



COLLEGIATE ACCESS SERIES FOR YOUNG MUSICIANS

El Sistema USA®

EQUITY ARC

February 17 - April 21, 2026



COURSE SESSIONS

Opening Doors to a Future in Music

The Collegiate Access for Young Musicians: Application Accelerator Cohort is a national program designed to open doors to collegiate music study for high school students who aspire to pursue professional careers in music. Now entering its second year, the initiative reflects the shared commitment of El Sistema USA® (ESUSA) and Equity Arc to expand access to higher education in music.

The 2026 series will guide high school sophomores and juniors—particularly those who identify with financial, geographical, or cultural barriers—through the essential steps of finding the right college fit, preparing applications, auditioning successfully, and navigating financial aid.

“Every talented young musician deserves the chance to pursue their dreams, regardless of the barriers they face. This collaboration with Equity Arc helps ensure that pathways into collegiate music programs are accessible, transparent, and welcoming to students from all backgrounds.

Elizabeth Moulthrop
Executive Director of El Sistema USA®

“The college application process is complex and personal. By pairing expert guidance with tailored resources, this program helps level the playing field by empowering young musicians to take confident steps on their path to college.

Stanford Thompson
Executive Director of Equity Arc.

Course Overview

Launching in February 2026, the multi-part series will be led by experienced educators, admissions professionals, and musicians. Sessions will cover finding the right college fit, preparing strong applications, planning for successful auditions, and navigating financial aid. Alongside building practical skills and resources, students will connect with a supportive network of professionals and hear candid insights about the application experience. The series culminates with a virtual college fair featuring leading conservatories and colleges of music nationwide.

Eligibility & Registration

The Application Accelerator Cohort is open to high school students who intend to pursue professional musical training and who self-identify as experiencing financial, geographical, or cultural barriers to accessing a degree in music. The course is designed primarily for sophomores and juniors.

Parents of students eligible for this course may participate on behalf of their student or together with their student. Program administrators are welcome to observe, though priority will be given to students and parents.



Register Today!

Sessions are from February 17-April 21, 2026

COURSE SESSIONS

Session	Date & Time	Speakers
Orientation	February 17, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Heather McCowen
Finding the Best Fit	February 24, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Heather McCowen; Zachary Allen
Optimizing Your Application	March 10, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Danielle Arnold; Alex Powell
Planning Your Audition	March 24, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Juliet White-Smith; Eli Perez-Hickman
Financial Planning, Aid, and Appeals	April 7, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Ellen Segarra; Denise Allen
Virtual College Fair	April 21, 2026, 7:30 pm ET	Heather McCowen and College Representatives

Session 1: Finding the Best Fit

Discover how to identify and compare college music programs to match your artistic and academic goals. Students and parents will explore what sets each school apart – degree offerings, faculty, facilities, location, and financial aid – and learn how to build a personalized college list to confidently take the next step in their musical journey.

Session 2: Optimizing Your Application

Gain practical insight and resources for preparing compelling college applications, including writing standout essays and resumes and securing strong recommendation letters. Learn from admissions experts about how to highlight your strengths, manage multiple applications, and present your best self throughout the process.

Session 3: Preparing Your Audition

Develop strategies and personalized tools to excel in your college auditions. Explore best practices for repertoire selection, practice planning, and live auditions, with guidance from collegiate faculty and insights from current college students.

Session 4: Financial Planning, Aid, and Appeals

Understand essential strategies for managing the financial side of college, from identifying and applying for scholarships to navigating the financial aid process. Hear from financial aid experts and parents who've been through the process, and learn how to plan effectively, negotiate scholarships, and make a strong case for support.

Session 5: Virtual College Fair

Connect directly with representatives from leading conservatories and schools of music in this culminating event. Learn what makes each participating institution unique and apply what you've learned throughout the series while engaging with admissions representatives and faculty from your schools of interest.

The series culminates with a **Virtual College Fair** featuring some of the nation's leading conservatories and schools of music.



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SPEAKERS



Heather McCowen, Ph.D.

Heather enjoys discovering innovative ways to help individuals understand the college admissions process. Before she became an independent consultant, she served as the Director of Programs at The ChiArts Foundation, where she worked with alumni, developed external partnerships, and ran her own college consulting company. Before her role at the foundation, Heather was the college Counselor, AP coordinator, and testing coordinator at The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts). As ChiArts's first college counselor, she created the college advising program in 2011 and worked with over 1100 arts students in Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre, and Visual Arts. Before this position, Heather was the Assistant. Dean for Enrollment and Student Services for Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, where she oversaw all auditions and arts scholarships. She also served as an Associate. Dean for Admissions at the Longy School of Music at Bard in Cambridge, MA. Heather has been an adjunct music professor at East Texas A&M Univ., a financial planner for Raymond James, and has admitted students in the arts (all the arts - Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre -acting AND musical theatre- Art History and Visual Arts) at Southern Methodist University (SMU). While her official admissions career started at the Meadows School of the Arts at SMU, she began by calling admitted students to congratulate them while a student at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music.

