

CREATE-A-COLLEGE

A BARD COLLEGE CREATION GUIDE



WRITTEN BY MATTHEW GRAVELYN

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A how-to guide for creating a bard College in 5e



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INTRODUCTION

COLLEGE ACCEPTANCE

Hello and welcome to bard subclasses 101.

No, sorry, that's lame. I'm sorry for that. You're here because you have an affinity for the bard class and you're looking to spice things up by creating your very own subclass: a bard College. In this guide I will offer you my take on how to approach this task with a step-by-step approach and a number of examples along the way.

I have researched the official bard Colleges along with a few more notable homebrews to figure out what makes the bard College tick, boil it down to the core essence, and compiled those insights here for you to follow along with. By the end of this guide you will have all the tools you need to homebrew a new and exciting College for your bard to utilize in their next adventure.

USING THIS SOURCEBOOK

This book is meant to be a template, a guide to help you create your very own bard College that is compatible with virtually any 5e setting or campaign. In this way, you have nearly limitless potential to entertain yourself and find new ways to bring the bard to life in your game.

Each section covers an area of College creation, including an overview of existing options, concepts to consider during creation, and how to balance the features that go into a College.

This book is based on research of the official bard College options as well as many other homebrew and self-published options. Using that research as a framework, I created this guide to help you create a College as quickly and easily as possible.

EXAMPLES

Included at the end of each section are two example Colleges that I have created following this guide. Feel free to use these Colleges in your game, but their true purpose is to illustrate the practical application of the guide.

Examples are found in blue boxes at the end of each section and detail the choices of that section. Complete versions of College of Chance and College of Hands can be found at the end of this guide.



CLASS OVERVIEW

Bards are not an overly complex class, but they do have some unique aspects to their progression. I always recommend brushing up on the base class before jumping into subclass creation, so take a minute to refresh yourself. For convenience I have added a brief overview of the bard's standard class features here for easy reference.

SPELLCASTING

Bards start with the ability to cast spells and begin with two cantrips, four spells, and two 1st level spell slots. When gaining levels, the bard gains additional cantrips and spells that are of a level they have spell slots for. These increase steadily throughout the bard's progression.

BARDIC INSPIRATION

Bards also come out of the gate with a support ability that allows them to grant a d6 to an ally who can then use it to increase an attack roll, skill check, or saving throw. The bard can do this a number of times equal to their Charisma modifier and regain spent uses after a long rest.

The die used for Bardic Inspiration increase later to a d8 at 5th level, a d10 at 10th level, and finally a d12 at 15th level.

JACK OF ALL TRADES

At 2nd level bards are already skilled in a wide array of abilities. Any skill that the bard doesn't already have a proficiency in still benefits from half the bard's proficiency bonus.

SONG OF REST

At 2nd level the bard can increase the healing done by hit dice during short rests. Any creature that regains hit points in this way gains an additional 1d6 hit points.

The die used for Song of Rest increases later to a d8 at 9th level, a d10 at 13th level, and finally a d12 at 17th level.

EXPERTISE

At 3rd level the bard chooses any two of their skill proficiencies and doubles them. They can choose another two skill proficiencies at 10th level as well.

FONT OF INSPIRATION

This ability is gained at 5th level and augments the bard's Bardic Inspiration. Expended uses of Bardic Inspiration are now regained after a short rest in addition to a long rest.

COUNTERCHARM

At 6th level, the bard can spend a turn performing to grant them and their allies advantage on saving throws against being frightened or charmed.

MAGICAL SECRETS

Ever the dabblers, bards gain access to additional spells at 10th, 14th, and 18th level, even those outside the bard spell list. At each of these levels the bard can learn two spells from any list, as long as the bard can cast it. These become bard spells for the bard.

SUPERIOR INSPIRATION

At 20th level is another bonus to Bardic Inspiration. When the bard rolls initiative, if they have no uses of Bardic Inspiration left, they can one use.

COLLEGE CREATION

The first thing to do when creating a subclass is to come up with a theme or guiding principle to base your features around. This will help your subclass feel cohesive and also add a rich layer of theme and backstory to your character.

COUSE GUIDE

Puns aside, the term “college” here is not the institutions of higher learning that probably spring to mind. For a bard, their College is simply a gathering of bards, a loose affiliation with one another to learn from one another, gossip, and trade secrets. In this way, bards of the same College or small factions within share a style of performance, combat, and magic.

