

Value by Design: Understanding the Artistic Student
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What educational direction to take is ultimately a personal decision based on an individual's interests, strengths and needs. A Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) may be well worth the time and investment if it adds a firm foundation of skills to talent you already possess and have the motivation and determination to demonstrate. Your knock-out portfolio combined with a degree from a good university is probably the best insurance for landing a job in the marketplace.

A big obstacle for a student who wishes to study the arts is the widely held belief that a degree in the visual and performing arts (VPA) is not helpful in terms of 'real' employment. In fact, just the opposite is true. One need only witness the emergence of iPod, "green" fashion, sustainability design, iPhones, and Wii Systems to see that proponents of the "Creative Economy" have made some accurate predictions over the past decade. The look and feel of a product is often as important to consumers as what it does; also critical is the product's social and cultural adaptability. Teamwork in the workplace between individuals with different backgrounds, such as engineering and graphics design, is what makes an arts-based degree marketable.

Artistic-minded students and their families should be aware of several powerful, prevalent myths:

1. Students must be polished artists to major in VPA: In fact most admissions committees gauge an applicant's potential for success; their focus is on identifying students who are creative, willing to work hard, and show the potential to become excellent.
2. A student who pursues a VPA major will starve: What is true is that you must develop a personal creative vision that will sustain you in your professional life and be motivated to earn an income.
3. The VPA major is easy: The VPA degree path involves a rigorous and time-intensive program of study. Students take foundation coursework in English, math and sciences to complete degree requirements. Some of the many majors available include architectural, landscape and interior design, communication arts (advertising design, graphic design, illustration) digital media, fashion design, fine arts (painting, photography, sculpture), product design and toy design.
4. Art schools are all trade and technical schools: While some art schools are trade and technical schools, most are liberal arts and science colleges.

There are several different types of colleges to research in order to find the right fit.

- I. Four Year Colleges and Universities: A good fit for the student who plans to earn an arts-based degree, while preserving the opportunity to enjoy a full college experience. The student engages in a broad-based liberal arts curriculum and has the opportunity to double major, choose a minor in a different discipline or even switch majors.
- II. Performing and Visual Arts Schools: Freestanding, usually small PVA schools and all degree majors are in the arts.
- III. Conservatories: Suitable for students who wish to develop their performance, conducting, or composition to a professional standard.
- IV. Vocational/Technical Schools: Many of these schools are private for-profit institutions and offer training to obtain employment. Research should include job placement data, lists of companies that employ their graduates and recent graduates.
- V. Community Colleges: The transfer path from a community college to any of the above alternatives is a viable one. This is most successful when the student identifies the school(s) she plans to transfer into and requirements for admission.

Other Important Factors to Consider

- Location (opportunities to perform or exhibit your work as well as view others doing the same)
- Availability of internships (to practice art, build a network, create a portfolio, perform)
- Access to professional venues (museums, galleries, theatres, concerts)
- Program's reach (Does the program attract regional, national and international talent?)
- Student to teacher ratio
- Facilities (Is there adequate studio space?)
- Program reputation (Are instructors known in their field? Is school respected in industry? What programs do music and arts scholarship and competition winners attend?)

- Admission criteria—how much value is placed on your GPA and test scores versus the importance of your portfolio or audition? How does the program view your creative potential in relationship to your academic achievements?

Extracurricular Activities Are Vital

The student heading toward a VPA degree must pay great attention to extracurricular activities. Music and arts programs abound and there are opportunities to fit nearly everyone's budget. By the end of sophomore year, a student should be involved in institutes, weekend classes, on-line courses, camps, workshops, performances and festivals, internships and part-time jobs. These experiences reveal possible career paths and play an essential role in portfolio preparation or audition.

The visual and performing arts niche in college admissions is an area that few students, parents and high school counselors know how to navigate. Artistic-minded students and their families must learn how to research and select the right fit type of college as well as prepare for the rigors of completing an arts-based college application. Two excellent guides include: Peterson's Guide to the VPA and A Guide to College Choices for the PVA coauthored by Kavin Buck and Ed Schoenberg. National Association of College Admission Counselors sponsors a VPA college fair each year in October (visit www.nacacnet.org)