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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.



In Their Own Words

Arts Alumni Describe What Postsecondary Institutions Do Well to Prepare Them for Future Work and Education

Prior SNAAP research looks at which arts alumni are able to break into a career in the arts, but what happens after these alumni get their start? In a forthcoming SNAAP report, Alexandre Frenette and Timothy J. Dowd ask: who stays and who leaves careers in the arts in the years after earning a postsecondary arts degree? They find that there are important predictors relating to personal characteristics, experience in their higher education program, and the impact of an uncertain arts labor market that affect whether alumni stay in or depart from a career in the arts. This DataBrief is the last in a [series of three](#) that focuses on particular findings from the larger report.

Debates about the ways arts education could better prepare students for future work emphasize nuts-and-bolts aspects of careers, such as [financial and business management skills](#), entrepreneurial skills, etc. However, such debates often overlook the wide range of skills arts alumni acquire or develop during school. We suspect that arts graduates consider themselves well-prepared for future work in terms of their development of artistic technique, technical skills, and more traditional liberal arts elements like critical thinking or

communication skills (see Frenette & Tepper, 2016). Our suspicions are borne out when turning to the collective responses of arts alumni to the following SNAAP survey prompt: “Please describe how your arts training is or is not relevant to your current work.” For this analysis, we limit the responses to a sub-sample of 50,322 alumni who are 30 years or older, who have ever worked in the arts, and who are currently employed to analyze how arts graduates see their arts training as relevant (or not) to their current work.

This DataBrief looks at the frequency of occurrences and co-occurrences of specific words in arts graduates’ answers to the prompt above. Figure 1 shows the most frequent co-occurrence of words offered by respondents, with the weight of lines connecting word pairs indicating the frequency of co-occurrence of the two words. The combination of “arts training” is most frequent (9,785 times), followed by “relevant training” (5,607) and “art training” (4,132). This makes sense given the words in the prompt, but even more interesting are the frequent combination of words that address arts content (i.e., those involving “music,” “design,” “graphic,” and “history”) and that address “critical thinking,” a core aspect of the liberal arts curriculum.

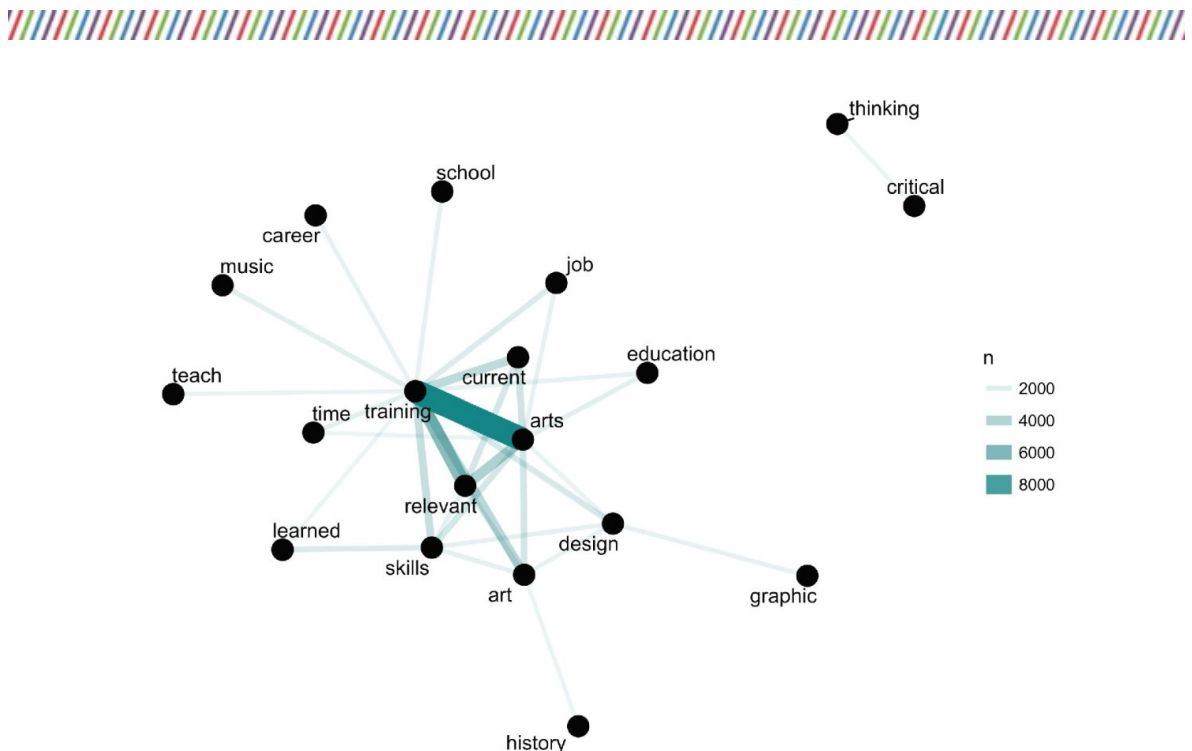


FIGURE 1: Co-Occurring Words Regarding How Arts Education is Relevant to Alumni

When we focus more closely on three-word combinations that end with words dealing with the knowledge gained while pursuing an arts curriculum (“skills,” “learned,” “relevant,” “training,” and “art”), an instructive constellation of topics emerges. This is shown in Figure 2 below. In the upper left corner of that figure, there is a linking of the more well-rounded traits that the liberal arts curriculum offers: leadership, presentation, communication, and interpersonal skills. Note that these are likely the abstract version of the concrete skills that their arts education would have

