also can make college take longer. So if you think an extra semester or fifth year might be a possibility, you may want to consider that in your financial plan as well.

Once you have been accepted to the colleges, they will send financial aid packages that outline what your family is expected to contribute and the level of aid offered by the school. When you receive these financial aid packages, you will have a much better picture of what the cost of college will be. It is important to remember that at most higher educational institutions, tuition and room and board costs traditionally rise each year so the estimated amounts that you are given will be only for your freshman year. To plan for the cost of your entire education, you will have to make some estimates of what the remaining three years will cost given the impact of inflation and other factors.

If you feel that you are due more financial aid than you are offered, you can ask for a reassessment with the financial aid office. This doesn't always bring success, but it is worth a try. If you are an excellent student, have exceptional artistic ability (such as might be indicated by obtaining one of the school's artistic scholarships) or if you have extenuating financial circumstances, it will be easier to plead your case to the financial aid office. And don't forget

that each year is a new year. If costs are rising to the point where you or your family can't pay the tuition or if your financial situation has changed, you can revisit the financial aid office and ask them to reassess your package.

## **Artistic Scholarships**

For talented creative arts students, a number of colleges and universities offer special scholarships based on artistic ability. Considering college programs that offer such scholarships is a good way to narrow your search if you are considering a number of schools. In most cases, competing for artistic scholarships is either part of the portfolio review process for visual arts students or the audition process for performing arts students.

Even if a school doesn't offer artistic scholarships, it's important not to rule it out immediately. The availability of artistic scholarships should be *one factor* in your decision-making process but not the *only* one. It is best to apply for as many artistic scholarships as you can to investigate all your options. Remember that there are also scholarships offered by arts organizations not affiliated with specific colleges. When the time comes to decide which school to attend, sit down with all the information including funding from an artistic scholarship, your financial aid package, your firsthand experience visiting the college and detailed information about the degree programs. Then decide where to go from there.

## **Part-time Work**

Working while in school requires some time management, but it's possible. These days, more and more students work part-time to supplement the cost of their education. As part of your financial aid package, you may be eligible for the federal work-study program, which allows you to find a job on campus. If you are lucky, you may be able to find a job within your department. This way, not only will you earn money to pay for expenses, but you will also gain valuable experience in your field that you can put on your résumé.

Gaining employment experience off campus is also an option; wages might be slightly higher than in federal work-study programs, and making contacts off campus can be helpful in seeking internships later in your college career. If you do take the plunge to get a part-time job in the "real world," it may be beneficial to find a job related to your field of study. The experience could be invaluable when looking for that first job after graduation from college. Here are some ideas:

### **Art Students**

- Work at an art gallery or museum
- Work at a local arts organization
- Teach art to children
- Try to sell your art whether it's a painting, illustration or graphic design work

### **Drama Students**

- Work at a local professional theatre company
- Find out if you can get paid to assist with local high school plays and musicals
- If you live in a major metropolitan area, see if you can land any acting gigs

### **Dance Students**

- Teach dance to children at a local dance studio
- Work at a local dance company
- Work at a dance supply store

### **Music Students**

- Work at a local symphony or opera company
- Teach music to children
- Work at a music supply store

### **Creative Writing Students**

- Work at a local publishing company or newspaper
- Work at a local literary arts organization
- Tutor high school students in writing

Remember to keep things in balance, no matter how rewarding your on-campus or off-campus job may be. You must remain focused on your stud-

ies, limiting your job to about 15 hours a week. You'll want to make your education the top priority, followed by work, and still fit in time for a social life.

## **The Double Major: Studying the Arts and Another Discipline**

Should you decide to combine studying another discipline with an arts degree, keep in mind that a double major is most easily attained by pursuing a bachelor of arts (BA). Because professional degree programs such as a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) or bachelor of music (BM) dedicate most of their requirements to the arts curriculum itself, there is little room for taking electives for another major if you want to graduate in four years. However, if you don't mind staying in school for an extra year, it may be possible to add another major or do a dual degree, such as a BFA in art and a BA in art history. The key is to plan your academic studies early in your college career.

## **Creative Students Not Majoring in the Arts**

What if after doing some serious soul searching you decide that despite your talent, you don't see a future professional career in the arts as your path in life? That's fine. You are still a creative student and will still be a creative person. Everyone is different, and although you might have what it takes to become a professional artist, that doesn't mean that is necessarily right for you. Only you can make that decision. And you can still study the arts in college; it just might not be your sole focus.

Perhaps you are a creative student who has decided that you want to pursue a more academic route after high school. That's okay! You can still enjoy the benefits of the creative departments on a college campus. You may consider a double major or a minor in an artistic discipline. Also, don't forget the contributions you can make with your creative side beyond an academic setting. You can always offer your talents to the community. You can participate in arts-related organizations or do artistic work on your own for personal inner satisfaction.

If you have spent much of your childhood and teenage years pursuing an art form, it will never be lost even if you don't continue your studies in college. It is part of who you are! You can always pick up where you left off, even though there may be no professional career as the ultimate goal. And you could return to studying your art later in life or share your love of the arts with others. At your core, you will always be an artist.