

[So You Want To Major in the Arts?](#)

The following is a document/presentation that I give to my students who express an intent to major in music or theatre in college. My five years of college admissions work provided me with some insights that you may find helpful. Please feel free to share this article with your own students and their families.



Majoring in the Performing Arts

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The decision to pursue music or theater in college requires research, dialog, and soul-searching. A career in the arts can be rewarding both personally and (yes, even) financially. I hope this document will serve as a resource for the family as you begin to discuss the possibilities.

Majoring in the arts is NOT like high school

One of the most important things to understand is that majoring in the arts in college is very different from your years in high school. In general, you are moving from a group-oriented, broad-based experience to an intensive, in-depth, *individualized* experience. Students who are expecting their college experience to simply be a continuation of high school will often be disappointed. Here are some quick differences:

- You must declare a specific major. Today there really is no such thing as “music major.” You will need to declare a more specific major. This might be Music Education, Performance (classical), Musical Theatre, Jazz Studies (performance), Acting, Composition, etc. This may or may not mean that you can still participate in ensembles and classes outside of your major. Every school is different in this regard, but you need to carefully consider what your professional goals will be so you can choose the appropriate major. Yes, you want to enjoy college, but you don’t necessarily want to jeopardize your career goals in favor of creating the most enjoyable or ideal college experience. What is your career goal?
- The most important class (for musicians) is **Applied Study**. In high school these are called “private lessons” and are optional. In college however, the development of your instrument (be it voice, clarinet, or whatever) is job number one. This is one of the reasons that choosing a college or university without carefully considering your applied teacher would be a big mistake.
- You may perform *less* than when you were in high school. Sometimes college freshman report that they feel they are not performing as regularly as they did in high school. This is

often very true, especially if the student participated in many ensembles, both curricular and extra-curricular. You may also be in a “rotation” in college. For example, an orchestra typically uses two flutes for any given piece, but there may be ten or twelve flute students. So students are usually “rotated” through orchestra, meaning you will only play on certain concerts and/or pieces. Musical theatre majors (who were always leads in high school) will quickly realize that everyone is strong and there are always a limited number of roles to go around.

Choosing potential schools

If you want to find the best “fit” there is no way around this fact: You will need to do a *lot* of research. One thing that almost always holds true in my years of watching high school seniors go through the process is that (a) they always seem to “know” they are going to attend a particular school early on and (b) it never ends up being that school. This tells me that students are not always doing enough research early and and definitely not keeping an open mind throughout the process. Here are some things you need to know and do:

- No two schools offer arts education in the same way. For example, while most music schools are members of NASM (National Association of Schools of Music) that provides a framework for a consistent set of courses, the ways in which those courses are offered and implemented are very different. You need to ask the same questions of each school in order to determine how they are alike and not alike. Theatre applicants need to make especially sure each school is *accredited*, otherwise you may not be able to gain entrance into a graduate program four years later!
- Keep your emotions in check. Many high school seniors have a “gut feeling” about a certain school. In truth this feeling is usually based upon someone else’s opinion. Or it might be that you met an applied teacher that you think you will love. Remember that there are many more factors that you must consider, including curriculum, location, size of student body, and costs.
- Keep your ego in check. Remember that--at the very best schools--well over half the applicants are *not* accepted. Remember too that most applicants are just like you: The very best in their school. Yes, be confident, but remember that you may not be admitted to some schools that you consider a top choice. Remember too that your parents always believe that you are the best (that’s why they are such a great support system for you throughout this process), but you must keep your feet on the ground and know that the competition can be fierce. Sometimes parents can be devastated and even offended when their child is not admitted to a particular music school. Again, you must keep the possibility in the back of your mind, and plan accordingly.
- Start early. This is not always easy because some students don’t realize they want to pursue music until late in their high school years. But for those of you who know right now that the arts need to be a part of your future, you need to start searching and visiting schools now. www.petersons.com is a good site for learning about the vast majority of performing arts schools.

