

jenn lena snaaps it in july

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Jenn Lena is well known to readers around here. She's a guest blogger emeritus, has her own blog (What is the What) and is the author of *Banding Together*, an innovative book on music production. She's recently been working with Steven Tepper and Danielle Lindemann on another groundbreaking study of cultural industries – the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (<http://snaap.indiana.edu/>). It's an annual survey designed to track the lives of people who graduate with degrees in the arts. The team has agreed to write a few posts there fascinating work.

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Written by fabiorojas
July 8, 2012 at 12:01 am

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damnant quodnon intelligunt

with 11 comments

Hi, Orgheads!

I am really excited to join the fray again as a guest contributor, and thankful to the team for inviting me. In my other posts I'll be speaking on behalf of [Steven Tepper](#) and [Danielle Lindemann](#) (both of Vanderbilt University), my collaborators in the [Strategic National Arts Alumni Project \(SNAAP\)](#). This one's just me.

We've been asked to post on the state of arts graduates and artistic employment and skills in the contemporary U.S. I think the topic is timely and appropriate for this blog as we've discussed the value and relevance of an arts or humanities degree in the past. In particular, OrgTheory hosted a discussion in November titled, "[why job hungry students choose useless majors.](#)" The gist of Fabio's argument, I think, is that college students are practical credentialists who want a BA to avoid service sector and manual labor; the least talented of these are drawn to majors that require the least "academic ability," namely, the arts and humanities.

I won't comment on the claim that arts and humanities disciplines require less "academic ability" (except to say that I think it's bonkers), but I do want to remark upon the fiction that a firewall exists between math and science on the one hand, and the arts on the other.

Math, science, and art have a long and complicated history in which the three have only recently been sorted into a status array in which science and math (are perceived to) require technical skills and great intellect in order to provide useful products that benefit society (while the arts do not). We scientists bear a special responsibility to defend the arts because, to some degree, our work *is art* (at least in the very concrete sense that it involves the act of composition). As social scientists concerned with the quality of life on this planet, it is our burden to convey the degree to which the arts elevate our mundane existence, bring meaning, connect us to history, educate us, and so forth. Finally, I doubt anyone reading this post sits in a room that isn't chock full of consumer products that have been worked on and over by an art school graduate, from the digital interface on which you read these words, to the chair upon which you sit, and the commercial you will use to distract you from my finger wagging. In short, I'll start with the premise that the arts are useful, that artistic skills are a form of human capital, and that many employers need artists and their labor.

[If you're interested in learning more about the links between math to art, you might check out the syllabus for [this "Geometry in Art and Sculpture" class](#) at Dartmouth, or maybe the 2011 LACMA materials for educators on "Geometry and Art" which covers various topics including lines, repetition, shapes and planes, balance, perspective, proportion and includes a set of exercises to do with objects in the collection, including Diego Rivera's *Naturaleza muerta con pan y fruta* (1917), a quilt, and a David Smith sculpture. There's also a [whole NPR series on the topic: "Where Science Meets Art."](#)]

When you see me next, I'll be back to tell you what we've learned about unemployment rates among arts graduates. Until then, a few quotes from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks—a man who achieved excellence in both art and science:

- "A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black, because all things in nature are dark except where exposed by the light."
- "Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in."
- "~~It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.~~"
- "~~Life is pretty simple: You do some stuff. Most fails. Some works. You do more of what works. If it works big, others quickly copy it. Then you do something else. The trick is the doing something else.~~"

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unhappy robots

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In Fabio's November 2011 post about the profit-motivations of college students, he wrote about "[why people choose useless majors](#)":

In 1971, about 50% went to college to make money. In the 1990s, it's about 70%. Similarly, modern college students are more interested in financial stability, not philosophical issues. I haven't been able to find more recent data, but I'd be surprised if that trend reversed.

As responsible social scientists, we want to measure the merits of higher education in part on how well it fulfills the expectations of the clientele: students, possibly their parents/guardians, and employers. If students enter college hoping to gain financial stability, and a college degree in some major fails to provide this, we might reasonably decide students need to be warned, and majors need to be redesigned. However, while Fabio cites research indicating students increasingly value financial stability, research on arts majors suggests they may be the exception to the rule.

