



DataBrief provides arts educators and arts policy makers with highlights of SNAAP data and insights into the value of arts-school education. Contact us for more information.

Spotlight on Contrasting Research on Arts Graduates

This month's DataBrief was written by Steven J. Tepper, SNAAP Research Director; and Dean, Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts, Arizona State University. We welcome your feedback.

An important study about artists in America came out toward the end of 2014 by a group of New York artists, self-named the [BFAMFAPhD](#) group. They analyzed Census data to help buttress their own experiences as artists “struggling to support ourselves with jobs outside of the arts and struggling to earn a living in the arts.” The report concludes that 40 percent of working artists do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher; that only 16 percent of working artists have an arts-related bachelor’s degree; and that just 10 percent of arts graduates make their primary living as working artists. The study also points out that arts schools are among the most expensive in the nation and that arts graduates do not reflect the changing racial and ethnic makeup of our country and that female arts graduates will face additional barriers to becoming working artists.

There is much to commend about the BFAMFAPhD report’s findings. **First** and foremost, arts leaders need to be aware of the great diversity of people working as artists who have no formal training in design and the arts. Researchers need to understand more about these workers - many of whom not only have no formal training in the arts but who also have no college degree. What are they doing? In what sectors do they work? How do their careers and trajectories differ from those who have arts degrees? What opportunities and barriers do they face? Recent research definitively shows that the life chances for college graduates far outstrip those without college degrees. I suspect these growing inequalities exist in the arts as well.

Second, the report identifies a troubling gap between the composition of our arts graduates and

St. Olaf College

the changing racial and ethnic composition of our country. Our institutions are not fully accessible or attractive to non-white students and families. Moreover, there are persistent barriers that result in inequalities between men and women artists in the workforce: Men are more likely to be full-time professional artists and they earn more as artists than women. The [2013 SNAAP Report](#) addresses these and other concerns.



Third, the BFAMFAPhD report calls attention to rising levels of debt and its impact on an arts graduate's life and career. Debt is a problem for many students and can be a significant hurdle for arts graduates who are seeking to work as professional artists. The [2014 SNAAP Report](#) finds that "strikingly, 35% of all recent graduates said that debt levels had a 'major' impact on their educational and career decisions, compared to only 14% of non-recent graduates." Furthermore, alumni with substantial debt take longer to graduate and are less likely to persist as professional artists. Importantly, however, this debate must take into account why design and arts schools tend to be relatively expensive and conducive to high student debt. An [article](#) that I co-authored with Douglas Dempster, dean of fine arts at the University of Texas at Austin, for *Inside Higher Ed* provides an explanation for these high costs and helps us reflect on the challenges of providing high quality arts pedagogy at reduced costs.

Fourth, the authors of the BFAMFAPhD report wisely call on arts educators to prepare graduates to work in a variety of fields - deploying the creativity and critical thinking learned in school in their work as managers, business owners, communications specialists, and educators. Again, SNAAP findings support these conclusions. More than 75% of SNAAP graduates have been self-employed at some point in their careers; 16% have started their own enterprises; and 34% currently spend a majority of their work time in non-arts related occupations.

The BFAMFAPhD report has generated debate in the press that perhaps the cost of an arts degree is not worth it. Clearly, all aspiring college graduates and their families should ask hard questions about their choice of college and major, and the financial investment in a college education. Nonetheless, based on SNAAP data the vast majority of arts graduates report that they would go back and attend the same institution again (76%) and that their training is at least somewhat relevant to their current work (81%), regardless of whether or not they work as a professional artist. Surprisingly, even for those who report that school debt has had a major impact on their lives and careers, 66% would still go back and attend the same institution again. These findings, drawn from over 88,000 respondents to the SNAAP survey over a period of three years, do not support the conclusion that arts graduates regret their decision to go to arts school; in fact, they strongly support the opposite conclusion.

Louisiana State University

These numbers compare favorably to other fields. The BFAMFAPhD report also finds, using Census data, that only 10% of arts graduates are "working artists." This finding seems to stand in stark contrast to the SNAAP findings that 74% of arts graduates work as professional artists at some point in their career and 54% self-identify at the time of the survey as



working either full- or part-time as an artist.