Where to begin

Your goal (finding the right school) involves these steps:

1. Deciding upon your specific major
2. Identifying your school “type”
3. Developing your long list of schools that fit that “type”
4. Creating your short list of schools (after research) to which you will likely apply
5. Visiting those schools including performances and lessons
6. Preparing/presenting your applications (including financial apps) and auditions
7. Being “accepted” and receiving financial aid packaging
8. Making a final decision (usually by May 1) from among the schools that accepted you

Identifying your school “type”

This is one of the most important steps, but assumes that you KNOW YOUR MAJOR already. If you want to pursue a double major, you need to know which schools will allow that and what trade offs are involved (usually affects applied study and years to completion). You are potentially wasting valuable time and effort by beginning school visits before you know the area of music in which you want to major.

Here are the basic school types:

- Large Public or Private University
- Small Private College or University
- Conservatory training

This seems very clean-cut, but in reality there is a lot of crossover amongst these types. The following descriptions are extremely generalized but will give you a decent foundation.

Large Public or Private University

- Large enrollments
- Many ensembles
- Applied study/other classes may be taught by graduate students
- Cost for in-state public university is usually less than other choices
- Mostly full-time faculty with previous (some more, some less) professional performance experience

If you like the big-campus atmosphere with homecoming, Greek systems, marching band, etc. then you might love this type of school. It can be a very thrilling experience.

Small Private College or University

- Small enrollments and class sizes
- Fewer ensembles, but usually more flexibility with majors and involvement
- Courses/lessons almost always taught by faculty (may be adjunct however)
- May appear expensive, but often have considerable scholarships

If you like the thought of having a smaller student-to-teacher ratio and being able to participate in a variety of groups, this type may be for you. With fewer students to go around, small schools need the students to be involved in different areas. Many students report that this type of school is similar to the high school experience in this way.

Conservatory

The modern-day conservatory is one of the most misunderstood college types, and with good reason. Conservatories, in their original form, were little more than businesses for private instruction. They were not originally degree-granting institutions. Conversely, most colleges and universities did not originally offer degrees in the arts. The period around the middle of the 20th century saw a “move to the middle” where both types began to act a little like the other. Furthermore, while there were hundreds of conservatories in the early 20th century, today there are only seven that are independent institutions. The others have either shuttered their doors or merged with larger universities or colleges. “The Seven” are:

1. The Juilliard School (NYC)
2. The Manhattan School of Music (NYC)
3. The Curtis Institute of Music (Philadelphia)
4. New England Conservatory of Music (Boston)
5. The Boston Conservatory
6. San Francisco Conservatory of Music
7. The Cleveland Institute of Music

These schools are primarily classical performance schools (again, that is a generalization) that are extremely competitive and small. Today, “conservatory training” is more of a philosophy of training, and is present in many schools of music at colleges and universities. The telltale signs include:

- Emphasis on applied instruction from individuals who are (or have been) full-time professional performers, including operatic stars, principals in major orchestras, Broadway stars, and recording artists.
- Small and competitive (generally)
- Expensive (generally)

Conservatory training schools include Eastman School of Music (University of Rochester), Cincinnati CCM (University of Cincinnati), California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Chicago College of Performing Arts (Roosevelt University), Mannes College of Music (New School University), DePaul University, The Shepherd School of Music (Rice University), Peabody School of Music (Johns Hopkins University), School of Music at Carnegie Mellon University, School of Music at Northwestern University, among others.

While conservatory training may not be for everyone, one simple fact remains true: Every major orchestra and opera company (and increasingly, Broadway production) in the United States is comprised primarily of alumni from schools that offer conservatory training. Note: Students interested primarily in a music education degree need to pay close attention to the education faculty (prior public school teaching experience) in addition to the applied teachers. Many conservatories do not even offer music ed. Several do, but again be sure you are researching the enrollment, the faculty, and the curriculum to be sure the institution is committed to teacher training.

