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TRACKING THE LIVES AND CAREERS OF ARTS GRADUATES



SNAAP DataBrief

DataBrief provides arts educators and arts policymakers with highlights of SNAAP data and insights into the value of arts-school education.



Arts Graduates "Oscillate Wildly" Across Disciplines

The under-acknowledged prevalence, predictors, and outcomes of multi-disciplinary arts practice

The idea of working across artistic disciplines is far from new, but evidence suggests that such crossover is becoming an increasingly important part of artistic careers. For instance, in interviews and roundtable discussions with over 300 U.S. artists, cultural leaders, and scholars, Holly Sidford and Alexis Frasz [report](#) a steady increase in the prevalence of artists working across disciplines and sectors, citing examples such as award-winning playwrights writing for television, musicians working across genres, and a prominent arts funder supporting many self-described multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary artists. Few studies in the U.S. capture how many artists work across disciplines, however. One large-scale [study](#) of Los Angeles- and San Francisco-based artists found that 60% of them practiced more than one art form.

This DataBrief draws on a [recent article](#) by Alexandre Frenette, Nathan Martin, and Steven

in artistic careers. In 2015, 2016, and 2017, the SNAAP survey asked 26,672 undergraduate alumni who were current or former professional artists the following yes/no question: “Since leaving your institution, has your artistic practice involved working across multiple art forms/disciplines?” Three-quarters (74%) of these arts alumni answered “yes.” Furthermore, alumni who currently work as professional artists are significantly more likely to report being multi-disciplinary than are those who no longer work in occupations where they create or perform art.

In the context of a labor market in which artists must oscillate between multiple roles and sectors—routinely holding more than one job, freelancing, teaching in the arts, becoming self-employed—prior [research](#) suggests that the more diverse the artists’ skill sets and resources, the better their career outcomes. While there are undoubtedly benefits to specialization, overall, “generalist” alumni who work across multiple art forms are more likely to stay in the arts well after graduation.

After controlling for demographic characteristics (e.g., gender) and other factors (e.g., type of school), this study finds that being a multi-disciplinary artist is significantly associated with a range of career activities and experiences (Figure 1). Compared to alumni who have not worked across different art forms or disciplines, multi-disciplinary artists are more likely to have ever been self-employed, a freelance worker, a teacher of the arts, or a manager of an arts-related organization. Multi-disciplinary artists are also more likely to currently make or perform art in their personal time.

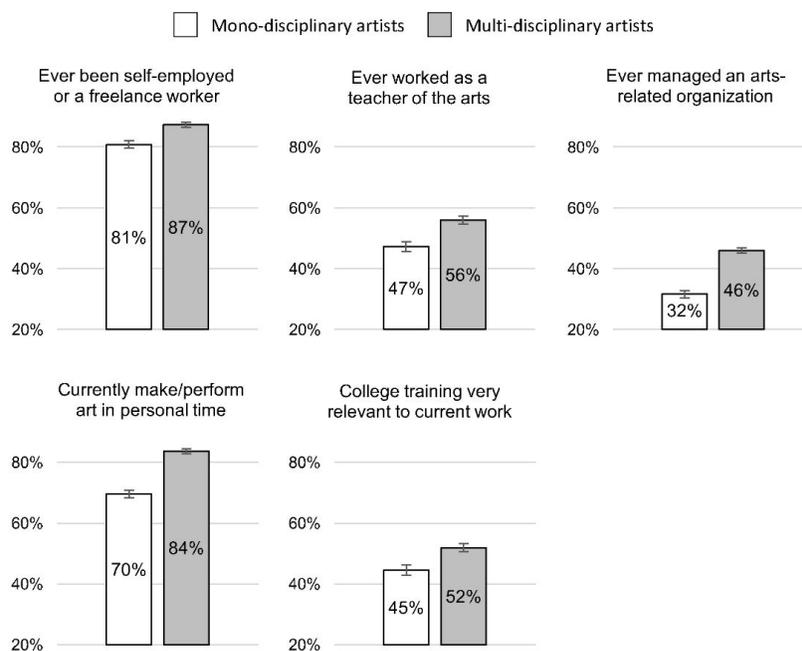


Figure 1. Adjusted percentages of arts alumni reporting selected career activities and experiences. The bars represent predictive margins and 95% confidence intervals for working (gray) or not working (white) across multiple art forms/disciplines in one’s artistic practice. *Data:* 26,672 undergraduate alumni who earned a bachelor’s degrees from a SNAAP institution between 1976 and 2017 and who have ever worked in an occupation as an artist. All models control for sociodemographic background, college experiences, undergraduate major, graduate degree attainment, and current work as a professional artist.

