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## Booking College Shows

Dan Ostrowski

### College Market? What's That?

What does it mean when you hear someone talking about the "college market"? Well, it depends on whom you talk to. Some will say it is an opportunity for your band to play at fraternity parties, make lots of young fans, and eventually get on MTV's Spring Break. Others will say that schools present performers in an environment enriched by culture that is for the most part open minded, and very interested in promoting music and arts of all kinds. And still others will say that the college market provides an artist the opportunity to play at packed bars and clubs on their way to becoming the next Hootie and the Blowfish.



Regardless of whether you have been a performer for some time or are just starting out, you probably have heard about the good money, easy routing, and target audience associated with college towns. So this is a no-brainer, right? Let's go play some college dates! Well, although the above statements are all reasonable to some extent, it has been my experience that to truly succeed in the college market, an equal amount of risk, resource, and patience is needed on the part of the artist or booking agency.

Witnessing the success of artists such as Dave Matthews Band, Ben Folds Five, Rusted Root, Guster, and God Street Wine in college towns across America throughout the '90s has been tremendous. These artists generally started on a grassroots level by playing at college bars, fraternity parties, Spring festivals, and eventually back on the college campus for big money when they got huge. That's *one* side of the story. Because on the other hand you have artists such as Life in General, Beth Wood, Domestic Problems, Keller Williams, Winefield, Granian, and Dispatch that regularly tour schools and make a decent buck playing college campuses. Some do so with the help of a booking agency, some with little or no help from an agency.

In this section of StarPolish, we will provide some basic information you can use to get a jump-start on reaching the much sought-after college market. As a developing artist, there are many avenues and vehicles you can utilize to reach an audience in a college town, and some are not quite so obvious. Read on and you can find out about how I got involved in the college market, and how agencies, promoters, and national organizations can help artists like you break into the market, as well.

### Listen to Good Advice

"Hello, Mrs. O' Riley?"

"Yes," she replied.

"My name is Dan Ostrowski, and I am going to be attending classes at St. Francis next semester."

"Great, how can I help you?"

"Well, I am a musician, and seeing as you are the chair of the music department I thought I would call you. I have several questions I'd like to ask."

"OK, well, I'm kind of busy right now giving a lesson. Can you get to the point?"

"Sure. I need a place to play my drums on campus when I get there. Any suggestions?"

"Well, I certainly do not want a drummer practicing here at all hours of the night. Here, call Dom Peruso, the Director of Student Activities, he will be glad to help you. Be careful though, he will probably rope you into helping him move the stage from time to time, and that could easily lead to helping him run sound for entertainers who perform on campus. Then you'll be so involved you won't have time for school!"

"Thanks for the advice, Mrs. O'Riley. I'll be careful not to get *too involved*."

Not get too involved? Little did I know that this phone conversation in August of 1990 would eventually lead me on a path to becoming the owner of an entertainment agency, "Alive! with the Arts," which specializes in the college market. Who could have seen it coming? Not I, that's for certain. When I left my hometown of Erie, PA to attend college at St. Francis in Lorreto, PA, I had merely been playing in a rock band with my friends in high school. Enjoying the creative energy of music was a passion of mine, and I never even thought about the "business" side of entertainment. It seemed so distant, and I really was not that interested. "Let's just jam!" I would say, "worry about the other stuff later." Well, that "other stuff" has now consumed my life, and I could not be happier. What happened? Read on.

After I hung up the phone with Mrs. O'Riley from the music department, I called Dom Peruso at his office in the student union. I explained my situation to him, and he said that I could set up my drums in the school's auditorium with access during the evenings. Cool-- a place to jam, and he didn't even mention anything about moving the stage! This was going to be a good deal.

When I finally arrived at St. Francis and got settled in, I began to notice the different types of entertainment scheduled to perform on campus. Naturally, I was interested and I thought to myself, "How could I get MY band to play on campus?" I went and asked Dom how they review and select performers to play on campus. Dom said that his office receives materials from artists in the mail and takes calls from agents, and the school attends a college booking conference sponsored by the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA).

