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## Spotlight on Lifelong Engagement in the Arts and Wellbeing

Studies of happiness and wellbeing suggest that participating in the arts should lead to increased life satisfaction, self efficacy, "flow" like experiences, and an overall improved outlook in life ([see Ivey and Kingsbury Report, 2008](#)). A new study by the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, confirms this relationship: among college students and the general public, actively making or presenting art is related to increased feelings of wellbeing and a more positive social outlook. ([see \*Artful Living: Examining the relationship between artistic practice and subjective wellbeing across three national surveys\*](#)).

### **Making art is important for the wellbeing of most people. Is it then even more important for people who have training and expertise in the arts - people for whom making art is a more central part of their personal story?**

Based on analysis of more than 2,000 respondents to the 2009 SNAAP survey (the only year we asked about general life satisfaction), Steven Tepper (SNAAP research director) finds that arts graduates who currently make and perform art professionally are happier with their lives than those who are not professional artists. So, if you train to be an artist, generally you will be happier if you actually get a job as an artist.

### **Are arts graduates who make and perform art avocationally - that is, outside of work - also happier than those former arts students who have largely stopped making art in their personal time?**

Unexpectedly, the answer is no. The research finds that former arts students receive no additional boost in life satisfaction when they continue to make and perform art avocationally. This may make sense for professional artists who are making art everyday (e.g., NBA players likely do not feel happier when they add a pick-up game to their

already grueling game schedule). Still, the findings hold even for those who are not professional artists. If you went to arts school, and you end up in a non-arts career, continuing your arts practice is unrelated to life satisfaction.

## But, what explains why doing art in one's spare time is unrelated to increased life satisfaction for former arts students?

If one is not a professional artist, is it actually better in terms of life satisfaction to walk away from artistic practice than to dabble on the side? Perhaps the operative word is dabble - if one tries to pursue art in one's spare time but finds insufficient time to do the work well or at the level desired, then this might actually lead to lower levels of wellbeing and satisfaction than giving up artistic practice entirely.

Analysis of the 2009 SNAAP data demonstrate that if a former arts student practices her art outside of work and feels she has adequate time for this activity, she reports higher levels of life satisfaction than those who do not practice their art at all in their free time. On the other hand, if she continues to practice her art and reports that she does not have adequate time for this activity, then her life satisfaction is significantly lower. In other words, former arts students are happier when they continue to do their artistic work outside of their regular jobs, but only when they feel they have adequate time to do that work at the desired level.

The [full report](#) can be found on the NEA's website.



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