She also likes sharing her thoughts and feelings about the bonkers college admission process.

Follow her on Instagram @ heatherm_collegedoc and on TikTok @heatherm_collegedoc



Danielle Arnold

Danielle has a career in music school admissions which has spanned over 15 years. In her current role as Associate Director of Admissions at the Eastman School of Music she has worked on many student-focused initiatives aimed at improving the experience of applying to music school. She regularly represents Eastman at meetings for professional music admissions organizations including the Music Admissions Roundtable (MAR), and the Independent Consortium for College Admissions in Music (ICCAM). Danielle is currently pursuing a PhD in Education through the University of Rochester's Warner School of Education with a focus on higher education. Her research interests include equity in admissions, meritocracy, systems of oppression in higher education organizations, and the impact of trauma on faculty and student experiences. Prior to this, she earned a Master of Science in Higher Education-Leadership from the Warner School of Education and her Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Stony Brook University.

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SPEAKERS



Ellen Segarra

December 2025 marks three years in my role as a Financial Aid administrator for the Manhattan School of Music. Although my cumulative experience in higher education is eleven years, nine years have been dedicated to Student Financial Services, starting with Bursar and shifting to Financial Aid. As a third-generation Puerto Rican/Cuban and first to attend college through my graduate degree, I find financial aid rewarding because it is an opportunity to give back to others in a capacity that can make a difference for students and families. I'm grateful for the chance to assuage the concerns of students and families with guidance during an overwhelming time. My degrees in Psychology and English Literature are the foundation of my approach to Financial aid with analytical precision and a deep understanding of the human experience. I'm also an active member of Financial Aid associations such as NYSFAAA, NASFAA, and EASFAA, contributing to the broader conversation on financial aid policy and practice. Beyond financial assistance, giving back is fundamental to my ethos of passing "the torch of inspiration" through volunteering experiences such as performing for Bharati's Foundation food drive events in the Bronx and Thanksgiving Soup Kitchen at All Saint's All Catholic Church in Brooklyn. My favorite things are reading, singing karaoke, going to the movies, and writing research papers on fairy tales (especially Beauty and the Beast) for the Popular Culture Conference I attended in 2019, 2020, 2021 and returned in 2025.



Zachary Allen

Zachary Allen is a third-year dual-degree student majoring in Oboe Performance and Africana Studies with a minor in Orchestral Conducting at Oberlin College and Conservatory. He is an alumni fellow of the Chicago Musical Pathways Initiative and former Merit Scholar at the Music Institute of Chicago. Zachary was also a member of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra for four years and served as principal oboe for three years. In 2023 he made his conducting debut at Chicago's Symphony Center after being named the CYSO Music Director's Conducting Fellow.

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SPEAKERS



Dr. Alex Powell

Dr. Powell has nearly twenty years of experience in college and conservatory administration. He has recently served as the Dean of Enrollment Management and Aid at the Cleveland Institute of Music, following many years as the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. He also led admissions efforts at the Longy School of Music of Bard College and Wheelock College and has provided enrollment management consulting to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the Cleveland Institute of Music. He has given numerous presentations on college admissions in the performing arts and has been a featured panelist at many conferences. He served as an adjudicator for Classical Singer, NEC concerto competitions, Boston Lyric Opera, and VoicesBoston, and has been on panels for hundreds of conservatory auditions.

Dr. Powell earned his Doctor of Musical Arts in Music Education at Boston University, a Graduate Diploma in Vocal Performance at NEC, a Master of Music in Vocal Performance at Belmont University, and a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in History and Music at the University of Notre Dame. For twelve years, Dr. Powell was a faculty member at Nashville State Community College, specializing in innovative approaches to online music instruction.

As a professional musician, Dr. Powell has performed throughout North America and Europe. As a long-time member of the Handel and Haydn Society Chorus, he performed on numerous recordings and in live concerts at Boston's Symphony Hall and Jordan Hall. He has sung with Philovox, Orpheus Singers, Boston Cecilia, and Boston Secession, and was a member of the London Symphony Chorus performing under Colin Davis, Andre Previn, and Richard Hickox. Dr. Powell completed the master course in poetry and performance at the Franz Schubert Institut in Austria where he worked with Elly Ameling, Julius Drake, and Wolfgang Holzmair. Dr. Powell was also the conductor of the Conservatory Chamber Choir at the Longy School of Music of Bard College.