NACA is a non-profit, national organization that brings together school programming boards, concert committees, and other collegiate booking organizations on one end, and artists and agencies on the other. There are 11 regional conferences held each Fall (East Coast, Great Lakes, New England, Southeast, South Central, Upper Midwest, Far West, Heart of America, Pacific Northwest, Illinois, and Wisconsin), and one national conference in the Spring. The host city for each conference changes from year to year, but NACA does a pretty good job of making them centrally located for everyone in the region to attend. All agencies and schools sign up with NACA on a yearly basis, pay a membership fee, and participate in the conferences.

At a NACA conference, artists and agencies are offered a unique opportunity to actually *perform* live showcases for college buyers, build blocks of tour dates through "co-op" booking, and very efficiently offer their entertainment directly to the college demographic. Without a doubt, the most powerful tool for getting booked on the college circuit is to showcase at a NACA conference. In 1999, my company "Alive! with the Arts" showcased five different artists at regional conferences. These showcases resulted in over 60 bookings for the Spring of 2000, which is really just getting started in NACA world. There are artists such as Dave Binder, Howie Day, Five O'clock Shadow, and Matthew West that play upward of 100 college dates a year for an average fee of approximately \$1,500 per show + expenses. Not a bad living when you add it all up, and this success has everything to do with the talent of the artist, but also has quite a bit to do with the benefits of utilizing the NACA organization, as well.

After discussing NACA with Dom, he mentioned the possibility of *my* band coming to play at one of the many campus Open Mic Nights.

Recognizing my interest in all things musical, Dom quipped, "Oh, by the way, Dan, we need someone to host and organize the upcoming campus Open Mic Night. Can you do it?"

With a reasonable amount of trepidation I answered, "Um...well...I guess that I can do it. Only this once, right? And I don't have to move the stage or anything like Mrs. O'Riley warned?"

Dom replied, "Yeah, only this once, Dan. And I promise, no stage labor. The regular guy will be back next time to run things, and we will have the maintenance crew move the stage."

"Do I have to run sound?"

"Maybe, we'll see. Really, just do as much as you like. Anything will help."

“Alright, just this *once*.”

Well, it was now only my third day of college, and unbeknownst to me, I had just made a commitment that would last my entire college career. The Open Mic Night arrived, we *did* have to move the stage, I *did* run sound, and I had so much fun that I asked if I could do the next one. Turns out that the guy in charge was leaving school, and he was also the chairperson of the programming board that booked entertainment on campus. So Mr. Peruso, from his years of experience getting people to work and learn for free, offered me the chairperson position to the Soft Rock Café, our campus programming board. All of a sudden, there I was, in charge of spending a \$15,000 budget on entertainment, not having a clue about how to do it, and I just wanted a place to play my drums. That’s what I got for not listening to Mrs. O’Riley.

### **How Schools Select Entertainment**

I sat down with Dom and he began to show me the ropes of college booking. This is where I got my first glimpse of how a school selects “on campus” entertainment. In the student activities office, there were hundreds of files on all sorts of acts: comedians, bands, solo musicians, hypnotists, lectures, Velcro walls (yes, there *is* a Velcro wall - get one for your next family reunion and watch gramps stick upside-down to an inflatable, sticky wall of Velcro), leadership training, and NACA conference materials. Dom said that as part of the overall Student Activities Organization, I would be responsible for operating a committee of people (called Soft Rock) who would book the entertainment on campus for the following semester.

Generally, most schools select the acts that they want to bring to campus each year in some sort of committee form. Usually, there is a chairperson with a little more influence who can sway the vote his or her way. The committee goes over materials that are sent to them in the mail, and they review acts from NACA conferences. In fact, there are often several *different* committees responsible for booking entertainment at a college: the student activities people, the concert committee, student government, and specialized clubs (i.e. Women’s Group, Earth Day Committee, Black History Month). Most of these organizations will attend a NACA conference, or some type of meeting that brings together school buyers, artists, and agencies. Every school has a student activities office or an on-campus programming committee of some sort. So, if you want to play on a college campus, the most logical place to start is the student activities office. The NACA main office publishes a yearly directory containing hundreds of school contacts (included with your NACA membership), and virtually every school has a web-based resource where you can find information on organizations and clubs on campus. The latter takes a little more time, so another benefit of joining NACA is that they do much of the work for you in researching who to call, and publish it in the yearly directory.

### **The NACA Conference**

“Hey Dom, what’s this?” I said pointing to a NACA conference program lying on the table.

