



Data, Pressing Needs, and • Biggest Challenges: Insights from the Field

• JUNE 2022

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• **STRATEGIC
NATIONAL
ARTS ALUMNI
PROJECT**

• *Tracking the
lives & careers of
arts graduates*

Prepared by

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Contents

- Acknowledgements..... 3
- Introduction 5
- Data & Information Resources Used 6
 - Market demand, a macro perspective..... 6
 - Market demand, a micro perspective..... 7
 - Student outcomes..... 7
- Needing to Shift Narratives..... 9
 - Changing the narrative of “success” 9
 - Changing systems..... 10
- The Next Five Years..... 11

Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our gratitude to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, whose support enabled this report. We sincerely thank everyone who generously shared their experiences and insights with us in the focus groups and interviews:

Neil Alper, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Northeastern University

José Antonio Bowen, PhD, Principal, Bowen Innovation Group and Senior Fellow, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Lauren Cross, PhD, Program Coordinator & Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Art and Design Studies, University of North Texas

Sarah B. Cunningham, PhD, Vice Provost, Strategic Partnerships, Rhode Island School of Design

Antonio C. Cuyler, PhD, Director of the MA Program & Associate Professor of Arts Administration, Florida State University and Visiting Associate Professor at University of Michigan.

Adrian Daly, DMA, Provost, Colburn School

Andrew Davis, PhD, Dean, McGovern College of the Arts, University of Houston

Alex Fisher, Operations Manager, Pratt Institute

Alexandre Frenette, PhD, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Associate Director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy, Vanderbilt University

Casey Grambo, Associate Director of Development Communications and Alumni Affairs at David Geffen School of Drama at Yale / Yale Repertory Theatre

Gabriel Harp, Director of Research and Creative Practice Development, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Kathryn Heidemann, Senior Vice President, Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty + Chief Operating Officer/Chief Academic, President-Elect, Cleveland Institute of Art

E. Patrick Johnson, PhD, Dean, School of Communication, Northwestern University

Joanne Kersh, PhD, Director of Research, Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design (AICAD)

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Richard Paulsen, PhD, Assistant Professor of Economics, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

Rachel Roberts, Director, Institute for Music Leadership; Associate Professor, Music Leadership; Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester

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Jill Sonke, PhD, Director, University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine

Robert B. Townsend, Director, Humanities, Arts, and Culture Programs, American Academy of Arts and Sciences

Holly Unruh, PhD, Executive Director, Arts Research Institute, University of California-Santa Cruz

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Introduction

The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), approaching the major milestone of 20 years since its inception, is taking a renewed look at how best to achieve its mission of delivering to a wide range of stakeholders clear, reliable data on alumni outcomes. For over a decade, SNAAP data and research have provided extensive insights into the careers and lives of alumni of arts, design, and other artistically creative programs. SNAAP data have also provided alumni perspectives on the quality of and deficiencies in their educational experiences. Collectively, SNAAP data, and the new knowledge generated from it, have helped institutions of higher education and other training institutions to continuously improve student experiences and have helped an array of stakeholders to develop data-informed insights on ways to amplify the work of artists, designers, and other creatives in the labor force and their contributions to society.

Amid the fast-evolving conditions of the last few years, SNAAP has engaged with a broad cross-section of higher education arts and design stakeholders to discuss the field's current and future information needs. A series of focus groups and interviews were held with scholars and higher education professionals in fall 2021. This report provides a synthesis of insights from these conversations. Discussion topics spanned pressing data needs for researchers and administrators, valuable data sources, and perspectives on the biggest challenges ahead for educational institutions training artists and designers.

Vitality, these conversations highlight field-wide challenges and opportunities for administrators, institutions, and researchers—and the information used and still needed—in efforts to continually bolster student and alumni experiences, and to re-envision new ways and systems of learning and working.

To learn about the pressing information needs within post-secondary arts and design fields, focus groups were asked:

- what data and information sources do you regularly use to understand and communicate about the career outcomes for graduates, in general or specifically from your institution?
- what is the most useful data for your understanding of students' experience with your institution, or with their alma maters?
- considering the fast-evolving academic environment, what do you see as the most pressing information needs for higher education leaders regarding bolstering the educational experiences of and outcomes for their arts and design students?
- what do you see as the most pressing challenges facing the arts and design field of post-secondary education over the next five years?