In addition to a career in classical music, Dr. Powell performed in regional musical theatre productions, country music shows at Dollywood, and was recognized in the Roger Miller Songwriting Competition while living and recording in Nashville. Dr. Powell continues to enjoy teaching voice, music directing for junior theater, singing, and playing the guitar and upright bass.

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SPEAKERS



Juliet White-Smith

Juliet is an accomplished violist, an engaging and dynamic teacher, and an expert string pedagogue. With a career spanning four decades, she has performed in concert halls as a solo, chamber and orchestral musician throughout the Americas and in Europe, Asia and Africa. She was a featured soloist with the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of guest conductor Terje Mikkelsen (Norway). She has been featured as a recitalist and presenter for conferences and congresses of the American Viola Society and International Viola Society at venues in Montreal, South Africa, Thailand and Brazil. White-Smith was a member of the Texas Chamber Orchestra under Sergiu Luca, the Houston Grand Opera under John DeMain, a fellow with the Rochester Philharmonic, and has performed in the viola sections of the Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Columbus (Ohio) Symphony Orchestras.

White-Smith's views on pedagogy, talent, and effective practice have been featured in articles in *The Strad*, *Strings Magazine*, *Journal of the American Viola Society*, and *American String Teacher*. She has presented master classes throughout the United States and abroad at major music schools including the Eastman School of Music, Rice University's Shepherd School of Music and Mahidol College of Music in Thailand. She has been an invited presenter and master class clinician for the American String Teachers Association, the nonprofit Save the Music Foundation, the 75th anniversary Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, and at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa for the International Viola Society Congress in 2009. She has been on the artist-faculty at music festivals in the United States and abroad including most recently the Brevard Music Festival from 2018–2023. In 2025, she joined the artist-faculty at the Cremona International Music Academy and Festival in Italy. She is active as an adjudicator for prominent career-advancing competitions including the William Primrose International Viola Competition and the Yellow Spring Chamber Music Competition. Her students have won positions in summer music festivals such as National Repertory Orchestra, in training orchestras including the Chicago Civic Orchestra, and have successful careers as professional orchestra musicians and in academia.

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Elizabeth Pérez-Hickman

Venezuelan-American oboist Elizabeth Pérez-Hickman brings a vivid storytelling approach and expressive musicality to her performances across orchestral, chamber, and solo settings. She is a strong advocate for diversity and accessibility in classical music, and she strives to connect audiences of all backgrounds through both performance and community engagement.

Elizabeth currently studies at the Manhattan School of Music on a full scholarship from both MSM and the Latin GRAMMY Cultural Foundation, under the guidance of Sherry Sylar, Associate Principal Oboe of the New York Philharmonic. She earned her Bachelor of Music degree from the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University on the Excellence in Music Leadership Full Scholarship, where she studied with Nicholas Stovall and Melissa Hooper. She graduated and received numerous honors, including the President's Commendation for Achievement in the Arts, the Evergreen House Foundation Artist Scholarship, and the Dean's Grant to record works by minority composers. Her early training began at Interlochen Arts Academy as a full-scholarship student of Dane Philipsen, where she was awarded the Young Artist Award, the school's highest distinction.

As an orchestral performer, Elizabeth has appeared with the New World Symphony, American Pops Orchestra, Baltimore Philharmonic, Bach in Baltimore, Westside Chamber players, and the Pennsylvania Philharmonic. She has performed with many notable conductors, including Gustavo Dudamel, Michael Morgan, James Judd, Joseph Young, Leslie Dunner, Marin Alsop, Leonard Slatkin, and Michael Tilson Thomas, among others. Notable appearances include performances at the 75th Anniversary NATO Summit in Washington D.C., at the Library of Congress, and at major venues such as the Hollywood Bowl and Walt Disney Concert Hall. She has also performed with popular artists such as Esperanza Spalding, Derrick Hodge, Young Jeezy, Tori Kelly, J'Nai Bridges, Nic Rouleau, and Natascia Diaz.

In her solo and chamber performances, she actively champions composers from underrepresented backgrounds and brings classical music to spaces and communities that rarely have access to live performances, including rehab shelters, hospitals, libraries, and public museums. Beyond the stage, Elizabeth's work reflects her deep commitment to equity in the arts. She has presented at national conferences and symposia hosted by El Sistema USA, the League of American Orchestras, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA), and the Eastman School of Music, speaking on topics of access, representation, and mental health in music and music education. Elizabeth hopes to continue to build pathways for young musicians from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds.

When she isn't performing or making reeds, Elizabeth enjoys photography, managing social media for music organizations, and dog-sitting in her New York neighborhood. She performs on both oboe and English horn, and occasionally oboe d'amore.

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