“That’s where *you* go and spend most of our money for the year. I go golfing,” he said with a smile.

“You mean we go to a conference and book acts on the spot?”

“Yep. Pretty efficient, and the quality of the entertainment is very good.”

“When do we go? And where is it?”

“In about three weeks. We will go to the East Coast regional NACA. It is in Lancaster, PA this year.”

“Lancaster, PA?”

“Yeah, its Amish country, so bring your boots.”

Lancaster, PA. Not exactly the Entertainment Promised Land of the world waiting to spawn new artists and agents, but my first visit there turned out to be a real eye opener and one of the most inspiring moments in my booking career (although I did not realize it at the time). At the NACA conference, the Soft Rock delegation and I witnessed a wide variety of great entertainment to bring to our school. The key being, *witnessed*. We went to showcases where bands *played for us* in 20- minute spots to show us what they were all about. From a buyer’s standpoint, what better way to preview an act before you hire them? Much better than getting a press kit and CD in the mail, don’t you think? NACA conferences offer the college buyer an opportunity to see an artist *live* before making the decision to book them. Obviously, this gives an advantage to the artists who perform at the conference as opposed to those who do not. Not to say that you need to showcase at a NACA to play on a college campus, but it certainly streamlines the process of getting your act noticed by college buyers.

Our delegation also attended co-op buying sessions where we built blocks of dates with other schools to route an artist to our campus at a reduced cost. So we saved money as an organization, too. In the end, we participated for the first time in the entertainment “business,” left with half our calendar filled for the next semester, and now had tons of ideas to fill up additional months of entertainment when we got back to campus.

If you are wondering why some of the above is important information for helping you get booked at colleges, think about the buyer for a minute. First of all, as an artist or an agent, we are trying to sell something to the schools, a performance. It is worth something and they are willing to pay for it. But since the schools are spending money, they generally want to make booking decisions *easily* and *affordably*. Often in the case of booking entertainment on a college campus, there is a great deal of time wasted between the artist and buyer trying to get each other on the phone, getting the committee to make a decision to book your band or not, and general run-around type of stuff. At NACA conferences, *all of the people needed to make these decisions are in one place*, ready to do business. Calendars are open and contracts are getting signed. This is great for the artists or agents because business gets done, and the “run around” factor is reduced. It’s good for the school because they get to plan their events, and spend money more effectively and confidently. When selling your act to a college, try to make it *easy* for people to book you. Becoming involved with NACA can help you accomplish this.

“Hey, Dom. We spent the entire budget for this year at the co-op buying session. It was easy, and now our calendar of entertainment is completed for next semester.”

“Oh yeah, that’s great. I shot a 105 this morning. Not my best game.”

“That’s OK, because now you have more time to practice. You won’t have to be on the phone all day booking acts for next semester, we just took care of it all.”

“True. NACA sure does make it easy to get the job done.”

“Yep, and I also picked up some information on how *my* band can get involved in NACA.”

“Great. Maybe we’ll see you showcase at the next East Coast conference.”

“You never know until you try!”

“True.”

### **How To Get Involved and Utilize the NACA Tool**

Taking the first step to getting involved as an artist or agency is as easy as picking up the phone and calling the NACA main office at 1-800-845-2338, or log on to the NACA website at <http://www.naca.org>. You can get information about how much it costs to join, when and where to submit your materials for showcase selection, and information on the location and time frame for attending regional and national conferences. There are essentially two ways for an artist to get involved with NACA-- self representation, or representation by a NACA-accredited agency.

### **Representing Yourself in NACA**

Representing yourself in NACA is definitely a great place to start if you have the drive and determination to see things through, and the patience to follow up on lots of leads. If you are one to give up easily, then try to find representation. Some of the most successful acts using NACA as a booking tool are self-represented. Self-represented artists such as Dave Binder, Travelin’ Max, Rick Kelly, Mark Rust, Karen Goldberg, Barry Drake, and Craig Karges like the control of doing it themselves, and they get to keep all the money, too (i.e. no commissions to an agent). If you do choose to self-represent, there are several fees you should be aware of.

