

Why is incorporating an art portfolio critical to the college application process?

Ichen Wu, Founder, Principal and Art Director, Ichen Art Academy

In the past few years, Ichen Art Academy has trained many young artists who have gained admittances to the top art colleges and universities in the world. However, the vast majority of students still hope to learn art from a young age and build their foundations, instead using art as a supplemental extracurricular for applying to top U.S. universities. In particular, during the past three years, Ichen Art Academy students have utilized the art portfolio as a supplemental extracurricular to gain admittances to Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and more top universities. I often receive the question from parents: what exactly is the value students receive when they engage in arts and build a portfolio? Through this article, I hope to address the key points of why exactly students should do so:

Every year, during the college admissions process, students are asked to demonstrate their unique strengths. Numerous college consultancies have told Asian parents that reaching Level 10 in piano is practically useless. As Asian students increasingly attain this level of expertise, their individuality becomes lost in the overall stereotype of a typical Asian student. If piano is also an art, why do Ivy League universities, Stanford, and MIT prefer the art portfolio to the conventional art forms of music?

This brings us again to the importance of having a student express his/her individuality. How does an art portfolio allow a school to recognize a student's unique characteristics?

1. Expressiveness, Imagination, and Creativity

When admission officers at prestigious universities examine their prospective students, a question they often ask is: what can this student contribute that is unique to this school, its culture, and society at large? Does a student have curiosity, expressiveness, and a distinctive perspective? Prestigious universities don't hope to admit cookie-cutter students who excel only in academics and nothing else. They especially like students who have the courage to explore and constantly challenge themselves. In an art portfolio, colleges are able to gain insight to these kinds of information. Art itself acts as a transmitter for a student's unique ideas and principles. Through using color, various mediums, unique brushstrokes, and communication methods, students are able to communicate their characters, expressing imagination, creativity, and opinions. These are the exact elements a college looks for in a prospective student. This year, one of my students who was admitted to Stanford told us: art is not only about producing beautiful artwork. She's been learning art since a young age, but what affected her the most was how differently she viewed the world after. Art encouraged her to become more curious,

to become more daring, and try out a variety of possibilities. Prestigious colleges, when viewing such unique candidates, definitely favor this mindset and these characteristics.

2. Cultivating patience and resilience

Art is not a form that could be acquired overnight. Before creating their own works, students need to establish a strong foundation. Because in creating an outstanding portfolio, besides needing the creativity and imagination elements, students need the technical skills to bring their dreams to reality. In the learning process, students wouldn't face a smooth sailing; they would reach roadblocks, bottlenecks, and low tides, and art will teach them resilience to overcome these mental obstacles before producing their best works. This trains a student's patience, resilience, and problem-solving abilities.

3. Training a student's observation and memory

Students who study art tend to have much more acute and sensitive observation skills of their environments. Subconsciously, a student will ingrain the people, events, and physical environment he or she sees and express them with artwork. The beauty in art is that these unique perceptions and viewpoints are able to translate through a student's pieces. Even though the subject matters may be common, a student's unique take and observation skills would allow them to add an individual spin to their artwork. This ultimately allows for students to create a much more profound impression.

In my own personal example, as my daughter was in high school, I always told her: no matter how busy you are, art portfolio isn't just another "optional extracurricular" but a "requirement." Even though I knew that she wouldn't enter an art school or study a major related to art, I knew that a strong art portfolio would definitely be an important plus. Every year, she also sent her artwork to the Scholastic competition, and won a couple of prizes which were helpful. In an essay she wrote for her Stanford application, she wrote about how art transformed her day-to-day life, viewpoints, and incorporated elements she learned in history to write an eloquent piece blending academics with art. This definitely played a major role in her gaining the acceptance.

My daughter has told me numerous times since going to college that: throughout all of her extracurriculars from kindergarten onwards, only art had the most impact, and has helped her the most to this day. In a school in the heart of Silicon Valley, focused on science and technology, she is able to understand art and design, and this has been a differentiating factor for her. She joined numerous student groups, and was always in charge of marketing, producing materials, designing web pages and apps, and even entering hackathons and competitions where she was the designer on the team. Because she understands art, in applying for summer internships, she was also able to explore more options, and gain the best offers.

Art is a form of cultivating one's self and is indispensable to a well-rounded education. These are the key reasons to why prestigious colleges increasingly recognize the importance of an art portfolio.