A major limitation in the BFAMFAPhD's analysis is that to be considered a "working artist" - using Census data -- the majority of the respondent's paid hours of employment in the preceding week must be as an artist.

But, there is overwhelming evidence from SNAAP that arts graduates work multiple jobs and many are self-employed in project-based work. Their workflow is often contingent, working for weeks on a paid contract and then switching and working in a non-arts job between gigs. Or they may work continuously as an artist part-time, but have another primary occupation on which they depend. Or, they may invest full-time in an artistic project and then get paid for it once completed. Still others maintain very active lives as teaching artists, so their primary occupation is "teaching," even though they remain deeply embedded in the arts and continue to make and practice their art. So, the Census-based definition of a working artist used in the BFAMFAPhD's report is simply not adequate for capturing the variety of ways artists actually live and work.

A further difference between SNAAP and the BFAMFAPhD report is that the former includes both undergraduate and graduate alumni, while the latter only includes those with an undergraduate art degree. The SNAAP survey also includes a broader range of majors, including architects and designers, as well as arts educators.

A word about the reliability of SNAAP's response rates (the percentage of those invited who respond to the survey) and response representativeness (how accurately the respondent sample reflects the total population). Alumni surveys typically have lower response rates than college student surveys, due to a number of factors, including poor contact information and suspicion of financial solicitation on the part of the potential respondents.



Millikin University

[Lambert & Miller \(2014\)](#) compared responses of graduating seniors from six diverse institutions on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to the corresponding sample responding to the SNAAP survey. Their results suggest that the demographic characteristics and institutional satisfaction of alumni closely mirror those of the graduating seniors. Therefore, even though response rates on alumni surveys might be lower, the results may be just as representative as studies with much higher response rates.

As arts educators, leaders, and administrators we should celebrate this important report produced by BFAMFAPhD and acknowledge that it has given us much to think

about. We need to make our programs more affordable and accessible; we need to expand our curricula to embrace more diverse skill sets; and we need to help support artists who have no formal training. But, we must also stand firmly behind the value of our training and education. Creativity and education scholar Keith Sawyer argues that arts pedagogy is well aligned with everything we know from the learning sciences about how students actually process information and learn to solve puzzles. A design and arts education may be the best preparation for a 21st century world of work that requires graduates to be creative, flexible, collaborative, and adaptive. No one is guaranteed a full time job in their chosen profession these days. In fact, some outside research has shown that across most majors, including biology, accounting, math, and physics, almost half of all graduates do not work in a field related to their chosen major. Graduates with arts degrees, it turns out, look a lot like most other graduates when it comes to working in jobs related to one's field of study.

The real secret to career success is being resilient, embracing new challenges, and stretching oneself to work in new ways, across occupations and fields. SNAAP data suggest this is exactly what arts graduates are doing. The added benefit of an arts degree, compared to findings from many other areas of study, is that many graduates continue to work as artists in some capacity - informally, avocationally, and as teachers. If you major in petroleum engineering, you might find a high paying job after college; but, if you end up in another profession, don't expect to stay involved in "mining" as a lifelong avocation and pursuit. Arts graduates meaningfully draw on their arts education throughout their lifetimes, something that cannot be said of many other degrees.

Save the Date: 3 Million Stories 2016!

The second SNAAP national conference, 3 Million Stories, will take place March 3-5 in Tempe, Arizona. Hosted by the Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts, the coordinating committee is putting together a superlative group of speakers to challenge assumptions about the arts school of the 21st century. The conference is funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Register for SNAAP 2015 Beginning in April

Registration will open for SNAAP 2015 in April and close on July 15, 2015. SNAAP 2015 will feature two participation choices (SNAAP and SNAAP+), a new core survey, new topical modules, reports with data visualization, and much more. Any institution with degree-granting programs in the arts is eligible to participate. For more information, contact us at snaap@indiana.edu or 812-856-5824.



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