Making the Right Decision

by Tod Fish and Scott LaGraff

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hile graduating seniors have already paid their enrollment deposits to their colleges of choice, next year’s seniors are starting to look seriously at where to apply. They’ll research online and visit institutions this summer to help find the best fit for their future. If you have aspiring music educators in your program, you’ll want to support them as they navigate this crucial next step.

Because much attention is focused on schools that specialize in performance, your students may find it challenging to be fully informed about available music education programs. Just as in athletics, the schools that attract stars destined for big professional careers grab the headlines, but what about programs that teach the stars’ teachers? Because these schools are often in the shadows, students aspiring to study music education become responsible for finding the answers themselves. To do that, it is critical to ask the right questions before selecting a program.

Drawing on our combined experience as teachers of teachers (one in music education, the other in applied voice), we have created a list of questions future choir directors should ask themselves and the programs to which they apply, along with some reasons why we think these questions are important. Take time to review this information with your students who are considering a career in music education; it could be one of the most valuable conversations you have as you help support their futures.

Questions to Ask Yourself

How important is a school’s name and size? This is not nearly as important as the faculty members with whom you’ll be studying. As these professors will help you develop the skills and offer experiences you will use throughout your career, it is imperative to find mentors who are strong teachers and, just as important, with whom you are comfortable. Some larger, well-known schools often focus on performance and graduate studies. While these programs are impressive and worthy of respect, it’s worthwhile to extend your search to other institutions as well. A better question to ask would be, “What is the school’s placement rate for choir directors?” (see the last question in the article for more on this).

Should I attend the school that offers me the most money? In this era of financial uncertainty, it is understandable that students (and parents!) want to get the most bang for their education buck, and scholarships are an important part of this. But scholarship offers can be deceiving; it’s more important to look at the bottom line and ask yourself which school offers the best value.

Let’s assume that School X and School Y have equally strong music education programs. School X costs $30,000/year and offers you a $15,000/year scholarship. School Y, on the other hand, offers you only $2,000/year, but their annual cost is $10,000. On the surface, it may look like School X is making the better offer, but you’re still on the hook for $15,000/year as opposed to $8,000/year. No doubt, it is flattering to receive a large scholarship offer, but failing to look deeper can leave you in greater debt. No one enters the music field expecting to get rich, so if you can get an equivalent education from School Y for less money than you’d spend at School X, you would be wise to do so.

Questions to Ask Colleges

Will I study voice with a member of the voice faculty? Many schools, especially those with a large graduate program, will have music education majors study with graduate students. It is important to remember that most graduate students will have had less teaching experience than full-time faculty members. Also, most
graduate programs are 2–3 years long, while most undergradu-
ate programs take 4–5 years to complete. You could potentially
begin your studies with one graduate student, get a new grad
student voice teacher for the next two years, and then switch
into a faculty studio for your senior year, just as you’re preparing
your senior recital. These circumstances can make it difficult to
develop continuity in study. Remember, you are studying to be
a voice professional. Your applied voice teacher will be a major
contributor to your musical life; it is in your best interest to find
an experienced one.

**What kind of performing opportunities will I have?** Many
future choir directors also enjoy performing on stage as soloists.
If this is important to you, it would be a good idea to ask about the
opportunities that will be available to you at a prospective school.
In most large programs, solos and roles in the opera or musical
will be given to graduate students and performance majors, leaving
few opportunities for music education majors.

While you may not desire a career as an opera singer or to be
on Broadway, what you learn while performing one of these roles
can be valuable in your growth and confidence, and it can offer
you added insight and experience if your future job includes put-
ting on musicals. There are also many wonderful solos in choral
music, of course. Additionally, some schools do not require music
education students to perform a senior recital. Preparing a senior
recital can provide a valuable experience that will translate well to
readying your future students for their solo performances.

If solo performance is important to you, be sure to ask about the
opportunities for and requirements of music education majors.

**Who will teach me how to conduct?** You may assume that your
university choir director will be your primary conducting teacher,
but that may not be the case. At some schools, all music education
students attend a single conducting class for vocal and instru-
mental conducting. In other situations, students may be taught
conducting by a graduate student. If you plan to spend your career
conducting, seek out the best teacher you can find. By asking up
front how and with whom you will study conducting, you won’t
be surprised after you arrive.

**Will I study diction?** Your knowledge of
the rules, and especially the execution of lyric diction, will help the overall quali-
ity of your ensemble. You will be equipped to teach proper pronunciation as well as to
address ensemble issues that may be directly related to the language. In addition, the bet-
ter your knowledge of diction, the more confident you will feel tackling a wider vari-
ety of repertoire.

This knowledge will also help you prepare to support students in the solo & ensemble
process, as those without voice teachers will likely come to you for assistance. If you’ve
thoroughly studied diction, you’ll be pre-
pared. The more you can experience during your undergraduate studies, the better off
you’ll be, because it takes time to master the skills of transcription and pronunciation. I
recently spoke with the director of a very large high school choral program who told
me how much he regretted that he did not have to study diction
at the college he attended. He had a lot of catching up to do. As
you evaluate your options, be sure to consider whether you will
study this important subject.

**Will I study vocal pedagogy?** There is a lot more to directing a
choir than knowing how to conduct. You will have to fix vocal
problems, both in the ensemble setting and working with soloists,
as well as teach your choirs about important concepts like sup-
port and resonance. Therefore, the more you learn about how the
voice works, the better prepared you will be for your career. Find
out which schools will make this part of your course of study.

**What is the school’s placement rate for its music education gradu-
ates?** If a program has a high placement rate (some will be very
close to 100%), it must be doing something right. The music
world is a small one; if a program puts out a lesser product (i.e. its
graduates), word gets around. Conversely, if a school is known for
training successful directors, their graduates will be more likely
to be hired. There is nothing inappropriate about asking a college
representative to discuss with you how successful its graduates are at finding jobs in music education.

This is a very exciting time for young students who are pas-
sionate about music education. If you’re a music teacher of an
aspiring music educator, do your part to help guide them through
this process to help them choose where to focus their application
time and dollars. If you’re a music student, gather as much infor-
mation as possible to make the most informed decisions about
this important step in your future.

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