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VOLUME 7, NUMBER 4



TRACKING THE LIVES AND CAREERS OF ARTS GRADUATES



SNAAP DataBrief

DataBrief provides arts educators and arts policymakers with highlights of SNAAP data and insights into the value of arts-school education.



In Their Own Words

Arts Alumni Describe What Postsecondary Institutions Could Do Better to Prepare Them for Future Work and Education

Prior SNAAP research looks at which arts alumni are able to break into a career in the arts, but what happens after these alumni get their start? In a forthcoming SNAAP report, Alexandre Frenette and Timothy J. Dowd ask: who stays and who leaves careers in the arts in the years after earning a postsecondary arts degree? They find that there are important predictors relating to personal characteristics, experience in their higher education program, and the impact of an uncertain arts labor market that affect whether alumni stay in or depart from a career in the arts. This DataBrief is the last in a series of three that focuses on particular findings from the forthcoming larger report.

What could postsecondary institutions do to better prepare their arts graduates for their careers and for future educational pursuits? Such a question drives and perhaps even causes sleeplessness for many faculty, staff, administrators, and students at arts schools. How do arts alumni answer this question? Below we consider a few answers from SNAAP survey respondents, which vary greatly by length, specificity, and tone:

Respondent 1: "Artist financial career skills and networks, work after graduation networks and connections."

Respondent 2: "[My institution] was a good place if you were self-motivated. It was a school that gave students great freedom to pursue personal styles in art. The student/faculty personal relationships were great, but the areas that needed improvement were in career planning and advising."

Respondent 3: "More exposure to the business side of the world, and better understanding of where industrial designers fit into the world."

These answers stress career skills, networks, advising, and business skills, but how would it look if we considered over 55,000 answers to this question?

This DataBrief analyzes the frequency of occurrences and co-occurrences of specific words in 55,301 responses to the open-ended question, *"Is there anything that [your postsecondary institution] could have done better to prepare you for further education or for your career?"* This particular SNAAP sub-sample is restricted to arts alumni who are out of school, who are over 30 years of age, and who ever worked in arts occupations; this combination of characteristics is meant to reflect arts alumni who have ever had a career in the arts and are still in the workforce.

In creating a visual representation of responses to the question of interest, we get a sense for how frequently a variety of topics come up in this group of arts alumni. The most frequently appearing words in their answers are not about the aesthetic or technical aspects of their arts majors or training, but instead they are about broader and sometimes even noncurricular topics. Of their responses, the words that appeared most frequently were "art," "students," and "time."

Of course, alumni answers were not only single words, so in order to assess the context of their answers, we analyze the co-occurrence of different word combinations. For example, "time" is often mentioned by respondents in combination with other telling words – such as "school" (combined with "time" in 3,473 instances), "art" (3,028 instances), "career" (2,839 instances), "program" (2,113 instances), "job" (1,972 instances), and "skills" (1,932 instances). Figure 1 displays these co-occurrences, giving insight into the patterned responses of arts alumni. In this Figure, the information is displayed such that the heavier the line between two words, the more frequently those words are used together in the 55,000+ open-ended responses. The frequent linking of "time" with these other words (i.e., co-occurrences) suggests a strong, collective concern among these arts alumni with the temporal elements of education and career. However, just by looking at these combinations it is unclear exactly how institutions of higher education might help address this concern. We know from other research that the grueling pace of student life, often paired with work and debt, make it challenging for aspiring artists to locate, draw from, and thrive based on resources provided by one's

postsecondary institution (for instance, see [Frenette et al., 2018](#); [Throsby & Zednik, 2011](#)).

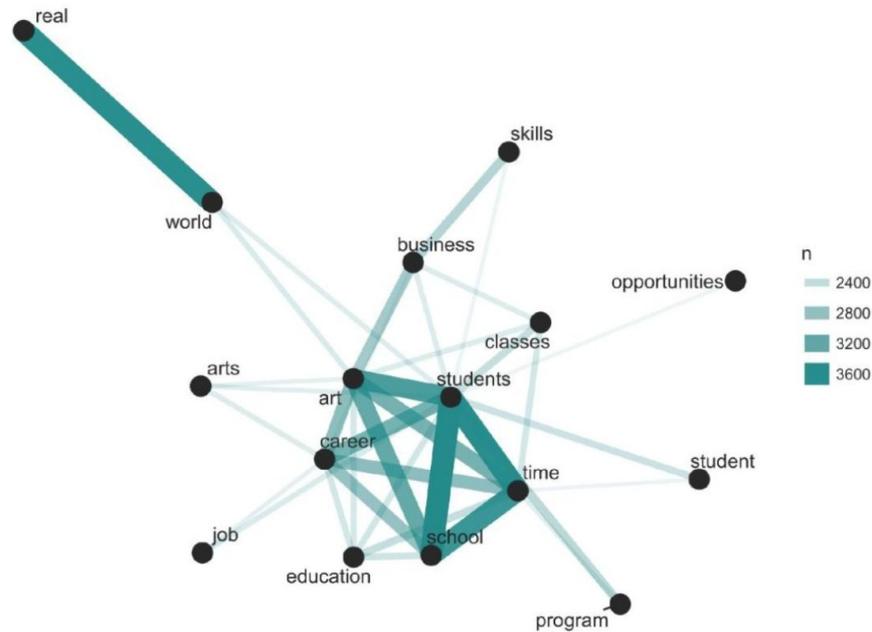


FIGURE 1: Co-Occurring Words Regarding What Arts Education Could Do to Better Prepare Alumni for Careers

One clear feature of this systematic mapping is the collective concern with the preparation for the “real world,” as opposed to a concern with the technical or aesthetic aspects of their institutional experiences. In fact, the second most frequent combination of two words is “real world” (occurring 3,583 times) – following only the combination of students and school (which comes in at 3,969). A concern with time continues to be evident in this Figure, and we see that these alumni wish that they had received more preparation in terms of art and career, of art and business, of business and skills.

Since alumni responses center on “real world” career concerns, we decided to delve even further into this concept by looking at three-word combinations for answers in which “business” is the middle word in those combinations (depicted in Figure 2). The focus here is not on frequency of word combinations, but rather on gaining a clearer understanding of how “business” is evoked by the respondents.

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