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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.



Why Do Some Artists Leave the Arts?

Research by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), [Americans for the Arts](#), and [others](#) confirms the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and culture sector—since mid-March 2020, the pandemic has (at least temporarily) cost the U.S. arts economy millions of jobs as well as billions of dollars in lost revenue. This DataBrief provides some insight on demographic groups whose artistic careers might be disproportionately affected by the current conditions. Building on the most recent [SNAAP report](#) regarding *who* leaves the arts in the years following graduation, this DataBrief considers the specific reasons *why* arts graduates leave the arts. Since the recent SNAAP report revealed significant demographic inequalities – in particular, women and people of color are more likely to leave the arts than are men and white alumni – the sections below focus especially on demographic differences regarding why alumni leave the arts. Although SNAAP data were collected several years prior to the onset of COVID-19, it is highly probable that the pandemic will intensify the existing

inequalities uncovered in the following data analysis.

Major Reasons

The SNAAP survey asks arts alumni who are not currently working as professional artists why they either stopped working in the arts or chose not to pursue work as an artist after graduation. Table 1 depicts the top six reasons selected by undergraduate arts alumni, by field of study. Among the 12,924 arts alumni who reported leaving the arts, by far the most commonly cited reason is for “higher pay or steadier income in other fields” (selected by 61% of respondents). Responses vary slightly by major:

- Arts graduates from fine/studio arts and media arts (majors with a higher than average percentage of non-white alumni) are especially likely to select debt and lack of access to networks.
- Art history/education/administration and performing arts alumni (majors numerically dominated by women) are most likely to select leaving the arts due to family reasons.

Table 1. Reasons why arts alumni stopped working in the arts, by major

2015-17 SNAAP data; undergraduate alumni only.

Major	Higher pay or steadier income in other fields	Artistic work not available	Debt (including student loans)	Change in interests	Lack of access to networks and people	Family-related reasons
Architecture/ Design n = 2,382	52%	37%	23%	27%	25%	21%
Art History/ Education/ Administration n = 1,766	57%	25%	22%	29%	21%	27%
Fine/Studio Arts n = 3,169	64%	43%	36%	21%	35%	19%
Media Arts n = 1,705	62%	47%	37%	24%	38%	15%
Performing Arts n = 3,902	67%	34%	26%	37%	25%	26%
Total (12,924)	7,945 (61%)	4,802 (37%)	3,714 (29%)	3,699 (29%)	3,695 (29%)	2,834 (22%)

Note: based on responses to the question, "Why did you stop working in an occupation as an artist/choose not to pursue work as an artist?" Alumni could select more than one reason for leaving the arts. Two other, less frequently selected options included "current city not conducive to artistic career" (19%) and "lack of social support from family and friends" (9%).

Gender and Parental Status

SNAAP data also reveal gendered patterns of leaving the arts (see Table 2). Analyses show that men are 34% more likely than women to name pay as a primary motivator for leaving the arts and 34% less likely than women to name family as a reason for leaving the arts, even after controlling for other demographic characteristics and educational experiences that might influence career paths.

Gender and parental status combine to shape why people leave the arts:

- Men with at least one dependent child (under 18 years old) are more likely to leave the arts for family reasons than men without dependent children.
- Women with dependent children are less likely to leave the arts in pursuit of higher pay than women without dependent children.

These findings are consistent with research on family and work (across arts and non-arts fields), which finds that women are more likely than men to opt out of career paths due to family reasons. Faced with “[competing devotions](#)” between paid work and care work, women are more likely to report leaving their jobs and taking on more home-based labor. There is [evidence](#) that the [pandemic](#) has amplified these trends. Children are a major predictor of leaving careers because of “family concerns,” and these concerns are gendered—prior studies show that women “[opt out](#)” of careers while men pursue jobs that pay better as they take on more responsibility for the family’s financial stability.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and, in many cases, [exacerbated](#) longstanding gendered divisions of labor within the home, there is reason for concern that the proportion of women in the arts—particularly women with children or other caregiving responsibilities—will decrease during the pandemic.

Table 2. Reasons why arts alumni stopped working in the arts, by major
2015-17 SNAAP data; undergraduate alumni only.

Gender Identity and Parental Status	Higher Pay Selected	Family-related Reasons Selected	Higher Pay and Family-related Reasons Selected
Men without children (n = 2,840)	64%	12%	8%
Men with children (n = 1,773)	70%	27%	19%
Women without children (n = 5,840)	61%	14%	7%
Women with children (n = 3,786)	56%	39%	17%

Note: “With children” refers to alumni who answered “1” or higher to this question: How many children (under 18) live with you or are dependent on your income for support?

Race and Socioeconomic Status

In addition to gender and parental status, analyses show that race and socioeconomic status shape why alumni leave the arts:

- White arts graduates are 15% less likely to name debt (including student loans) and 17% less likely to cite lack of access to networks and people as informing their decision to leave the arts than do non-white arts alumni.
- First-generation college graduates are 59% more likely to cite debt (including student loans) as a reason for leaving the arts than non-first-generation graduates.

These findings are concerning for racial diversity and equity in the arts economy, as social distancing brought on by the pandemic likely created additional challenges for arts students and alumni to develop professional networks. In addition, [estimates](#) suggest that approximately half of U.S. households lost at least some employment income since March 2020, and such loss of income has been tied to growing [concerns over debt](#). While government initiatives helped relieve some debt by allowing borrowers to reduce or suspend mortgage payments and federal student loans repayments, there is a serious risk that these financial concerns will disproportionately impact non-white and first-generation college graduates for some time.

More research is needed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis are reshaping the arts economy, including how arts graduates are navigating a changing economy. Pre-pandemic evidence from SNAAP data suggests that the current conditions will continue to pose particular challenges for women, people of color, and first-generation college graduates. Arts school leadership and policymakers must consider how to ensure a more robust and equitable arts economy for arts students and alumni.

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