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# **Creative Colleges**

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**A Guide for Student Actors,  
Artists, Dancers, Musicians  
and Writers**

**Second Edition**

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# 1

## 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. Also, 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—components of your college application. Because the artistic component of your college search will likely be a critical factor

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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 substantial, 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. 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