Following a period of expansion and awareness in the arts during the 1960s and early 1970s, Chancellor Edwin Young established the Arts Consortium in 1975 with the expectation that this entity would be able to develop ways of coordinating and rationalizing arts activities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW).

By 1988, the mission and vision of the Consortium evolved to be an “administrative committee composed of representatives of the arts departments, programs, and faculties” on campus “to act as a vehicle of communication in the arts, and as an agent for support for collaborative artistic efforts.” That same year the university’s accreditation review by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools cited concerns about the administrative dispersion of and support for the arts across campus, and recommended a more focused study.

The Arts Consortium presented a strategic plan to Chancellor David Ward in 1993 and recommended among other things, the creation of a college of the arts by the end of the decade. At that point, campus arts departments and resources were distributed among six administrative units and included 21 academic departments or programs composed of 170 faculty and 59 academic staff. Citing budgetary concerns, the Chancellor charged the Consortium to propose alternative ways to advance the arts. In 1997, the Consortium proposed the creation of an “Arts Institute” governed by the leaders of arts programs and departments and led by a 50% time director. Chancellor Ward approved the Arts Institute structure and in 1998 it replaced the Consortium.

With the new direction, the Arts Institute made significant advances in activities and scope over the Arts Consortium. These include:

- “Arts Awards” to faculty and graduate students from UW Foundation arts-related bequests
- The Interdisciplinary Arts Residency Program which receives substantial funding from the Cluster Hire Initiative
- Administrative partnership and support for the “Creative Arts and Design Learning Community” in Sellery Hall
- Development of cross-listed courses to enable artists in residence to teach classes
o Establishment of the Wisconsin Film Festival

o Creation of the Campus Arts Cards

After ten years of operation it became clear to members of the campus arts community that it was time to measure whether the Arts Institute had succeeded in unifying and galvanizing the arts at their full potential at UW. With the approval of the Institute’s Deans Council and the assistance of the Office of Quality Improvement, the Institute undertook an extensive investigation of the state of the arts on the UW campus during the fall of 2009.

This exploration consisted of interviews, surveys, and town hall meetings. The results of this evaluation project indicated again the need for a more robust structure where the arts might thrive and contribute to campus. A plan to establish a college of the arts was once again proposed, supported by the administration, and submitted to the faculty for review and approval by the Arts Institute Executive Committee.

In reviewing the proposal for the college of the arts during the spring of 2012, four departments (Art, Dance, Music, and Theatre) voted initially to move to create a college of the arts. During the 2012-2013 academic year, developments in both the campus and statewide political climate prompted a shift in approach. While the majority of involved units remained positive towards the idea of a college of the arts, campus leadership decided it would be prudent to instead proceed with augmenting the current Arts Institute. In 2014, Chancellor Rebecca Blank constituted the Arts Institute as a campus division, which gives us more visibility and responsibilities around campus.