

Elizabeth Kramer | Arts grads have gifts that lift our city

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I remember having some reservations when I made the commitment to major in journalism in college, knowing that my earning potential wouldn't be as high as in other fields. Even as I look back on that time now, given my decision to stick with it and work as an arts reporter, I recognize that it has definitely been tested.

I don't regret either choosing journalism or my commitment to the arts, which enriched and shaped my young life and continues to do so.

So, it was no surprise to me when I recently read about a study that surveyed 13,600 graduates from 154 U.S. public and private college arts programs, conservatories and arts high schools. Their take on their own decisions about majoring in the arts echoed my own. According to the report, "In general, arts graduates are happy with their training and have few regrets."

But the study, "Forks in the Road: The Many Paths of Arts Alumni," by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, working with Indiana University School of Education's Center for Postsecondary Research, went much further -- and shows that these people don't fit the starving-artist stereotype. It showed how an arts education leads to gainful employment and that these graduates can be a strong support system to the local arts ecology. According to the data collected in 2010, 92 percent of arts alumni who wished to work currently are doing so, and more than 80 percent of them found employment soon after graduating.

These graduates also reported that what they learned in school has helped them in their current jobs, whether as art directors at advertising firms or in such positions as managers, lawyers and health care professionals, among others. Nearly 55 percent reported that their training in the arts is pertinent to their primary job.

The drawback was job security: Only one-third indicated that they were satisfied with that part of their employment.

In past columns, I've written about creativity being crucial to the competitiveness of our local economy. To an extent, this study bears out the ways arts graduates take entrepreneurial actions that contribute to that economy. In the study, nearly 15 percent reported having started their own company or organization and supported arts groups. These arts majors are 18 times more likely to volunteer for such organizations (37 percent) than the population at large (2 percent).

What does this information mean for this community? It gives us a reason to look more closely at what arts alumni are doing here today and how that contributes to Louisville's ability to attract new businesses --

especially those more rooted in the technology-based economy with jobs that pay better, but also require employees with more education and sharp critical thinking skills.

It also gives us a reason to look at the arts education being offered in the region now, and at what these institutions can do to turn out skilled and enterprising arts majors.

These days, the numbers of students earning visual and performing arts degrees are up. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred rose nearly 23 percent between the 2002-03 and 2007-08 academic years, and the number of master's degrees rose by 21 percent.

There are a few plans in play that could bolster the local numbers of graduates. For more than five years, the University of Louisville has been working to establish a master of fine arts program, which has been slated to go into Museum Plaza. Given that the latter project is on hold, there has been no official word of when that program will start. But local artists are getting impatient, knowing that the presence of such a program could attract internationally reputable artists to teach here, show their work here and help raise the bar on the quality of work shown around town.

Also, the Kentucky School of Art, which makes its home at Spalding University, has finished its first year there and is looking to grow. In both instances, these programs have the potential to attract more creative types here.

They and arts programs up and running at other colleges and universities -- Bellarmine University, Indiana University Southeast, you name it -- will need to do more than offer first-rate arts courses, however. They need to put serious focus on preparing their graduates for a life of enterprise, self-employment and entrepreneurship. That move would demonstrate a commitment to bolstering their students' successes.

But there will need to be more support for these creative participants to more fully contribute to the local economy after graduation. Public and private institutions will need to not only recognize them but offer some support, even if that comes simply as forums to discuss how to integrate them more fully into the economy. If that doesn't happen, then those people could decide to move to greener pastures, stripping the local economy of its creative work force of the future. And while those one-time arts majors likely might not have regrets, Louisville's leaders could.

To learn more about the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project and read the report, visit <http://snaap.indiana.edu>.

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