Data & Information Resources Used

Our focus group participants and interviewees highlighted a variety of data sources and data-informed resources that they use in their work, both to advocate for their students and programs, as well as to inform efforts for continuous improvement:

Market demand, a macro perspective

One of the most prominent information needs expressed by participants was for better insight and foresight into market demand for the skills, training, and experiences that their institutions provide, and might impart to their students. Participants described using market-demand data for multiple purposes, including:

- Demonstrating the value and relevance of current programs to higher education administrators, educational governing authorities, and policy experts
- Providing evidence in support of program innovations within the institutional approval procedures
- Communicating with prospective students and their families about the value of arts, design, or media degrees
- Examining career choices and outcomes of alumni
- Illustrating large-scale shifts in education and career paths for a wide variety of creative professions

Focus group participants discussed using several sources that could provide an array of relevant data on market demand in creative professions, many of them publicly available data sources and reports. Namely, these sources include public, federal data sources, such as the Current Population Survey, the American Community Survey, and datasets provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. State-level and regional-level studies drawing upon these federal sources, as well as regional sources of data, can also provide insights on the creative economy and creative sectors. Regional and institutional studies, such as the now long-standing Otis Report on the Creative Economy¹ that focuses on California, were noted for their usefulness both inside and outside of the area of their geographic focus. Participants emphasized how imperative these data and related studies are for providing vital macro-level insights and a compelling evidence base to inform program design and advocacy. Professional publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education*, along with alternative sources like *The Creative Independent*, were also named as important sources of information.

¹ <https://www.otis.edu/creative-economy> (Accessed March 18, 2022)

Market demand, a micro perspective

The need for micro-level information about market demand was also described as a pressing need in order to better shape post-secondary arts and design education. Direct input from current employers is vital to revealing immediate pathways for students' early career advancement. Such input can be used to improve direct placements through informing better ways to train, advise or otherwise connect students to future employment. Some participants reported taking stock of employment trends by scanning, aggregating, and distilling job postings and related resources, a service provided by private consultants. Importantly, participants noted the importance of investing in and developing direct relationships with potential employers, as well as larger-scale industry collaborations through standing advisory boards or other means of communicating with prospective employers. Participants use insights from potential employers for refining and evolving curricula, in both a reactive manner responding to demonstrated market needs, as well as a proactive manner, forecasting future employer needs, new approaches to work, and new types of jobs that draw upon the skills and perspectives of arts and design alumni.

Some administrators, notably those from community colleges, highlighted the value of state and local labor data for revealing regional trends that allow curricula to be aligned with employer needs. Along with monitoring large-scale job posting websites, administrators rely on advisory committees that inform their institutions on what employers in their region are looking for in the next generation of employees.

Active alumni networks were also discussed as vital to micro-level information about market demand. Though participants readily identified the challenges of activating alumni networks, they emphasized that *any level of authentic activation* — meaningful engagements with alumni beyond simply soliciting donations — can result in critically valuable and actionable “anecdotal”. Participants discussed the importance of anecdotal to informing curricular offerings and placement efforts, especially during our current period of dynamic social change.

“Clear vehicles for the voice and experience of alumni can be very pivotal in moving the reality of conversations happening amongst the gatekeepers of current systems.” - *Focus group participant*

Student outcomes

Administrators described the focus on career outcomes as a relatively recent standard of success among arts and design institutions. In addition to using SNAAP data, researchers and arts school administrators who do want to know about alumni outcomes primarily turn to two federal data sources, the American Community Survey² and the National Survey of College Graduates.³ The American Community Survey includes data on undergraduate majors, as well as general information on graduate degree attainment; the National Survey of College

² <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs> (Accessed March 18, 2022)

³ <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvygrads/> (Accessed June 9, 2022)

Graduates includes data on undergraduate and graduate majors, including the visual and performing arts.

It was noted in each conversation that few departments and institutions use systematic strategies to track alumni career trajectories. There is a notable shortfall in detailed data available to arts administrators and researchers. Participants reported relying heavily on SNAAP data to understand career outcomes of their graduates. SNAAP has proved integral to revealing substantial institutional detail about student outcomes, as well as providing context for institutional data by comparison with national-level, peer institution data. The Gallup Alumni Survey, which is not specific to arts and design, was named as another resource used to capture broad data on alumni.