provided them about the real-world of arts-based work. That is, while higher arts education imparts to their alumni the ability to be entrepreneurial in the general sense, as discussed in the [next DataBrief](#), those same alumni are requesting training on the specifics of being entrepreneurial in arts-related occupations (how to network, how to handle debt and budgets, how to manage the business concerns associated with their particular arts-based work, etc.).

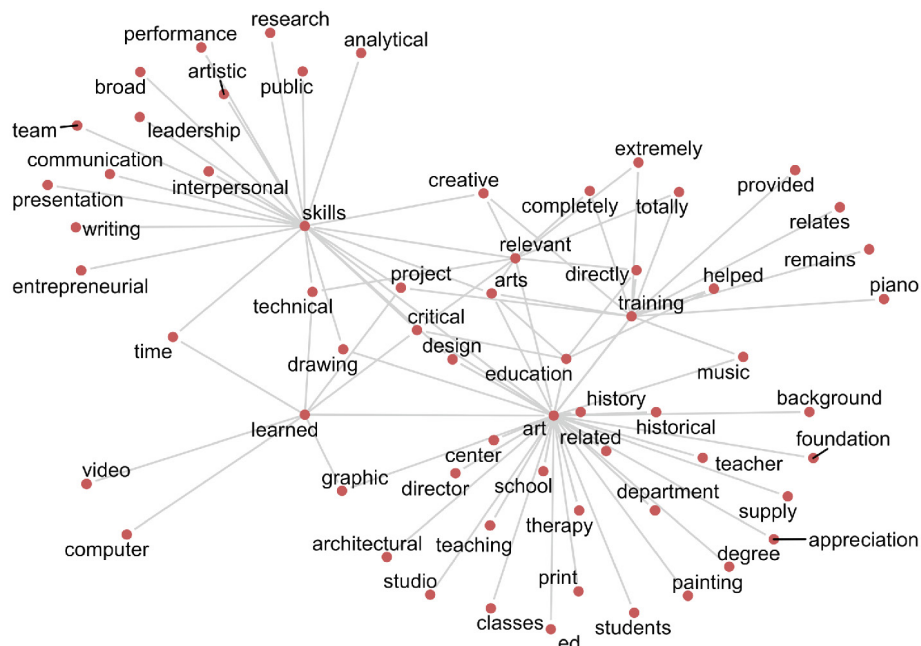


FIGURE 2: Most Frequent Word Combinations Used by Arts Alumni about Knowledge They Acquired

Meanwhile, the abstract skills depicted in the left-hand corner of Figure 2 are closely aligned with the intellectual (e.g., critical, technical, appreciation) and the artistic (e.g., piano, drawing, video, historical background) skills that the survey respondents maintain that they were provided by their respective alma mater. Arts alumni noted the valuable things they learned from an arts education – including arts-specific knowledge, intellectual skills, and general traits that are beneficial beyond the campus. Below are some illustrative responses:

Respondent 1: “*My academic training in different areas had helped me to develop my abilities as both a fine artist and an illustrator, and as a teacher.*”

Respondent 2: “*Critical thinking, attention to details, collaborations, passion for the craft, art history. These are important skills that I learnt (sic) that are still relevant*”

Respondent 3: “*My arts training helped me to develop skills that are transferrable to the fields of education and law.*”

Rather than downplay valuable aspects of their education such as artistic technique, critical thinking skills, and attention to detail, alumni also noted that higher arts education should also *add* more types of knowledge to its curriculum.

While artistic knowledge and transferable skills are valuable assets for negotiating uncertain careers, so too the alumni propose that specific business and managerial knowledge could give them an extra resource – an important resource that will not eliminate the precariousness found in

arts-based occupations, but one that will hopefully help them keep precarity at bay. While calls to adapt arts education to incorporate entrepreneurial and business skills continue to shape curricula, it does not seem that arts alumni are requesting a curriculum tightly adhering to career training. Instead, they acknowledge the importance of a liberal arts type of curriculum for the arts, but also want this curriculum to incorporate the specific knowledge needed for those careers that many students will one day pursue.

This DataBrief was prepared by Alexandre Frenette, Associate Director, Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University.



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snaap.indiana.edu

snaap@indiana.edu



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Our mailing address is:

PO BOX 303303
AUSTIN, TX 78703

CONTACT:

Sally Gaskill, SNAAP Consulting Director
gaskill@indiana.edu

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