As mentioned before, there is a membership fee to join the NACA organization as an artist or agency. Regional memberships are available for \$230, and National memberships cost \$530. The membership fee gives you access to the National Directory of college contacts, and also makes you eligible to apply for showcase spots at the conferences. It can be expensive at first to join NACA and attend the conferences, but if you are patient and work the system well, it pays off in the long run. Expenses for attending a NACA conference range from showcase application fees (\$35 each), buying a booth at the conference (\$200), hotel for three days (\$250), travel (\$200), and paying an attendance fee (\$150). In the end, you can expect to spend approximately \$1,000 for every regional conference, and for this reason alone, many artists are interested in being represented by an agency because the agency picks up most of the fees, and there is considerably less risk of the artists’ investment of time and money.

### **Work With an Agency in NACA**

This is by far the most popular avenue that artists choose to pursue. There is a huge list of agency names with NACA memberships on the NACA website at <http://www.naca.org>. Go there and look through them, as one may be the important connection you need to make in the college market. Agencies have years of experience dealing with the NACA organization, and you may even find an agency that specializes in your particular type of entertainment. I have received many, many solicitations from artists via our listing on the NACA website alone. So if you are a booking agent thinking about investing in the NACA system, having your listing on the NACA website and in the National Directory will pay for itself over time. Some of my most recent and most promising clients have come from them seeing my ad in the National Directory or my spot on the NACA website. In fact, if you are an artist who'd like to contact me and my company "Alive! With the Arts" for college representation, visit us at [www.alivearts.com](http://www.alivearts.com).

When you are an artist represented by an agency, the agency will submit your materials for showcase selection, and if you are chosen by the showcase selection committee, bam! You're in! Now you just have to go to the conference, deliver a stellar performance, and wait for the dates to roll in. It may sound simple, but you must be aware that competition for the showcase spots is always fierce, especially in the larger regions such as East Coast, Southeast, Great Lakes, and New England. Competition is less severe in the smaller regions like Upper Midwest, Far West, Pacific Northwest, and Heart of America. So getting involved with one of the less competitive regions may be a strategic way of approaching things in the beginning.

Some agents will say that the key to getting a showcase is sending in a great video for the committee to look at. I recommend to all of my artists that they produce a 5 to 7-minute video highlighting the best elements of their show for showcase submission. So if you are seriously thinking about giving NACA a whirl, I strongly recommend getting together an excellent video. It will pay off in the end because you can use it for a promo piece to send to schools later, as well as use it for showcase submission. It has been my experience that buyers like to *see* what you are doing, just as much as they want to *hear* what you are doing.

### **What is a Middle Agent?**

You may have heard of this term, so let's just take a moment to explain it. A middle agent is someone who generally works with a school or other organization to book national-level entertainment. The middle agent works *for* and is paid by the school to negotiate a good price for an act, and usually takes partial interest in the production values of the show. Some NACA agencies operate as middle agents almost entirely, like [Concert Ideas](#), specializing in providing big-name entertainment to college campuses. The middle agent charges the school a 10% fee based on the price of the act, and the national agencies like this arrangement because they don't have to deal with the schools, and they don't have to give up any additional commissions; the schools like it because they can have an experienced college agency negotiating on their behalf. The whole "middle agent" position is not very important to young developing talent, but it can be important once you become more popular, or if you are an agent interested in making money by offering this additional service to schools along with your regular roster of acts.

### **Choosing *Not* to use NACA**

People choose not to get involved with NACA for lots of reasons. Mainly because joining NACA, participating in conferences, and pursuing the general "college market" can be expensive and very time consuming. Some artists and agents also find the environment within NACA to be very interested in entertainment, but sometimes not at all interested in promoting the arts, so they don't bother with it. In the end, the NACA experience is what you make of it, really. It is clear that NACA supports an industry of agents, artists, college professionals, and student programmers who book *lots* of entertainment for their schools, but it is also clear that you can book an artist on campus without the help of NACA at all.

Maybe you are just interested in touching base with some local colleges and universities. The "local talent" avenue can offer a different approach to the overall college market by promoting your act as readily available and cost-effective. Most schools will gladly pay out \$500-750 to a quality *local* act because most touring NACA talent is more expensive. Selling your act to the local college can also be easier if you are playing around town a bit, and have your own PA and light arrangements. Invite the student programming board to a gig and show them your stuff. I've seen this used very effectively in large college towns like Columbus, OH; State College, PA; and Syracuse, NY.

