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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.

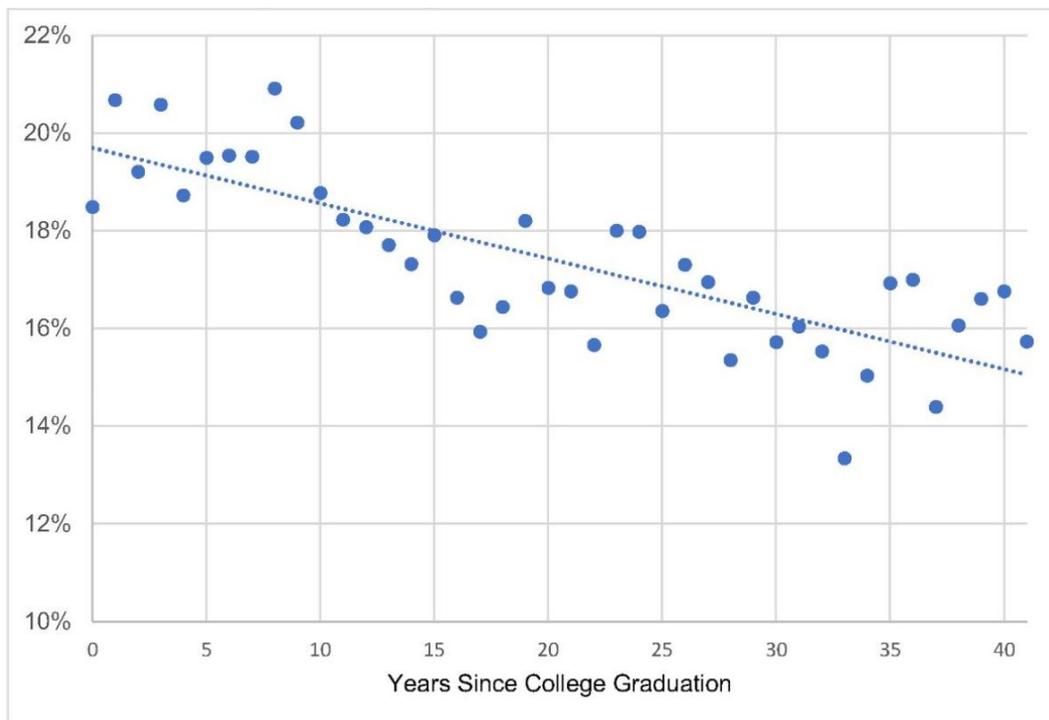
Major Choices

Arts Graduates Who Never Intended to Become Artists

Every year, tens of thousands of students in the United States begin their postsecondary education with the intention of becoming artists. SNAAP research has focused greatly on these students, paying particular attention to their [educational experiences and careers](#). However, not every arts graduate intends on becoming an artist. SNAAP asks arts graduates whether they intended to become artists when they began their undergraduate studies (“When you began at [this college/university], did you intend to work eventually in an occupation as an artist?”) and more than one in six (18%) alumni answered “no.” Notably, more recent college graduates are increasingly likely to say they never intended to become artists (see Figure 1). Based on analyses conducted by [Alexandre](#)

Frenette and Rachel Skaggs, this DataBrief explores three overlapping explanations for this rise: artistic identity, hypo-specialization, and reluctant or accidental arts graduates.

Figure 1. Percentage of arts alumni who “never intended” to be artists when they began at college/university, by years elapsed since graduation. 2015-2017 SNAAP data; dashed line represents trend line.



Recent research on artistic identity, using [SNAAP data](#) as well as [other sources](#), suggests that not all arts students and alumni are equally likely to identify as artists. For [various reasons](#), some arts graduates working in artistic occupations reject the title of artist, particularly if they work in occupations such as arts administration, design, and teaching. Indeed, our results show that “never intends” currently working in an arts-related occupation are most prevalent among museum and gallery workers including curators, K-12 arts educators, architects, and arts administrators or managers.

