

National Association of Schools of Dance

ADVISORY

Transitions from High School to Professional Studio Schools

Definition of a Professional Studio School

Professional studio schools offer focused preparation in dance at advanced levels leading to career entry as a performing professional. The curriculum is usually dance only. Normally, these programs do not lead to degrees. They may or may not lead to a certificate of diploma, but all provide the student with a written record of completion. Professional studio schools may or may not be affiliated with a professional company.

Considering and Choosing a Professional Dance Studio School

You have many choices among dance schools. Your task is to find the best school for you. This requires matching your talents, needs, personality, and goals with the school that can help you achieve. Then it takes effort to accomplish this task effectively, but the right match is worth the effort. Here are some important questions to get you started.

- What do dance professionals in your area think about various schools and their programs? Ask your own teachers and other respected teachers and dancers. These professionals may be found in local dance companies, performance-oriented high school programs, private studios, and institutions of higher education. When seeking advice about schools, ask for more than one recommendation.
- What does your study of published materials from a variety of schools tell you about possibilities? As early as possible, you need to obtain a package of admission information from a sufficient number of schools to make comparisons. A thorough study of materials will enable you to ask good questions.
- What does your review of dance publications and web sites tell you about possibilities? Magazines, journals, the Internet, and other publications focused on dance can provide important information. If you don't know how to start, find a dance professional who can guide you.
- What can you learn from an on-site visit or participation in a summer program at one or more institutions? Personal experience is the best way to get a sense of what a particular school is like. Many professional studio schools provide summer programs. These are an excellent introduction to the many features of a professional dance school. If possible, an on-site visit during the regular school year is advisable.
- What are the reputations of various dance schools? Reputation is more than a list of successful or famous graduates. You should focus on the school's reputation for teaching, its fairness and integrity, and its approach to the individual student and his or her development of dance skills. When seeking information from individuals about reputation, ask for how long and in what ways the individual has known the school.

- What are your goals for your educational development as a dancer, and how do these goals relate to the offerings and achievements of individual schools? It is critically important to develop a good understanding of your own wishes and expectations. These are the bases for the questions that will lead you to your decision.
- How realistic are your choices based on your preparation to enter and sustain work at the level a particular dance school requires? You may have to make a transition from being the “best dancer” in your local situation to being a “dance beginner” in a difficult and highly disciplined program intended to hone your skills to the highest level. It is best to talk to current students or recent graduates to gain an understanding of what is expected. Normally, professional dance studio schools will not retain a student that is not making sufficient progress in a specific dance program.
- Who are the faculty and which faculty members are most likely to be your teachers? The faculty will be the leaders of your educational experience. It is important to know who they are and how they teach. Focus on the teaching ability of the faculty and specifically on their ability, collectively and individually, to prepare individual dancers. Know the artistic and educational backgrounds of the faculty. If you need help in interpreting credentials, ask your local advisors.
- What facilities does the school offer? An on-site visit is the best way to make this determination. Is the dance rehearsal and performance space safe, well ventilated, and equipped with proper flooring? Does the school provide, or assist students in finding, a place to live? Is your maturity level sufficient to live alone or, if necessary, are you ready to live with others in a setting with no affiliation to the school? What about food services?
- To what extent are support staff associated with the dance program and curriculum present and active in the school? Is there a counseling program? How does the school address and monitor nutrition? What is its approach to the body sciences, medical services, and physical therapy?
- What are the curriculum and graduation requirements? The curriculum is the course of study that you must follow; graduation requirements include completing the curriculum but also reaching a certain level of proficiency. It is extremely important to understand all of the requirements for being successful in the dance program of the school. For example, are there academic requirements in addition to performance requirements? What are the levels of expectation in competency in comparison to what you have been used to in high school?
- To what extent does the school provide continuous evaluation and feedback about your progress through the program? To what extent is there a competitive or nurturing philosophy or atmosphere? How does the answer relate to the way you learn?
- What performance opportunities will you have? Is there a student company? Schools differ with regard to their approaches to these questions. Be sure you know in advance the approach a particular school takes. If there is a student company, what is required to obtain a place in it? To what extent are you guaranteed performance experience? What is the school’s approach to repertory knowledge and skill?
- Are there performance opportunities with a professional company? If so, what is the frequency of these opportunities and the level of proficiency necessary to be considered?