As mentioned before, there are other ways of getting involved in a college town's music scene-- bars and clubs, fraternities, miscellaneous clubs on campus, and benefits. Getting on campus without the help of an agency can be tough, but you can do it if you spend the time researching who is on campus, and who is doing what. You

need to first locate the student activities office, and then any clubs, organizations, or committees that you think would be interested in booking live music. If you have the time, visit the campus and find the information. You could set up a face-to-face meeting with the music chairperson to present your material. The only way you know is if you call and ask. When I was booking at St. Francis, someone used this approach and we hired them. Don't ever be afraid of calling and asking too many questions of a school. A few minutes spent on the phone can land you at the desk of the exact person you want to talk to.

### General Advice Regarding NACA and Playing on College Campuses

As an agency owner in the large but relatively specialized world of college bookings, I can attest to some of the rewards and pitfalls of this niche market. Many agencies will tell you how expensive it is to exist in the college market, specifically NACA. The college market tends to be a specialized market for a few different reasons, and it takes patience and time to wade through the massive amounts of information. Here are a few general pieces of advice that I have found helpful over the years:



1. *Focus On Building Relationships:* Many artists and agents who join NACA at first set themselves up for big disappointment by expecting too much in too little time. It takes *time* to work your way into the college booking world. It is vastly different from club [booking](#), and for that reason you should treat it as such. I have seen many an artist join NACA expecting to immediately fill their calendars with college dates, and when only a few (or none) happen, they get discouraged and quit. In your first year, focus more on meeting people, forming relationships that will last years, and building credibility within the system. Go to the meals and educational sessions at the conference with the initial intent of meeting people, not selling your act. Once you meet them and have a relationship going, then put on the booking hat.
2. *Stay Away From Pressure Sale Situations:* This more or less goes with the above, but it's important enough to mention on its own. No one likes the high-pressure sales situation. I have seen many artists and agents try this, and in the end only wind up with one or two bookings, and a bad reputation for being too pushy. Focus on the people first, and then once you get comfortable with them, offer them info on your act.
3. *Contracts, Rider, And Paperwork:* Now that you have the gig, what next? A little paperwork, of course! One of the benefits of playing at schools is that everything is contracted and legit. Whereas a local club may not want to offer you a contract (nor even pay you for that matter), a college almost always will. The money is guaranteed, and I have never had a school not pay an artist the contracted amount. Design a standard contract to use with all of your college gigs, and many of the same issues will then be covered. If you have no idea what should be in a standard contract, see the attached [Artist Performance Contract](#) for guidelines to create a contract that suits your needs.

An increasing number of schools are now presenting additional paperwork to the artist (aside from the artist's contract with the school), in order to protect the liability of the institution for anything undesirable that may happen as a result of the artist's show. What was once a simple performance contract ends up being a dozen pages by final execution. In these days of lawsuit culture, we can all understand why this is so. This is just another good reason for *you* to have a contract with them, as well (aside from payment). Use contracts for all of your performances, no matter where they may be. Cover liability and all financial issues thoroughly, and keep good records. Be prepared to give financial data to the school. They will ask for a Tax ID or Social Security Number in order to issue a check. If you do not have a Tax ID for your act, get one. [Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts](#) should be able to help you with this, for free. In some situations, schools will issue individual checks to band members, and you can put all that information in your standard contract. You would need to supply the Tax ID or Social Security Numbers of each member or employee of the band and a payment schedule. If you are a solo artist, this really isn't an issue (your SS number should suffice). The point here is, just get the Tax ID, go legit, and start making money. It's the only way to go.

“Riders” are also very important to make part of your contract. A good rider is a set of documents that are attached to your contract (they “ride” on the contract) that very simply outline all of the technical needs required for the artist to perform. If possible, I recommend working all production costs into your base fee and handling sound and light details yourself. Most schools will generally arrange all production values, but be sure to be specific and detailed in your rider. College gigs can be notorious for missing the fine details of sound and lights, and a developing artist certainly does not want to compromise their show and [image](#) with inadequate production. Go out of your way to be detailed with the production of your show well in advance. Organization on the production side of things will pay off down the road in terms of presenting yourself as professionally as possible, and that will get your act the return gig.