When institutions themselves are collecting data, common forms include the following:

- Exit surveys that are typically organized by a central university office that tend to focus on macro insight about the university or college. While some participants shared that their own institution collected useful student outcomes data, many commented that accessing the data and working with central offices has become harder as support staff have been steadily reduced.
- First-destination employment placement surveys, run either on an ad-hoc basis from individual departments or programs, or supported by institutional research or alumni offices
- Alumni surveys sent at key milestones post-degree—6 months and 1-year to 2-years post-degree, but typically not after two years—run on an ad-hoc basis from individual departments or programs, or supported by institutional research or alumni offices
- Word of mouth, alumni townhalls or events, or annual solicitations to alumni about current career and happenings for magazines, newsletters, and other alumni communications
- Internal efforts to track alumni through their social media profiles, namely on professional platforms such as LinkedIn

Needing to Shift Narratives

Many focus group participants spoke of the need to enlarge the definition of alumni success and adapt programs and degree credentials to the more diverse reality of graduate career tracks:

Changing the narrative of “success”

In reflecting on the information needs and data available, participants stressed the importance of understanding career outcomes in terms of traditional measures, such as employment and income. In contrast to other fields, however, many participants noted that there is a tendency amongst some within arts and design fields to see employment outside of these fields as not a successful alumni outcome.

Some participants articulated the reality that there is little unanimity, even within art schools, over what counts as graduate success. One standard is understanding success solely as employment as an artist or designer. Others understand success as the translation and celebration of transferable skill sets from arts and design into other sectors. While others see success as the adaptation, integration, and innovation that surrounds applying one’s “artistry in unique ways outside of the primary sector of the arts” (*Focus group participant*).

“What are the institutional narratives about what it means to be embarking on a career and life in the arts today?”
- *Focus group participant*

Some focus group participants noted that it is important to understand how alumni are making and defining their own success. They observed students and alumni increasingly tending to define their success in terms of happiness, satisfaction, and positive impacts made on others or their contributions made to matters of community importance. Some participants referred to this latter measure of success as the “mission mindedness” of many of their students. One participant asked, how can we “measure the degree to which [graduates] can make an impact in the world with their education and their employment, both as connected and separate

“How do we frame outcomes that reflect today?”
- *Focus group participant*

things, [how they] feel empowered to make impacts or change in the world”? *Focus group participant*. Another participant asked, “How do we guide our students to do the bridging with the other disciplines, and do it in a way that deepens and elevates the artistic practice, as well as linking to the other discipline?” *Focus group participant*. While the challenges and feasibility of obtaining this information was fervently discussed, one participant astutely commented, that it “may be complicated to ask, but it would be good to

not guess.”

Student outcomes evaluated in terms of employment and income are a vital measure of financial return on investment (ROI) for arts-related degrees,⁴ especially for degrees that may incur significant personal debt or public underwriting. However, many participants stressed the need to understand ROI more broadly—ROI as gains, benefits, and impacts beyond financial measures. Participants commented that it will be important to “measure the other capitals of employment,” those that are the sources of meaning and engagement in the world in addition to paid employment and to “account for nuance” when we think about employment — accounting for more movement in employment and nuance in how employment is configured (*Focus group participant*). Participants reflected on changes in work and dynamics expected around it, and the growing urgency of information needs related to these changes and dynamics. Some participants commented on the need to provide resources to faculty who don’t themselves have direct work experience in a rapidly changing and technology-disrupted labor market in effort to help them help their students.

Administrators stressed the importance of being able to communicate more confidently and credibly with prospective and current students about the range of plausible career opportunities following post-secondary study in an arts or design field. Participants mentioned the need to understand and communicate better the value of skill transferability across

“because what all just happened in the pandemic...has really gotten us to rethink a lot of things ... thinking about how the skill sets in the arts, how does that apply to almost every industry that’s out there, so that’s a strength we should continue to rely on that we may be focusing on certain things within our studies, but it’s really preparing us for a career path that could end up just about anyway...” -
Focus group participant

disciplines, especially into STEM fields, and the ways an arts-related degree prepares graduates for a multitude of industries and jobs. Participants noted that having data that speaks to how these arts-related degrees can be useful in myriad industries is needed and highly valuable. Arts and design schools are alert to standards and trends among their peer programs; these administrators expressed an interest in understanding more about what peer institutions are doing to actively encouraging students to broaden their career vision and preparation—or not. Some participants reflected on significant challenges within their own institutions around broadening the prevailing narrow vision of careers or employment opportunities in arts as indicators of success.