Chances are that by doing some basic web research and soul searching you will quickly have a feeling for the “type” of school that fits you. From there you want to start to create your long list. PLEASE READ THE BIOS OF THE FACULTY, and secure recordings or videos of performances.

Developing Your Long and Short Lists

The long list

I recommend that you create a grid (using Google Docs or another spreadsheet program) that will help you to keep track of the similarities and differences between schools within your type.

Column headings might include:

- * Tuition cost
- * Room and board cost
- * Types and ranges of scholarships
- * Minimum (or preferred) GPA and test scores
- * Application deadline
- * Application/audition fees
- * Double major options
- * Enrollment in the music program
- * Enrollment in your area (flute, soprano voice, etc.)
- * Name of applied teacher(s) to whom you might be assigned
- * Years needed to complete degree
- * Dates of auditions
- * Productions/Concerts per semester (for each type of group)

Develop a list of at least twelve schools, most (not all) of which fall into your “type.” Regardless of type, be sure to include a few schools that your family can afford and you feel confident you will be accepted. Remember to keep your ego and emotions in check! You are not picking a favorite in this phase. First a school must choose you.

If this seems like a lot of work, remember that you are about to make the most important decision of your life to this point, and an incredibly serious financial commitment for your family. It deserves your full attention. Don’t cut any corners during this stage. **THIS IS NOT YOUR PARENTS’ WORK.**

Who can you trust?

Your decision in creating your list and, ultimately, choosing your school may involve the following people:

- High school teacher(s)
- Private teacher
- Counselor
- Former high school friends who are current music majors

However (and this is very important) you and your family must realize that every one of these people will be *naturally biased*. If you are interested in becoming a high school music teacher, you should not be surprised that your high school teachers are going to recommend the schools

which *they themselves attended*, or other schools only in your home state. Why? Because this is what they know from their own experiences.

Don't be surprised if your private teacher suggests applying to the same school he or she attended, or a school at which a former student ended up "getting a big scholarship." Again, this is what they know of firsthand. But as the saying goes, "it's a big world out there" so make sure to keep an open mind and remember that *you* are the one who is in need of a college education that fits, not your teachers and counselors. The school must be the right one, educationally and financially, for you and your family. Gather input from all qualified sources but remember to think for yourself.

Paring down your long list into your short list

Your short list should begin to become apparent once your spreadsheet is complete, and should be ready no later than the spring of your junior year. The reason for this is spring is the time to begin your visits. You do not want to cram all of your visits into the fall, because frankly you won't get them all done. Your short list should include at least six schools. Remember to include at least one school that your family *can afford* and you are *very* confident that you will be accepted. Attending a junior college first is usually not the right move, although sometimes it is a necessity. Make every effort to start in a four-year, accredited school if you can, and remember that scholarships can change the financial picture.

Scheduling your visits

Although schools handle admissions differently, most of them will have a dedicated admissions office specifically for the arts (small private colleges are usually an exception, but still may have a faculty member who coordinates admission visits). If you are not sure, call (*you*, not mom) the main admission number but immediately ask if there is an office for music or theatre admissions. If so, ask for that number and that contact name. When having your phone or email conversation, here are points to remember:

- While this is a unique situation for you, it is what these people do every day. Let them explain how they handle visits. Tell them you are interested in a visit, and let them take it from there.
- After they have explained the process, ask any questions that have not been covered, such as opportunities to hear rehearsals, concerts, and to meet the applied teacher.
- Ask if you might be able to meet a student from within your major while you are there.
- Handle all communications in a mature, professional manner. Your impression upon the admissions staff is critical (this goes for parents as well). Use a mature email address. "broadwaystar@whatever.com" is **absolutely unacceptable**. Get a gmail account and use your first/last name.