When thinking about the history and backstory that comes along with your College, there doesn't have to be a lot in the way of grand history or prestigious leaders. A College can be as simple as a secret society of bards based out of a tavern basement or as widespread as a network of bards across the land. There are virtually no limitations to the size and scope of your College but remember that bards don't much go in for strict rules and overbearing leaders. Keep it casual and open to interpretation.

NAMING YOUR COLLEGE

Like many subclasses, the naming scheme for bard Colleges is very straightforward: **College of _____**. You'll fill in the blank with a single word that is evocative of the College's theme and may also indicate what the bard will be doing. As with all aspects of the bard, ensure this is catchy and inspiring. We can't have your College founded on a mere pun or synonym.

COMBAT FEATURES

I wanted to offer a general piece of advice at the top here that impacts all features in a College. While some subclasses offer features that add or modify non-combat abilities, the bard College focuses entirely on combat. My guess is that this is due to the bard base class already having a lot in the way of skill and non-combat abilities. Whatever the reason, I suggest also following this trend to help maintain overall balance and viability of your subclass.

Example: College of Chance

There are those performances that you are aware of: sweeping ballads, passionate acting, and even that of a court juggler. Then there are performances so perfect and cunning that you scarcely know they happened at all. Such is the way of bards who make up the College of Chance, a collection of gamblers, con artists, and grifters. These performers can affect an emotion or physical response so convincing they can make you remember them forever or forget them instantly.

Bard of this College are keen observers of people, spotting tells and seeing through deceptions with ease. They are also able to adjust their body language and speech to effectively disguise themselves and their intentions. These skills also serve them if their scam comes to light and they need to fight their way out of danger. Knowing when and how someone will throw a punch makes it all the easier to dodge it.

Example: College of Hands

Found in both royal courts and street corners, the noble profession of the juggler is one that entertains the rich and poor alike. Their nimble hands move with speed and precision unmatched by even the most skilled fighters or martial artists. They seem to have a sixth sense for the floating objects around them and pluck them from the air without so much as a glance. Skilled performers also spice up their routines by tossing daggers and other dangerous items.

Bards of the College of Hands are masters of their craft. Despite the frivolous appearance of their performances, seasoned jugglers can translate their dexterity and aim into a deadly fighting style, blending the lines between melee and ranged combat. It is said that the more skilled bards can pluck an arrow out of the air and with one swift movement send it back where it came from. Some speculate that there is more to these jugglers' abilities than just skilled hands, suggesting there may some magic to their routines.

BONUS PROFICIENCIES

Several of the official Colleges grant one or more proficiencies on top of those granted by the bard's base class. These are optional and could be swapped out for an extra feature at 3rd level. I recommend using bonus proficiencies when you have a solid 3rd level feature but need just a little more oomph to start out the College.

FOUNDATIONAL

The first thing to consider here is what does your bard *need* to properly embody their College. The simplest route is to add weapon or armor proficiencies that might help the bard in combat, should your College focus on that sort of thing.

Alternatively, if your College explicitly focuses on the art of persuasion, making sure the bard definitely has proficiency in the Persuasion skill would be handy. If being a talented manipulator isn't strictly necessary for the playstyle but might be one of a few skills that would help, then you could offer a choice of one or two proficiencies from a short list.

THEMATIC

If you want to add more character and non-combat elements to your College, and I fully support you doing so, you could look to add other proficiencies here that might otherwise be viewed as unhelpful. This could include tools like chef's utensils or even a gaming set. You could even use this as the seed for your whole subclass. For example, starting with a proficiency with a gaming set, your College could be built around gambling, bluffing, and reading a person's body language. That's actually a great idea...

ALTERNATIVES

If proficiencies just aren't doing it for you here, there are other options that carry about the same weight that you could offer at this level. Consider options like languages or even non-combat and cosmetic cantrips, like *prestidigitation* or *thaumaturgy*.

Example: College of Chance

This was an easy pick as I want the College to be based around gamblers, so what better tool proficiency than that of gaming devices. I also wanted to guarantee a proficiency in either Deception or Persuasion so the bard can truly play like a con artist.

Bonus Proficiencies: Starting at 3rd level, you gain proficiency in either Deception or Persuasion. You also gain proficiency in your choice of either a gaming set, playing cards, or gaming dice.



ORIGIN FEATURE

As far as initial subclass features go, the bard usually gets a substantial ability out of the gate at 3rd level. This feature should be the bard's bread and butter, a tool they will reach for often to navigate tense or difficult situations. Obviously, the ability needs to be balanced but don't be shy about giving your College a feature that packs a little punch.