working across multiple art forms not only is connected to sustaining one's status as a professional artist, but also to feeling satisfied with one's education and career pathways. Among employed alumni, multi-disciplinary artists report that their postsecondary training is significantly more relevant to their current work. While multi-disciplinary artists are significantly more satisfied with various aspects of their current work—including their opportunity to be creative and to contribute to the greater good—they are also significantly less satisfied with the levels of job security and income that their current work provides (Figure 2). The latter finding suggests that in many instances working across disciplines might signify a reaction to scarcity (i.e., precariousness).

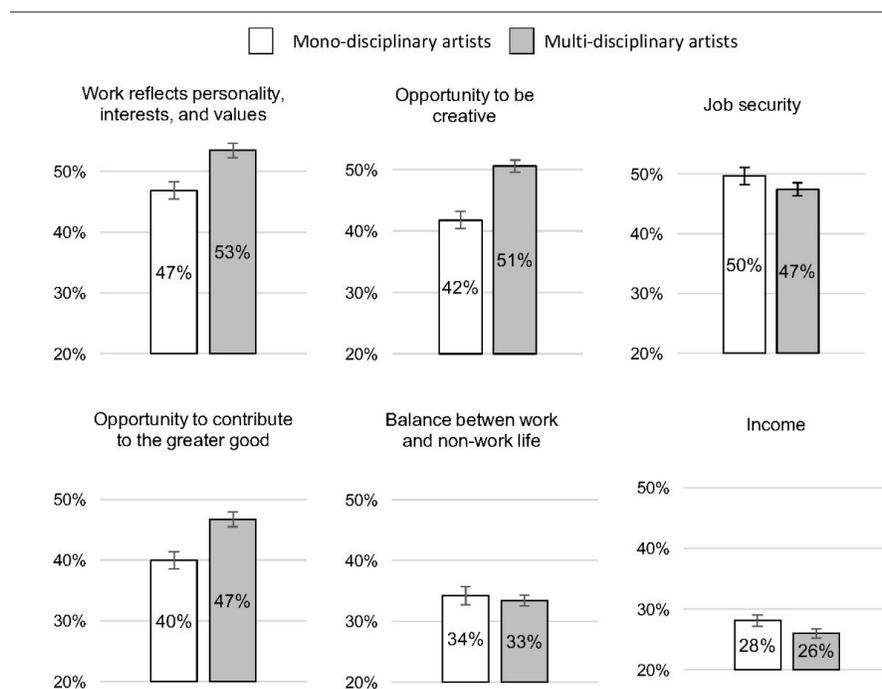


Figure 2. Adjusted percentages of arts alumni "very satisfied" with aspects of their current work. The bars represent predictive margins and 95% confidence intervals for working (gray) or not working (white) across multiple art forms/disciplines in one's artistic practice.

Data: See Figure 1 for details.

Therefore, much as multiple jobholding and self-employment are common strategies for artists to build and sustain careers in the arts, the article finds that incorporating multiple art forms into one's practice is also an important part of an artist's portfolio when it comes to consistently finding work that is related to one's college training and feeling satisfied with one's opportunity to be creative.

Educators, artists, scholars, and policymakers should be mindful of the opportunities and challenges associated with working across disciplines. With the exception of nascent intermedia programs, U.S. arts schools are generally organized around channeling students into specialized disciplines. Yet, evidence from this study and others suggests that successful careers in the arts will likely involve a broadening of skills and roles and a willingness and capacity to work across disciplines. The ability to work successfully as a multi-disciplinary artist will require new forms of access—to knowledge, mentorship, tools, and networks. And, such access will rarely be distributed equitably without the careful attention to smart policies—across education, philanthropy, and economic development—that lower the barriers to working across boundaries, borders, and disciplines.

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