On-going research on double majors and creativity, done by our colleague Richard Pitt and Steven Tepper, provides an illustrative contrast between art majors and others: while only 35% of art majors describe income as "very important" or "essential" to their careers, a full 64% of engineering majors describe income in this fashion [as I understand it, this data is from their [Surdna-funded study](#) (see "[Double Majors and Creativity](#)")].

Respondents don't complete [our SNAAP survey](#) until after they graduate from a participating program, and we don't ask them to tell us what they thought they wanted (financial stability/high income, or something else) when they entered college. However, we do have some information on how debt impacted the job choices of arts graduates, and how income impacts their level of job and program satisfaction.

Among the 33,801 arts alumni who completed our 2011 survey, 16% said that student loan debt had a major impact on their career and education decisions. The median individual student loan debt was highest for those with MArch and MFA degrees, and lowest for most bachelor's degrees (B.A., BArch, BM, BS) and the Ph.D. No degree group had a median individual student loan debt above \$25,000. (There's a [great infographic of this up on the SNAAPshot under the "debt and earnings" tab.](#))

We discovered that about a third of former professional artists cited debt, including student loan debt, as the reason they quit and sought other work. Our analysis suggests that debt may not impede individuals from becoming professional artists, but it may prevent them from *remaining* professional artists. Any amount of debt over \$10,000 significantly decreases both the likelihood of getting the type of job one wants after graduating, and the number of years one spends working as a professional artist. But then when we controlled for career intent (looking only at those who *intended* to become professional artists), we did see that high levels of debt (over 60K) were significantly negatively associated with the likelihood of becoming a professional artist.

We then looked at the relationship between income level and job satisfaction. Danielle and Steven cooked up a great table of results. The left column lists current primary jobs of arts graduates, listed from highest to lowest with respect to the percent of alumni that earned more than \$50,000 (this is personal income) in 2010. On the right, you'll see a list, from highest to lowest, of the occupations of arts graduates, based on the percent that indicated they were satisfied with their current primary job.

Percentage of Arts Alumni Earning More Than \$50,000 in 2010[1] and Percent Satisfied[2] with Selected Current Primary Jobs

Percent Earning More Than \$50,000 in 2010 (By Current Primary Job, Highest to Lowest)	Percent Indicating Satisfaction with Primary Job (By Current Primary Job, Highest to Lowest)
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Architect (64%)	Dancer or Choreographer (97%)
Multimedia Artist ^[3] (53%)	Fine Artist (94%)
Arts Educator ^[4] (50%)	Musician (93%)
Film/TV/Video Artist (50%)	Arts Educator (92%)
Designer/Illustrator/Art Director ^[5] (49%)	Museum or Gallery Worker (91%)
Theater and Stage Director or Producer (39%)	Theater and Stage Director or Producer (90%)
Arts Administrator or Manager ^[6] (36%)	Writer, Author, or Editor (90%)
Musician ^[7] (33%)	Arts Administrator or Manager (89%)
Writer, Author, or Editor (31%)	Designer/Illustrator/Art Director (89%)
Museum or Gallery Worker ^[8] (28%)	Architect (88%)
Actor (26%)	Film/TV/Video Artist (88%)
Fine Artist (22%)	Multimedia Artist (88%)
Dancer or Choreographer (9%)	Actor (87%)

^[1]Income is self-reported individual annual income in 2010, excluding spousal income or interest on jointly-owned assets. Income was collected as a categorical variable in \$10,000 increments. Table includes only those respondents who reported their 2010 incomes.

^[2]“Somewhat” or “very” satisfied (versus “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied”).

^[3]Includes animators.

^[4]Includes K-12 arts educators, higher education arts educators, private teachers of the arts, and other arts educators.

^[5]Includes graphic designers, illustrators, art directors, interior designers, web designers, and other designers.

^[6]Includes those who work in development, marketing, and box office sales.

^[7]Includes instrumental and vocal musicians, conductors, composers, and arrangers.

^[8]Includes curators.

One of the things worth noticing in this table is that dancers and choreographers have the lowest percentage of arts graduates earning over \$50,000 per year, but have the highest percentage of members who are satisfied with their occupation. It’s possible this happens because dancers tend to have the lowest economic expectations, so these graduates are less fazed by lower levels of income.