INSPIRING FEATURES

The majority of the official Colleges I looked into leverage the Bardic Inspiration ability in this first College feature. Usually this follows a pattern of "expend one use of Bardic Inspiration to..." do a new and interesting thing that is thematic to the College. Past this structure, these abilities range from ally support and healing to bonus combat effects to hindering the bard's enemies.

In some cases, the Bardic Inspiration die itself is rolled and used in the ability, either to augment a roll or deal additional damage. Sometimes though it is merely the use of Bardic Inspiration that is called into play here and the amount, if any, is outlined in this feature. This gives you control to write out a more balanced scaling of effects rather than relying on the Bardic Inspiration die.

NOT SO PROFICIENT

As mentioned in the previous section, if you chose not to offer bonus proficiencies you can instead double up here and offer two features. If you choose this route, there are two things to keep in mind:

First, you need to ensure that these features are balanced in terms of their effectiveness, power, and limitations. Having two very strong and very available features at 3rd level will make the bard overpowered compared to the other game elements, like monsters and the other characters. If you're doing two features here, aim a little lower in terms of power or place strict limitations on when and how often they can be used.

Second, it is my opinion that the two features should be distinct and unique from one another. Since these are two separate features, they should feel like it, and give the bard's player interesting decisions to make. These features can certainly compliment each other, but I like to aim for variety.

Example: College of Chance

For this feature I wanted to create a unique way for the bard to use their Bardic Inspiration. I decided on an ability that would allow the bard to effectively "read" someone and anticipate their next move, allowing them to better prepare for it.

Gambler's Eye: Starting at 3rd level, your time spent hustling folks has given you keen eye for tells and body language. When a creature targets you with a weapon or spell attack you can use your reaction to expend one use of your Bardic Inspiration to anticipate their moves. Roll a Bardic Inspiration die and add the result to either your AC or your saving throw against the spell. You can choose to use this feature after the creature makes its roll, but before the DM determines whether the attack succeeds or fails.

Example: College of Hands

For this College I decided not to include proficiency bonuses as the bard class already includes all the weapons I expect this character to use. Instead, I wrote up two 3rd level features, one to improve the bard's throwing attacks and one to improve their defense against such attacks.

Expert Throw: Starting at 3rd level, when you make a ranged attack with a melee weapon that has the Thrown property you add double your proficiency bonus to the attack roll instead of your normal proficiency bonus.

Catch and Return: Starting at 3rd level, your quick hands serve you well in a fight. When you are the target of a ranged weapon attack you can use your reaction to expend one use of your Bardic Inspiration, rolling the Bardic Inspiration die and adding the result to your AC against the attack. If the attack roll fails, you can catch the projectile and make a ranged attack against the creature who targeted you.

UTILITY FEATURE

At 6th level, shortly after choosing the College, the bard gains another feature. This feature is generally geared toward utility and support rather than direct action. These are supplemental abilities that the bard can leverage in support of their allies or to augment their own effects.

SIMPLE IS BEST

Across all the official Colleges, one thing stood out to me immediately: all of the 6th level features are very simple, both thematically and mechanically. These features are straight to the point and often may not seem as powerful or useful as other features. That said, they are typically available in a number of situations and can be used with regularity. So, while it may not be a show-stopping feature, they aren't gated to uses or long rests.

ADDITIONAL ACTIONS

Many of the features at this level are outside of the normal action, either as a bonus action or a reaction. This can make an ability that isn't very powerful on its own and, by combining it with a normal action or allowing you to act as a reaction, can lead to some powerful combinations of effects.

The way I consider bonus actions versus reactions is to think about whether the ability is something quick the bard does proactively (bonus action) or something the bard would do reflexively and instinctively (reaction). Whichever makes the most sense thematically is likely the best choice mechanically.

REPLICATE EXISTING MECHANICS

For simpler features like this one I often look to other rules and mechanics in the game to see if there is something I can leverage. I comb through other classes, spell lists, feats, and even magic items looking for a single effect or ability that might make sense in the context of the subclass I'm working on.

For example, if you're trying to create a College of brawler bards you might look to the fighter class or melee combat feats for inspiration. On the other hand, if you want your College to be more thoughtful and mystical, looking at non-bard spell lists or magic items would be a great place to start.

Example: College of Chance

Sometimes, despite your well-laid plans and careful manipulations, your con just doesn't work out. While a bard never doubts their skill, they also don't want to be caught without a backup plan. This feature gives them an option for fight or flight when their skills don't go quite as planned.