- What is the school's record for professional placement of graduates? What percentage of graduates from the school go into the company associated with the school, into other dance companies, or on to more advanced study? If you are attending a school hoping join the company it serves, what is the complete set of qualifications for joining the company? Do you have a chance of meeting all of these qualifications after completing your studies in the school?

The Audition Process

You will want to audition for the school or schools that most interest you. It is wise to consider the audition as two evaluations in one: the school's assessment of your candidacy, and your assessment of the suitability of the school.

- What kinds of auditions are acceptable to the school? The dance community is unanimous in agreeing that an on-site audition is preferable. However, off-site auditions or audition through electronic means may be necessary. Information you obtain from the school should provide the schedule of entrance auditions. Be sure that you obtain such a schedule well in advance of any audition. Gaining such information in your junior year of high school is advisable.
- What is the entire application process and what will it cost? Schools require more than an audition. Paperwork is associated with every application. Know what the school requires in terms of high school transcripts, recommendations, test scores, medical examinations, and so forth. If application fees are a hardship, determine whether the school has a program to waive these fees for qualified students.
- What requirements must you meet if you are an international student? You must have a proper visa and otherwise meet all foreign student requirements of the government of the United States. In addition, the school may have specific requirements for international students such as language proficiency, assurance of continuous financial support, and so forth.
- Does the school have a set of orientation instructions or a student handbook? If you are serious enough about a school to audition, you should obtain published information about what is expected of students beyond artistic and curricular requirements. Obtaining and considering such information is an important part of your evaluation of the school.

Long-Term Artistic and Survival Goals

While you are gathering information and taking auditions, it is increasingly important to begin establishing a set of goals for the development of your artistry and for your survival in a competitive and difficult field.

- What training and technical abilities will you gain through the program of a school? What style will you learn? How much opportunity is there to develop repertory? How do the answers to all of these questions relate to what you want to do and what you think you need to be successful?
- What is the nature of affiliations or connections with professional companies? Is the school preparing dancers specifically to work in the style of a particular company, or is the training intended to address greater breadth? How movable are the skills that you will acquire, and how much does the answer matter to you at this particular time?

- Are there opportunities to gain experience or credentials in higher education beyond the schools? Are there cooperative or joint programs with colleges and universities?
- Does the school offer opportunities to gain certification in any particular professional area? Does it offer internships or other competency development opportunities?
- Is there counseling associated with career development? To what extent does the school and its personnel engage in mentoring associated with helping students reach their artistic goals and preparing overall for professional achievement?

Financial Considerations

It is important to have a clear understanding of what completion of your training program will cost. This means considering and combining a number of issues.

- What are the elements in calculating the overall cost to attend a particular school? These include, but are not limited to, tuition and fees, housing and food, transportation, books and materials, clothing and shoes, insurance, medical and other maintenance costs, and so forth. Many schools provide an estimate of the annual attendance cost in their published materials. If this information is not readily available, ask about it. Some locations are much more expensive than others.
- To what extent can scholarships, grants and financial aid, or loans assist with the cost? Each of these areas is extremely complex. It is critically important to learn at the outset the extent to which the institution itself is able to offer scholarships or other aid programs. It is equally important to know whether the school participates in federal student financial aid programs. Some schools have work-study programs and other means of assisting students. It is important to remember that professional dance study requires significant amounts of time and expenditure of energy. Careful considerations should be given to expectations that students will be able to maintain a significant job and pursue their education at the same time.
- What are the specific arrangements and costs of housing? Are there requirements for all students; for the underage student? If off-site housing is necessary, what is the cost of safety, convenience, and all necessary utilities and services? What is the cost of living in the location of the school?
- What is your projected ultimate indebtedness at the end of the program? If you must borrow money to pay for your education, is the amount reasonable for you to pay back within the time stipulated in the loan? Although the answer may be a difficult one, it is wise to compare indebtedness with projected earning power after completion of the program.