**How to Choose Between College or Conservatory for Performance Manjors**

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PlaybillEDU went to the source at several top colleges and conservatories—and a Tony Award winner—to find out how you'll know which option is best for your

The process of applying to college is filled with often bewildering and potentially life-changing choices. But performing arts students find themselves with an extra quandary: conservatory or non-conservatory?

What’s the difference? What are the pros and cons of each choice? How can I figure out which one is best for me?

A conservatory is focused on one thing and that is basically all you can study. If you want to drench yourself in nothing but music, for example, a music conservatory is probably going to be best. If you want to study primarily music, but also want to round out your education by minoring in or sampling other fields, like sports, science or business, a liberal arts school would make a better fit. But there are also hybrids—liberal arts colleges that house their own conservatories, like New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts or the University of Michigan’s School of Music, Theatre and Dance. Some allow you to take a limited number of courses outside the conservatory, some don’t. **[Click through to PlaybillEDU to research which is the best choice for you.](http://playbilledu.com/index/student/" \t "_blank)**

**Wide or Narrow Focus**  
Catherine Weidner, chair of the Department of Theatre Arts at **[Ithaca College](http://playbilledu.com/school/Ithaca/" \t "_blank)**, contrasted the two approaches. “Though conservatories offer degrees (BFA’s usually), they may not provide a liberal arts education. Many colleges (like Ithaca College) offer a conservatory-style approach within a liberal arts setting. Some students (and parents) may want a more comprehensive college experience, and others choose a singular-focus conservatory approach.”

Pros and cons vary depending on each student’s goal for her/his education. As Weidner put it, “Do you want to go to football games on the weekends? Do you want to take a politics class or study a foreign language in addition to your BFA requirements?” If so, a broader liberal arts education may be best suited for you."

On the other hand, Alex Powell of the **[New England Conservatory of Music](http://playbilledu.com/school/NEC/" \t "_blank)**, said, “The conservatory experience is immersive—you are meant to dive in and be surrounded by music. Your classmates will all be musicians, making conservatories a great place to build a network in the musical world. Music permeates the halls, and students talk about recent and upcoming performances and master classes, not college sports teams. Again, if a student is committed to having a life in music, they will likely thrive in the intensive atmosphere of a conservatory.”

“The bottom line is about what you want out of the education you’re seeking,” Weidner said. If you are a theatre student, do you want “primarily theatre training—or theatre training *and* a liberal arts experience.”

**Highest Standards**  
While those distinctions may still be broadly true, Travis J. Cross, music department vice chair at the **[UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music](http://playbilledu.com/school/UCLA/" \t "_blank)**, said that in recent years the lines have begun to blur. “My sense is that conservatory training programs and performance programs within university music schools are more alike today than they are different—and probably more alike than they may have been in the past. No conservatory wishes to produce graduates who are not educated musicians or intellectually curious people, and no university program wishes to hold students to anything but the highest standards of performance.”

Cross said, “In the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, we seek outstanding musicians who are dedicated to their art and craft; they will study with world-class soloists, orchestral players, opera singers and chamber musicians. We also want our students to be intellectually curious, and they need to be able to succeed in the rigorous academic environment of one of the world's great research universities. We believe their growth as scholars and thinkers enhances their growth as musicians—and their future employment possibilities.”

**Focus on Skills vs. Self-Starting**  
Corey Mitchell, theatre arts teacher at the Northwest School of the Arts in Charlotte, North Carolina, who won the inaugural special [**Excellence in Theatre Education Award**](https://www.tonyawards.com/en_US/nominees/education_award.html) from the Tony Awards, sends dozens of students to both kinds of theatre programs each year. In his experience, he said, “the greatest strengths of a conservatory program is the laser focus on skills—the regimented and tested tracking of young artists. Additionally, conservatories tend to offer access to theatre professionals and professional experiences. On the other hand, there are wonderful BA programs that can allow you to ‘design your own experience.’ If you are a self starter and you are a bit unsure of exactly where your interest lies, this can be a tremendously rewarding opportunity. ”

**Types of Degrees**  
Powell of the NEC said you can get a better sense of what a particular school or conservatory is offering by looking at the type of degrees each is offering. For music students, he said, “The Bachelor of Music (B.M.) degree is the primary undergraduate program for most conservatories and ‘conservatory-style’ departments within universities. In this degree, students will take the vast majority of their courses (roughly 70-80 percent) in music while also completing liberal arts or general education college requirements. Many college music programs offer a Bachelor of Arts in Music (B.A.) rather than the Bachelor of Music. In this degree, roughly 30-50 percent of the required credits will be in music, with the remainder coming in general education, liberal arts, electives or a second major. Many conservatory programs also offer dual degree programs where students can earn two degrees, one in music and one in another field; NEC, for instance, has five-year dual degree programs with both Harvard and Tufts.”

**Fully Committed**  
Powell cautioned that “a student needs to be fully committed to pursuing music to thrive in a conservatory. At a college or university, you can usually just change your major by filling out a few forms in the registrar’s office—you could go from music to French literature to special education to math in a few semesters before finding the right fit. At a conservatory, music is the only major—you would need to transfer schools if you no longer wanted to study music. The rewards of an intensive conservatory experience can be many, but the student needs to be ready to fully commit.”

But that doesn’t mean that a conservatory is the only route for a “serious” student. “NEC believes that an educated person needs strong critical thinking, reading, writing and analytical skills, and it is necessary to become a great interdisciplinary thinker in order to become a great musician. Musicians also need to understand the historical and cultural context of the music they perform. NEC has its own liberal arts faculty that offer an array of courses to address these needs.”

**Making a Decision**  
David H. Stull, President of the **[San Francisco Conservatory of Music](http://playbilledu.com/school/SF-Conservatory/" \t "_blank)** and former Dean of the **[Oberlin Conservatory](http://playbilledu.com/school/Oberlin/" \t "_blank)**, said that real-world applicants generally make their decisions based on the same four criteria, regardless of which colleges they are considering. The two top deciding factors, interestingly enough, are “who will I study with and what is the size of the financial aid package.” PlaybillEDU lists major faculty members at each school, often with their email or phone contacts, so prospective students can see their experience and what they will be teaching.

Stull said factors three and four are “location and the character and reputation of the program. Some students prefer the quiet solitude of a bucolic rural college setting; some prefer an urban environment where they can experience a greater range of professional performances and have more opportunities for networking.”

The goal for any student, Stull said, is that they choose an environment “in which they learn how to teach themselves. The best programs don’t allow students to be passive, but to become proactive about their own work and become the drivers of their own education. We like to see students who demonstrate excitement and ambition. There’s nothing that replaces those qualities in an individual, and they should choose a program where they will feel most comfortable doing that.”

**Find Your Challenge**  
Mitchell said, “There are a myriad of reasons why one school may be better for you over another. The most important thing to do is to choose a program that will be a true challenge for you—growth occurs from struggle. Finally, remember that you should never hitch your wagon to a single star. Write your criteria—school size, city size, geographic area, tuition costs, scholarships, professors, internships, and production opportunities, etc.—do your research and choose five or six programs that check most of those boxes.”