Escape Plan: Starting at 6th level, you can anticipate when a scam has gone south. When you fail either a Charisma (Deception) or Charisma (Persuasion) skill check you can use your reaction to either move half your movement speed or make one weapon attack.

Example: College of Hands

I see this bard as someone who seems to throw daggers and darts out of nowhere. Even in regular combat, they can produce a weapon and launch it with deadly accuracy. I also wanted to lean a bit more into the magical aspects of the bard by having them create the dagger.

Quick Toss: Starting at 6th level, you always seem to have an extra dagger in hand. As a bonus action you can produce a dagger out of thin air and make a ranged weapon attack with it. This dagger disappears at the end of your turn.



BONUS FEATURE

Unlike many subclasses, a bard College doesn't tend to have a monumental feature at the top. Instead, the 14th level feature for your College will likely be a

BONUS ACTIONS

Several of official Colleges offer this feature as a bonus action, a smaller ability that the bard can leverage in addition to the standard action and movement of their turn. If you want to go this route, consider an action that a bard of your College does a lot and choose a bonus action that would compliment or improve that playstyle. For example, if your College focuses on melee combat you could create a feature that uses a bonus action to help defend the bard by imposing disadvantage on the next enemy attack that targets them.

Keep in mind that a character can only utilize one bonus action per turn, so if there are already a lot of bonus actions in your College, it might be less impactful to add another.

IMPROVING FEATURES

Another common use of this feature is to improve upon previous abilities from the College or the base class itself. There are a number of options here, everything from augmenting damage, extending range or duration, or increasing the number of times a feature could be used.

A good place to start is parts of the features that involve numbers: number of dice, number of feet, number of minutes, etc. These are easy places to increase a little without drastically changing the feel or playstyle.

ALTERNATE INSPIRATION

One of the original bard Colleges uses this feature to offer additional ways for the bard to make use of their Bardic Inspiration. For example, instead of only applying the bonus to your allies, this feature might allow you to do so for yourself. As with the origin feature you can either leverage the actual Bardic Inspiration die or simply consume a use of it to create a defined effect, like automatically charming a target or imposing disadvantage on an incoming spell attack.

Example: College of Chance

I decided to add a more proactive feature as the previous ones have both been reactions. Here I've tried to take the bard's natural ability to bluff and translate that to combat, allowing the bard to make subtle gestures and expressions that fool their target and help them land their attack.

Poker Face: Starting at 14th level, your ability to bluff has translated to your combat style. As a bonus action you can expend one use of your Bardic Inspiration, rolling a Bardic Inspiration die and adding the number rolled to a weapon or spell attack roll as you fake out your target. You must use this feature before you make your attack roll.

Example: College of Hands

This feature emulates the captivating nature of a juggler's performance and, combined with their innate magic, allows the bard to temporarily stun their enemies, allowing their allies to strike.

What Goes Up: Starting at 14th level, as an action you create a glamour on a small object you can touch and then toss it high into the air. All creatures of your choice within 30 feet that can see the object must make a Wisdom saving throw against your spell save DC. On a failure, a creature is fixated by the object, becoming Stunned until the beginning of your next turn.

Once you have used this feature you cannot use it again until you have finished a short or long rest.



COLLEGE OF CHANCE

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COLLEGE FEATURES

Bard Level Features

3 rd	Bonus Proficiencies, Gambler's Eye
6 th	Escape Plan
14 th	Poker Face

BONUS PROFICIENCIES

Starting at 3rd level, you gain proficiency in either Deception or Persuasion. You also gain proficiency in your choice of either a gaming set, playing cards, or gaming dice.

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COLLEGE OF HANDS

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COLLEGE FEATURES

Bard Level Features

3 rd	Expert Throw, Catch and Return
6 th	Quick Toss
14 th	What Goes Up

EXPERT THROW

Starting at 3rd level, when you make a ranged attack with a melee weapon that has the Thrown property you add double your proficiency bonus to the attack roll instead of your normal proficiency bonus.

CATCH AND RETURN

Starting at 3rd level, your quick hands serve you well in a fight. When you are the target of a ranged weapon attack you can use your reaction to expend one use of your Bardic Inspiration, rolling the Bardic Inspiration die and adding the result to your AC against the attack. If the attack roll fails, you can catch the projectile and make a ranged attack against the creature who targeted you.

QUICK TOSS

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WHAT GOES UP

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Thank you for downloading this sourcebook! It was a lot of fun to create.

If you have any feedback or suggestions for this sourcebook, please send it to me via email at matthew@gravelyn.com with the subject line "Create-A-College Feedback". Your input will help to make this sourcebook even better for future players!

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