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Spotlight on Graduation

In this issue of the SNAAP DataBrief, we take a different direction and offer some food for thought from SNAAP Research Director, Steven Tepper, about the 120,000 students graduating this spring with a degree in the arts. The data are based on responses of 65,837 arts alumni from 120 institutions (109 postsecondary institutions and 11 arts high schools) in the United States in 2011 and 2012.

With spring showers come May graduates - and a stiff wind of anxiety and concern about finding work. And for good reason. A study done by Accenture found that only 16 percent of students in 2013 had secured a job by the time of graduation. And, if this general anxiety hovers over most graduates, we often assume it is even more pronounced for the more than 120,000 graduates every year with degrees in the arts: music, theater, dance, visual arts, design, media arts and creative writing. After all, the common assumption is that arts graduates have trouble finding jobs in the arts, and they have higher rates of unemployment throughout their lifetimes.

In fact, this assumption was reinforced last year by the esteemed artist David Byrne when he spoke to the graduating class at Columbia University School of the Arts in May 2013, addressing many master's level graduates in several arts disciplines. As documented by [The New Yorker](#), Byrne used SNAAP data to note that only 3 percent of those with master's degrees in film and theater and five percent of writing and visual arts grads will go on to careers in their chosen area of concentration a cold dose of reality indeed. But wait!



SNAAP data actually paint a different picture. Byrne's numbers, derived from a misinterpretation of the data, were off by a factor of 10 or more. In a sample of arts graduates with master's degrees from a variety of colleges and universities across the United States, we find that approximately 40 percent of film, television and broadcast majors currently work in their fields, and 68 percent have worked in film, TV or broadcasting at some point in their careers. For fine and studio arts, the numbers are even higher 67 and 88 percent respectively. Additionally, the numbers for those holding only an undergraduate degree in the arts are comparable for film majors and only slightly lower for fine and studio arts.

If we broaden the aperture a little more, the numbers are even more encouraging. Of those masters' level alumni who intended to work as artists, 87% have done so. Sixty-two percent (62%) currently work as artists and 77% spend the majority of their work time in an occupation related to the arts (including artists as well as arts administrators and arts educators). Slightly lower, but similar numbers emerge when considering graduates with only an undergraduate degree.

When we look at the first job out of college, we find that 91% of masters' level theater majors got jobs after graduation that were somewhat or closely related to their field of study, and this is also true for 70% of undergraduate theater majors. Furthermore, more than 8 of 10 majors in film and television at both the undergraduate and master's levels work in related fields after graduation. This pattern is mirrored for fine and studio arts majors, with 70% of undergraduate and 83% of master's level graduates finding degree-related work.



These numbers compare favorably to other fields. The Survey of Recent Graduates from the National Science Foundation, for example, show that only 56% of accounting majors, 53% of mechanical engineers, 58% of biology majors, and 53% of journalism majors work in jobs closely related to their fields of study. So, the arts do just as well as many disciplines in placing students in fields related to their major.

Byrne raised another point in his address, reinforced by other national studies, that arts graduates make less money than graduates who pursue other careers. In fact, a [report](#) by the National Endowment for the Arts estimates that full-time artists make approximately 13 percent less than comparably educated professionals. Given the rewards of an artistic career and the opportunity to be creative, most artists, we find, prefer the benefits of working as an artist. According to the General Social Survey, artists are among the happiest professionals - happier than lawyers, financial managers and high school teachers. For many artists, there is very little relationship between satisfaction and the amount of money they earn. For example, SNAAP data show that arts alumni who currently work primarily as dancers or choreographers earn the least of any artists. Yet they are the artists who are the *most* likely to indicate that they are satisfied with their work; 97% indicated that they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied overall with their jobs.

But ultimately, Byrne's message is that arts graduates need to be resilient and enterprising. He notes, "you don't get picked" for creative success; you must "pick yourself." And this is a point that comes across loud and clear in the SNAAP data. Arts graduates are plucky - they start businesses, work multiple jobs, work across sectors and disciplines. In short, arts graduates approach their careers the way they approach their art - they use every tool available to them, every resource, every connection in order to exert their will and their vision in the world.

I have always believed that training in the arts is one of the best preparations for a 21st century economy and SNAAP data, when interpreted appropriately, is beginning to shed light on why this is true.

As mortar boards take flight this May, arts students and their parents should breathe more easily knowing that the future is bright - filled with meaningful creative work and diverse pathways to success.

But, when all is said and done, perhaps the best advice to our graduates is to put aside our statistics and numbers and follow the simple advice that David Byrne himself sang on the Talking Heads' second album, "So think about this little scene, apply it to your life. If your work isn't what you love, then something isn't right."



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