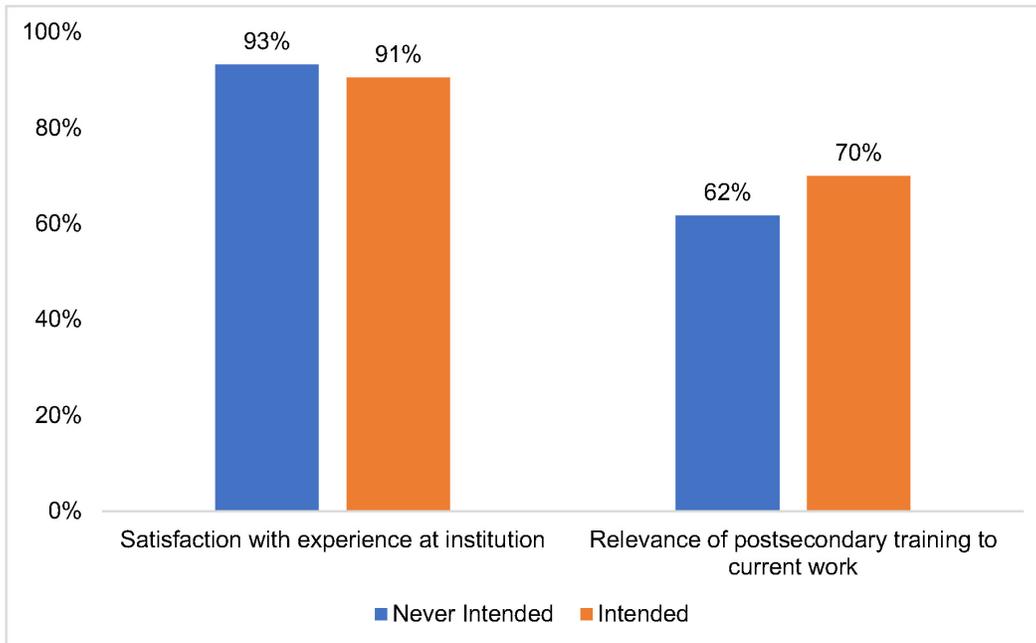
Beyond resisting artistic identity, another explanation is “hypo-specialization” among arts alumni. Nearly one in five (19%) alumni who “never intended” to be artists graduated with a double major (compared to 15% of arts alumni who did intend to become artists). About a quarter of SNAAP arts alumni who report working in engineering and science (27%), legal (27%), financial and other business services (24%), and healthcare occupations (24%) say they never intended to become artists.

As research on the rise of double majors suggests, a growing proportion of students resist hyper-specialization in one discipline, seeking instead to pursue interests in disparate fields (hypo-specialization). Therefore, students may identify with more than one field and pursue these diverse interests by majoring in the arts with the goal of applying their creative thinking and problem-solving skills to another discipline.

Analyses controlling for arts graduates' sociodemographic characteristics and educational experiences find that arts alumni from special focus institutions (arts, music, and design schools) are 64% less likely than those at comprehensive institutions to be "never intends." This finding is consistent with the hypo-specialization trend—a student interested in arts and non-arts fields seems more likely to attend a comprehensive higher education institution—but also suggests that some individuals may be "reluctant" or "accidental" arts graduates. It may be that students who question their artistic abilities, see their creative practice as a hobby, or otherwise feel reluctant about embarking on an artistic career might become increasingly enthusiastic about majoring in the arts after taking an elective course. Students might feel an intrinsic "pull" into the arts and declare their major(s) accordingly, but such [major decisions](#) also tend to be shaped by students' socioeconomic status—our analyses find that first-generation college graduates are 15% less likely to be "never intends" than alumni whose parents earned at least a bachelor's degree.

As the pathways from college to career become [increasingly tenuous](#) and unclear across nearly every field, and undergraduate students need to acquire a [wider portfolio of skills and experiences](#) to navigate careers in an uncertain economy, it is important to pay attention to the diverse aspirations and pathways of arts graduates. Some students fervently aim to pursue artistic careers when starting their undergraduate studies, but a growing proportion of arts students do not intend to become artists at that time. Importantly, as Figure 2 shows, while a higher percentage of alumni who aim to become artists later report that their arts training is "relevant" or "very relevant" to their current work, "never intends" are no less satisfied with their overall experience while pursuing their arts degree.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with & Relevance of Institutional Experience of Alumni, by Intention to Become Artists 2015-2017 SNAAP data



This DataBrief was prepared by Alexandre Frenette, Associate Director, Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy and Assistant Professor of Sociology at Vanderbilt University.



**The next SNAAP Survey will be held in
Fall 2022.**

Registration information will be forthcoming in 2021.

[More DataBriefs](#)



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