The importance of observing a rehearsal or performance is not to be underestimated. It is shocking how many students decide to attend a school having never seen a production, concert, or rehearsal. At the very least be sure to secure recordings. And musicians, remember: Your applied teacher is your single most important decision in your development. A visit to a short list school that does not include this meeting is a waste of your time (unless the school is nearby and you can meet with the teacher another time).

During the visit you will likely meet with an admissions director or assistant. Make sure you (the student) have good questions prepared. Parent...be quiet!

Preparing Applications and Auditions

Preparing and submitting your applications

OK, it's the fall of your senior year. It's time for another spreadsheet, though this one is much simpler. Your columns might include:

- Application type (online, paper)
- Application fee (be prepared for \$75-\$125 per school)
- Separate applications for the university and the school of music?
- Letters of recommendation needed? How many?
- Essay required?
- Due date
- Audition dates (regional, on-campus, pre-screening recordings)

Next, get about the business of securing all applications (or links if the application is online) including financial aid applications. Do not miss any financial aid details or deadlines unless money is no object for your family. Be aware that some institutions require financial documents even if the family is not going to need aid. Be sure to ask.

On the topic of letters of recommendation

Make sure you follow each school's guidelines for letters. If they ask for letters from people who have taught you in a musical capacity, then do not have your English teacher write a letter! Also, if you need letters from your teachers at school please give them plenty of notice and reminders. They want to write a good letter for you and they need to fit letter writing into their busy schedules. Be sure to give anyone who writes a letter for you the pertinent information (school, to whom it should be written, and any points you feel we should address) in writing.

Essays

Essays are an important part of the application process. Most essays will ask you to address your career goals and how the particular school relates to those goals. Here are some do's and don'ts:

DO:

- * Take your time
- * Get it proofed
- * Clearly state your career goal (if asked)
- * Clearly explain how the particular school will help you obtain your goal

DON'T

- * Give your life story
- * Go overboard in your enthusiasm for the school
- * Talk about things that have nothing to do with your intended major

Financial Aid

In addition to submitting the financial aid documents for each school, your family will also need to file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. The website for FAFSA can be found at www.fafsa.ed.gov. The FAFSA needs to be filed (it is easily done online) by February 1st for most schools. This means that your family will need to have their tax information together

a little sooner than they otherwise might. This is very important since most schools will not process any financial aid (including scholarships) unless the results of the FAFSA are on file. When your family submits the information, you will tell the government which schools should get the Student Aid Report (SAR), so be sure you have your short list on hand when you sit down to submit the FAFSA.

Preparing your auditions

The fall semester of your senior year (at the latest!) is the time to be planning the repertoire for your short list schools. Hopefully there will be some similarity between the audition requirements, but the number one rule to remember is to adhere to each school's audition requirements. If school "A" asks for a movement from a concerto, do not show up with a few etudes. If school "B" says they prefer singers to present songs from the Italian, English, or American repertoire, then do not present a song in French. If school "C" says "no Shakespeare" then do not present a classical monologue!

Your ability to adhere to the guidelines at each school is a demonstration of your commitment and attention to detail. If you have a question about the audition requirements, by all means ask. But do not ask to substitute a piece that is clearly outside of the guidelines because it will be more convenient for you. Remember that the audition committee is comparing your potential against the other applicants, so they need a consistent basis upon which to do this.

A final suggestion in regards to difficulty level: No one will be able to gauge your musicianship by listening to you try to perform a piece that is too difficult (and they will most definitely not be impressed). Prepare an audition that is within the guidelines and that you can perform with excellence.

The waiting game

Well, your paperwork is in, you've presented your auditions, and now you must wait. How long will it take to get your results? The more competitive schools usually take the longest (they tend to send results out on April 1st), and less competitive schools may contact you just a week or so after your audition. This is another time for you to keep your ego in check. Generally speaking, the schools that need you the most will contact you the soonest and the most often. This can really pump up your ego and make you feel that the school really wants you (which they do!) but you must keep and clear head and be patient until all of your results are in. Conversely, if you are rejected by a school, do not call and ask why. No means no, just focus on the schools that admit you.