It’s also possible that this is further evidence that arts graduates are less likely use financial benchmarks to evaluate their career, and there is ample research on which to build this claim. Danielle thought you might be especially interested in Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1968, 522), who, drawing on Allport, Vernon, and Linzey (1960, 12), find that arts students as a group hold values and norms—such as a commitment to aesthetic value more so than economic value—which distinguish them from other students of the same age, sex, and level of education.

As you see, we’ve found something similar, e.g., that those who work primarily as dancers earn comparatively little money but are overall the most satisfied with their jobs.

If arts majors and artists do not place great value on their salary, but end up satisfied in their careers, I think that’s a good reason for us to stop exclusively using salary when evaluating these majors/jobs. If only a small percentage of arts majors are steered away from work in the arts by debt and expected income, we

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probably shouldn't treat financial success is a major driver of the choice of major or occupation, at least for arts majors.

In short, with respect to arts graduates, we should stop obsessing over which college majors make us rich, and start caring about which majors provide people with the jobs and lives they desire.

Citations:

Allport, G.W., Vernon, P.E., & Lindzey, G. (1960). *Manual: Study of values*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Getzels, J.W. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1968). On the roles, values and performance of future artists: A conceptual and empirical exploration. *Sociological Quarterly*. 9, 516-30.

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Written by Jenn Lena
July 18, 2012 at 1:56 pm

Posted in [culture](#), [education](#), [guest bloggers](#), [uncategorized](#)

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paid in full

with 12 comments

One of the core disputes about arts and humanities degrees is whether they have *value*, and if so, what might comprise that value.* There are a few obvious definitions of value in this context:

- Art degrees produce artists.
- Art degrees produce incomes. This could be true in the sense that they equip workers to produce objects called “art” which are sold on a market. It could also be true in the sense that Fabio suggested in his November post: bachelor’s degrees are credentials that employers value, even if they are completed in humanities majors.
- Art degrees reflect the acquisition of skills that employers require.

Our survey can’t provide the definitive proof that arts degrees function in any of these ways, but we can provide you with some suggestive evidence.

Do art schools produce artists?

Let’s start with the question of professional work and identity: do arts degrees produce artists? The answer is complicated. In our 2010 survey, 43% of arts graduates had never worked as a professional artist. For some of these non-artists, events conspired to prevent them from pursuing their occupational goals, but between 10 and 20% of students in most arts disciplines (in 2011) *never planned* to pursue art as a profession.

Those most likely to work as professional artists at some point were majors in design, dance, music performance, and theater. The largest gaps (between those who intended to become artists and have never worked in this capacity) are among creative and other writing majors (28% gap) and architecture (14% gap). Of course, the higher a student’s degree, the more likely they are to work as a professional artist: 86% of those with an arts-related master’s degree do so, compared with 71% of those with an arts bachelor’s degree.

Why get an arts degree and then not become an artist?

How do we make sense out of students with an arts degree who do not pursue a career as a professional artist (and/or never intended to)? Were they simply misinformed about what work as an artist involved? Unmotivated after years of indolent drug use and midnight graffiti sessions on the quad? Perhaps, but graduates rated their institutional experience really highly even if they did not use their arts degree to become a professional artist. Overall, 77% of arts graduates in the 2011 survey said they would (definitely or probably) still attend their institution if they could start over again (this number was 76% in 2010), and 88% would recommend their institution to another student like themselves.

This simply doesn’t make much sense, especially if arts graduates paying attention to reporting on high unemployment rates, wage penalties, job insecurity, or if they read OrgTheory and learn that their peers think they’re less academically able.

The answer is that arts graduates might have a better understanding than we do of the skills they can gain in arts programs, and the value they have in various occupations.

Many of those working in jobs outside of the arts continue to utilize their creative capacities within their work. Four fifths of employed graduates say that their arts training has relevance to the job in which they currently spend the majority of their time. As we would expect, this number is higher among professional artists: 97% of arts alumni who spend the majority of their time working in careers within the arts describe their training as having relevance to this work. But 62% of those working in fields outside of the arts make the same claim.

Graduates also enjoyed specific aspects of their programs. 93% of art history majors were satisfied with their

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opportunity to take non-arts classes, 72% of arts education majors were satisfied with career advising, 87% of fine and studio arts majors were satisfied with their freedom and encouragement to take risks, and 91% of dance majors were satisfied with their opportunities to perform.

Drilling more deeply into the facets of arts programs enjoyed by non-artists required that we turn to the qualitative responses to the survey.

