

HuffPost Arts

Posted: 02/09/2012

The Artist as Advocate

By John M. Eger

Professor of Communications and Public Policy and Director of the Creative Economy Initiative
at San Diego State University

Picasso once complained: "Everyone wants to understand painting. Why don't they try to understand the song of the birds?" He once is alleged to say he would've been a writer but he's not; he's a painter, so don't ask him to explain anything about his work.

What an artist does, what a painting or sculpture says, is not something most artists want to explain in any great detail. The work speaks for itself. What art's role is in society, however, is not easy to do either. Talking about the relationship art has to economic prowess is not easy at all. Not for the artist. Not for the business executive.

Yet, the future of business is art some say.

There is little doubt that creativity, however defined, is the most sought after skill most corporate CEOs say will be in greatest demand. Indeed, "U.S. employers rate creativity and innovation among the top five skills that will increase in importance over the next five years, and rank it among the top challenges facing CEOs," the Conference Board [reported](#) after an in-depth study. Therein lies the conflict.

It could be that all the current interest in marrying art and business will be good, indeed essential for business. But not necessarily for art or the artist. Artists will feel the pressure to explain their art to non-artists, join the business establishment, and make the marriage work for the benefit of the country's economic prowess.

Or will they?

The artist who wants to be left alone, to create their work, to use the tools of their craft to say what they feel will always be there for those who choose that M.O. as a way of life. For the other 99 percent, -- particularly the art or design graduate -- they just want a job and want to make a living. Frankly, not every graduate is destined to be a great artist or performer.

"The myth of the starving artist is just that, a myth," [according](#) to a recent report of the **Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP)**. But for many making a living is hard. The same study found that, "over half hold at least two jobs concurrently; 18 percent are working three or more jobs," and few had the business or marketing skills they needed to start their own business or even to launch their careers.

Art leaders, educators and policymakers need to better understand that the status quo for arts education is missing a few things; specifically, the importance of business savvy and the increasing demand for arts-trained executives. Fortunately, many schools are providing entrepreneurship training -- or at least beginning to do so -- and general business training for art and music majors.

Something else is happening in business and engineering schools alike, i.e., they are integrating arts and sciences to create a more well rounded curriculum but also, laying the foundation for the workforce most corporate executives say will be most in demand in the so-called new economy.

More and more we are beginning to see [that](#) "arts-training is crucial to developing creativity." Creativity leads to innovation, and innovation is America's only path to prosperity and, certainly, survival.