Changing systems

Many participants emphasized the need to change Eurocentric cultural assumptions and White supremacist structures that underpin so much of the curricula and dynamics of arts and design schools in the U.S. One participant opined that academia is 20 years behind other industries in identifying and working to rectify racial inequities. It was also noted that arts and design

⁴ For more on matters related to ROI and arts degrees, see: <https://snaaparts.org/uploads/downloads/Arts-School-ROI-in-the-Age-of-Big-Data-Final-Version.pdf> (Accessed June 8, 2022)

faculty, administrators, and students in higher education are overwhelmingly White and that there is a “lack of lived experience within the system” (*Focus group participant*). Some participants commented that the overall structure of the academy will need to shift and that interacting with the new problems—such as decolonizing curricula, normalizing the increased use of technology in teaching during the pandemic—poses challenges when powerful senior faculty are wary of change. One participant commented that SNAAP data going forward will be important to helping them have “clear-eyed conversations” with faculty about “what the ethics are of their choices and giving them more information than their own expertise upon which to make those choices...when it comes to designing programs and building curriculum for students to function in worlds that [the faculty themselves] never lived in and many of us are having trouble imagining?” *Focus group participant*.

“The biggest change is going to need to be in the faculty, and the greatest push against change is going to be the faculty.” - *Focus group participant*

Although COVID-19 created and exacerbated several challenges and inequities, some participants shared that conversations surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion were more open during the pandemic. Participants shared that Zoom capabilities allowed students and alumni to be more engaged in conversations and more empowered to share their perspectives and to challenge their institutions. Participants also mentioned a need to better understand intersectionality and to expand equity and inclusion conversations beyond race and gender to include disability, sexual orientation, religion, and political ideology.

there is a “lack of lived experience within the system” - *Focus group participant*

The Next Five Years

The shifting social, economic, and public policy context presents many strategic considerations for arts and design fields. In looking ahead to the biggest challenges for administrators and educational institutions during the next five years, participants discussed more holistic measurements of success, the pressing need to address diversity and equity of both access to educational opportunity as well as career success, technological adaptability, the impacts of and recovery from recessions, and the uncertain, but ongoing effects of the pandemic on the working lives of creatives. Focus group participants highlighted the following needs:

- The need to understand better how to broaden the pipeline of prospective students. Drawing lessons from the Great Recession and the negative impact it had on choices to

pursue traditional arts related degrees,⁵ participants expressed interest in utilizing current circumstances as an opportunity to highlight the efficacy of double majors or the acquisition of a variety of skills to assist graduates in accessing job opportunities in an economic downturn.

- The need for meaningful, substantial reform around diversity, representation, and equity issues in the face of society's racial reckoning is top of mind for administrators.
- The need to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on alumni and students, both in the long-term and short-term. More specifically, the need for data that communicates the major pandemic-related stressors for students and alumni, and data that can inform more nuanced understanding of the skills, abilities, and sensibilities needed to best prepare their students for the rapidly evolving nature of work.
- The need to adapt to changing technologies and economies. New technology is emerging on a regular basis, and educational institutions need to keep up with these changes and adjust curricula to meet the emerging trends. Additionally, how we understand the economic opportunities of an artist are changing. Not only do we need to understand economics in terms of pay, but also economics in terms of investments (e.g., owning royalties in one's work) in creative work.

To inform these matters, participants expressed the need for broader calls to action regarding:

- National perspectives for broader context and messaging, alongside their own institution-specific data. National perspectives and industry data can be leveraged to help directly inform advising offices to directly and better help current students.
- Systems to support their institutions and departments to collect information from recent graduates, specifically those who are five or fewer years out from the completion of their degree. Feedback from recent graduates is valued as being particularly powerful for driving change, as it feels vital and is highly relevant to current programs and departments.
- Systems to support administrators and faculty in their use of alumni data and the translation of what is learned into action considering the many demands that they face. Many departments do not have the capacity to utilize what data they may have, yet there are calls for evolving systems and to use data more readily and with mounting accountability.

Overall, the conversations encompassed an array of matters regarding the historical tendencies in the fields of arts and design higher education, how they are currently transforming, and the

⁵ See Paulsen, R.J. "Arts majors and the Great Recession: a cross-sectional analysis of educational choices and employment outcomes." *Journal of Cultural Economics* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-021-09430-7>

opportunities surfacing for how they could and should evolve into the future. Beyond the need for more data and better knowledge, focus group participants highlighted the importance of developing an institutional culture within their schools and among their colleagues that would encourage the translation of observations into insights and insights into innovation. Focus group participants discussed the need for firmly fixing priorities on the best outcomes for the students that study and train with them, and the need for data to help them continuously monitor and strive toward improved outcomes. And, perhaps most tellingly, they emphasized the value of inviting current students and recent alumni to provide input into what the intended outcomes of learning and training in the fields of arts, design, and other artistically creative fields can and should be.