1. **Be Ethical:** This doesn’t just go for NACA, but for business overall. Treat people kindly, and they will return for more business. Don’t take advantage of people and their money. Many of the school delegates attending NACA conferences are learning about the booking process, so if you are more experienced than them, be willing to explain things, and treat them with respect.
2. **Be Professional:** When performing on a college campus, be professional. Be on time, and remember where you are. This is not a bar or a club, so in general there is no alcohol or club-like atmosphere going on. Don’t screw up a return trip to campus by drinking, doing drugs, or carrying on like an idiot.
3. **Be Willing to Teach and Learn:** Many of the students and staff attending NACA conferences are learning about the booking process, just like you. If you are more experienced, take time to explain things like contracts, riders, and technical requirements. Also be willing to learn about how certain colleges operate. Not everyone conducts business in the same way, and take the time to show your attention to detail when dealing with situations that are less than “normal”.
4. **Don’t Give Up:** It takes time to build the relationships necessary to succeed in the college market. Expect to spend two to three years developing a plan that works for you, and one that you can measure success with in terms of milestones along the way. Don’t be discouraged if things are not working out as you had planned. Be willing to adjust along the way and make changes that will put you on track to long-term success in the market. Ask for advice from people who have succeeded before you, and be creative with new ways of presenting your act to buyers.

### **Other College Booking Opportunities**

Aside from NACA, there are other organizations that you can target to get gigs in a college town. A few are listed below

1. **Fraternities:** Fraternities in general can be risky places to play (mainly because they are infamous for bouncing checks and skimping on production), but they can also be great places to generate a solid fanbase in a college town. The best way to obtain frat gigs is to contact the school and get a list of the different social chairs at each house. Make contact with the social chair and send them your stuff. Give them a good price, and cover all the details of your show, including production and power requirements. I have played many fraternity parties where the house electricity was not enough to withstand our PA. Take care of these details in advance so things go smoothly.

Another great way to get into fraternities is to tap into your own social circle. Do you have any friends at fraternities? This is how my band got a major start in the fraternity market at Penn State University. Try to identify schools with very active Greek life, and go after them. Some include Penn State, Bucknell University, Vanderbilt, West Virginia University, and University of Alabama. Most major universities and larger colleges have an active Greek scene. You could also ask to attend one of the monthly meetings held by the campus Greek Council. Here you could present your act, and offer to send

information to interested parties.

2. *Specialized Campus Groups*: If you have a specialized show celebrating some aspect of our society or culture (i.e. female performers for Women's History Month, culturally diverse groups for Black History Month, family programs for Parent's Weekend, roots rock for Earth Day, etc.), then chances are that there is a need for your act at some point during the school year. Many colleges recognize these special times with performances and programs. Look for an organization on campus that may share the ideals you have as an artist. Sometimes there are high-profile benefit concerts that are sponsored by groups on campus. Try to identify these and offer your services. One performance at a well-attended benefit can lead to gigs down the road.
  
3. *College Bars and Clubs*: Becoming popular in a college town through the bars and clubs is a sure way to eventually landing a gig on campus. Lower-paying club gigs can serve as a springboard to popularity in a college town, and can be a good way to get noticed by fraternities, as well. My band, after becoming popular in bars around State College, PA, found ourselves very busy the next semester playing at frats for better money. And let's face it, college students like to drink, so eventually most of them will frequent bars and clubs and see your band. How do you get the bar gigs? Well, usually you have to start by opening up for other acts, and basically play for little to no pay. It's a labor of love, really. Identify a popular band in a college town, and pursue the opportunity to open for them. Also review our section [Booking Local / Club Shows](#) for more advice.
  
4. *Arts Associations*: This could be a completely different article all in its own. Just like there are NACA conferences, there are all types of arts associations that hold booking conferences and cater to the performing arts centers on campus, theaters, and community groups. Joining and participating in these types of conferences is often more expensive than NACA, but in general, they are attended by experienced music and art buyers who know what they are doing. NACA tends to be a place of learning for many people, just as it is an established place of conducting business. But go online and search for arts associations such as the Southern Arts Exchange, Mid-West Arts Alliance, Western Arts Alliance, Northeast Arts Alliance, and Arts Presenters.