What exactly are these “useful” skills you get in arts majors and programs?

Some of the answers to this question are reliably true of most college graduates: the ability to work independently and in groups, knowledge about careers and information about how to get them, and opportunities to develop new talents and interests. But one of the surprising things we realized, as we started to look at what non-artists especially had to say about the value of their arts education, is that the job they worked was a poor predictor of how relevant they thought their education was to their work.

We asked arts graduates: “Please describe how your arts training is or is not relevant to your current work.” 81% of alumni who wrote valid responses to this question characterized facets of their artistic training as being useful to their current occupational endeavors. From these answers, we selected a few, matched by job, to illustrate that the jobs arts graduates held did not dictate whether they felt their arts training was relevant to their current work. Danielle Lindemann went through these to find out what skills non-artists use on the job that they learned from arts programs.

Work Area	<u>Training Relevant to Current Job</u>	<u>Training Not Relevant to Current Job</u>
Sales	“I work in a luxury retail sales environment, having to utilize memorization skills, team building skills (like as an ensemble) and also mild performance skills to work in difficult customer service situations.”	“I’m in auto/home insurance sales. Nothing related to what I spent my time in college doing.”
Food Prep.	“I work for the [] in charge of the cafe. I work alone and my personality, along with the training I received at [], has helped me in all the jobs I’ve worked with in dealing with the public.”	“I am a cashier. Sometimes I make sandwiches. This is not radio. This is not art. It is money.”
Law	“Many of the skills I gained as a theatre artist are transferrable to the courtroom, as well as in legal writing. As an actor you learn to think like other people, which is the same thing a good lawyer must be able to do. Of course communication and speaking skills are also helpful in the legal world. Generic values such as work ethic, cooperation, etc. are also easily adapted to many fields.”	“I’m a lawyer. Arts is creative. Law is thinking.”
Accounting	“In my arts training I learned a lot about teamwork and diplomacy, which are skills that apply to any occupation. I also learned self-discipline and how to apply a critical eye (ear) to my own work. “	“I do accounting... a music degree simply has not applied thus far.”

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Starbucks
Barista

Starbucks because it allows me to connect with customers while at work, figure out how to connect with them more easily through my music. Plus by working at Starbucks it allows me to get money so that I can continue pursuing my Masters in Music and hopefully obtain a more relevant arts job in the future. “

“I am preparing coffee and blended beverages at Starbucks, which does not utilize any musical ability or knowledge of music industry laws or standard business practices.”

The job in which an arts graduate works does not determine the degree to which they feel their arts training is relevant to their work. Some Starbucks Baristas think the skills they gained at art school help them at work, while others do not. One continuity across affirmative answers is that arts education gave them the ability to connect with people, to perform the skills of empathy, diplomacy, and teamwork.

What, then, is the value of an arts education?

- Clearly, art degrees produce artists, although they also produce non-artists. Most interestingly, arts degrees leave most non-artists satisfied and prepared for work.
- Art degrees produce incomes, although artists do tend to suffer longer and more frequent periods of unemployment than many other professionals, and experience a wage penalty compared to other artists with comparable credentials (see Menger 1999 on this).
- Art degrees also reflect skills acquisition. In fact, it seems arts degrees provide a wider (more broadly useful, that is) skill set than we realized. However, the characteristic that predicts the satisfaction of non-artists with their arts degrees is probably not what work they currently do (if this table is to be believed). Instead, the answer probably lies elsewhere.

What are the take-aways? I'm afraid this is another episode of me telling you that any simple assumptions you've got are probably wrong. Arts graduates are probably not as "academically limited" as you imagine, and likely use (on average) more chemistry, math, and geometry than you do at work. Arts graduates are not as poor as you think, nor are they necessarily unhappy when they bear the burden of low income and high debt. (Of course, that's not to argue that they don't deserve more money, nor is it to defend our current debt-addicted educational system.) Finally, some arts graduates never become artists, and some never intended to do so. Despite this, they largely remain satisfied with their educational experience and institutions and most would recommend the same choices to others like themselves. If we want to understand the skills that arts graduates offer to employers, we won't do ourselves any favors by limiting the search to particular occupational categories or jobs. Nor should we limit our view to only practicing artists.

*This post used to begin with a quotation from a famous person.

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