If a school is really courting you, then you may need to consider whether they have a deficiency in your area of study, and whether that would be a positive or negative for you educationally. You need to be very cautious about attending a school where you will be the "top dog" from day one. How might this affect your progress? Might you be better off having older students to model and compete with? Consider this carefully. At all times you need to ask yourself "where will I get the best training?"

Most schools are members of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), whose rules stipulate that families do not need to give a decision until May 1st. Read your admissions letters carefully and if you are being asked to provide a decision sooner you

should politely ask for an extension until May 1st. Your goal is to get all of your acceptance letters and financial aid packages on the kitchen table so you and your family can make the best decision about *your* future. Do not feel pressured.

Understanding financial aid, scholarships, and “out-of-pocket” costs

The first thing an applicant usually wants to know is “how much scholarship did I get” when the better question is “what is my family’s total out-of-pocket cost going to be? For example, school “A” gives an applicant no scholarship, and school “B” gives a scholarship of \$10,000 annually towards tuition costs. Assuming both schools are great educationally, which is the better deal? Well, it depends on the costs at each school.

If school “A” is an in-state university with tuition of around \$6,000 and school “B” is a private college with a tuition price tag of \$25,000, you can quickly see that school “A” is better financially even though they have not offered a scholarship because the *total out of pocket will be less*. The moral of the story is do not get caught up in the amount of the scholarship. Instead, focus on the out-of-pocket cost after all scholarships and aid have been factored in.

Asking for more financial assistance

Every spring news broadcasts and talk shows around the country will start talking about college admissions and the cost of education. Invariably some guest will appear on these shows and suggest that families be assertive with college admissions people. “Call them up and demand more money” they say. “Tell them you got a better deal at another school and see if they will match it” they say. These people usually have no real experience in college admissions, nor have they themselves gone through the process with a son or daughter.

Here are some do’s and don’ts if you need to ask for more financial aid:

DO:

- call the admissions office and thank them for being admitted
- ask if there is an appeals process for scholarship and/or financial aid
- be ready to explain how much more aid you require
- be extremely polite

DON’T:

- say “I’d really like to go to your school. School Such-and-Such offered me more money though. Can you match it?”
- have your parents call... **You** make the call
- act like the school can’t do without you (they can)
- expect a large increase, if any

Remember that schools have been awarding scholarships for a long, long time and they generally know exactly what they are doing. They have various models that they use to determine the best way to allocate scholarship. They sometimes will leave some funds in reserve for appeals, but the adjustment will likely be small if your appeal is approved. You must provide clear, compelling reasons for needing more funds, and comparing the funding to another school is generally not considered compelling. You can and should contact the financial aid office to make sure you have investigated all loan, grant, and work-study options. Families with a combined

income of more than six figures should not expect much if anything in terms of grants and work-study.

How much scholarship can I expect?

Generally speaking, scholarships are better for the instruments/voice parts that are hardest to find. For example, two applicants score the same on their auditions, but one plays viola and the other sings soprano. You can be virtually guaranteed that soprano applicants outnumber viola applicants each year (by a very wide margin), so the school needs to attract more violists with scholarship dollars. Fair? Yes and no. If you play the violin, do you want to be in a college orchestra with weak violas?

Also, again generally speaking, the more competitive schools will be more expensive because they can be. These schools are competitive for admission for a reason: They provide excellent education. These schools will be able to offer lower scholarships and still obtain great students each year.

For Younger Students

Things you should do between now and senior year to see how you “stack up”

- District/All-State
- Summer camps/festivals
- Regional/Community ensembles and productions

For Seniors

- Get a formal gmail address for correspondence (NO CUTE NAMES)
- Create your spreadsheet
- Secure applications, know your deadlines
- Know your audition requirements
- Practice!

GET BUSY, AND DON'T EXPECT YOUR PARENTS TO DO THE WORK!