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The Myth of the Starving Artist ^[1]

Submitted by [Dan Berrett](#) ^[2] on May 3, 2011 - 3:00am

Conventional wisdom has long held that pursuing a career in the arts is a likely ticket to a life of perennial unhappiness, hunger and unemployment. But the opposite appears to be true -- graduates of arts programs are likely to find jobs and satisfaction, even if they won't necessarily get wealthy in the process -- according to a new national survey of more than 13,000 alumni of 154 different arts programs.

"Arts graduates are finding ways to put together careers and be employed -- and many of them are satisfied with their work," said Steven J. Tepper, associate director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy, assistant professor in the department of sociology at Vanderbilt University and senior scholar of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project ([SNAAP](#) ^[3]).

The results of the survey, which are being [released today](#) ^[4], may offer some measure of succor to parents who are [anxious](#) ^[5] about their children's artistic aspirations. And, while the survey may help arts programs defend against accusations that they produce an oversupply of soon-to-be-discouraged artists, they also suggest areas -- particularly in the area of career preparation -- in which these programs can improve.

The results reflect the responses of 13,581 alumni of 154 arts colleges and conservatories; arts schools and departments within broader colleges and universities; and arts high schools. They constitute the largest dataset gathered about the lives and careers of arts graduates, according to George Kuh, professor emeritus at Indiana and SNAAP project director (SNAAP is based at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research at the School of Education). Those surveyed include graduates from fine arts, theater, dance, music, creative writing, media arts, film, design and architecture programs between 2005 and 2009, as well as those who graduated in 2000, 1995 and 1990.

A large majority of respondents (92 percent) who want to work say they are currently working. More than half (57 percent) either are working as professional artists (41 percent) or have done so in the past (16 percent) -- with the survey specifying that jobs as art teachers and arts administrators would be excluded from this tally. While the percentage of working artists struck some observers as being a bit low, it did not include those who minored in arts programs at broader colleges and universities, but who later found work as professional artists. Nor did the publicly released data disaggregate data for graduates of arts conservatories from data on those who attended comprehensive institutions.

Two-thirds of arts graduates reported that their first job out of school was a close match for the kind of work they wanted. And, of those who are currently working professionally as artists, most hold at least two jobs concurrently (and, contrary to stereotype, only 3 percent work in food services), according to SNAAP.

The survey results also painted a picture of artists as highly entrepreneurial: more than 6 in 10 were self-employed, and 14 percent had founded their own company. Bill Barrett, executive director of the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design, said he was impressed by how many alumni had started their own businesses, "especially since we're always told that our nation depends on developing more creative, innovative entrepreneurs." Barrett added that he was also pleased that the results upended many widely held assumptions about artists. "SNAAP demonstrates that arts alumni enjoy roughly the same levels of employment, and satisfaction with their education and their careers, as other college graduates," he said.

At the same time, very few professional artists reported being happy with their income -- from a low of zero craft artists to a high of 29 percent of art directors. For artists in general, the median salary was \$34,800 according to 2003-5 [data](#) ^[6] collected by the National Endowment for the Arts (full-time artists earned more, but still about 15 percent less than other professionals). Only one-third of professional artists surveyed by SNAAP said they were satisfied with their level of job security. Still, nearly half (47 percent) said they were very satisfied with opportunities to be creative in their work. An even larger share (64 percent) of arts graduates who became teachers reported high levels of satisfaction.

Among professional artists, there were stark differences in satisfaction between different disciplines: more than two-thirds of actors, craft artists, dancers, fine artists, musicians, photographers and writers said they were pleased that they were able to do work that reflected their personality, interests and values. In contrast, about one-third of art directors, graphic designers and web designers reported the same sense of satisfaction. This discrepancy came as a surprise to Tepper, and may have to do with the fact that the

disciplines reporting less satisfaction -- which also, interestingly, report higher levels of employment (see chart below) -- tend to be accompanied by stresses related to producing deadline-driven work for clients and not for oneself.

Arts Major	% Currently Working as Professional Artists
Dance	48%
Design	59%
Fine and studio Arts	44%
Music performance	47%
Theater	47%

More generally, the disconnect between salary and security on the one hand and meaning and satisfaction on the other suggests that many arts graduates appear to have devised ways to negotiate uncertainty and low wages to find personal fulfillment, said Tepper. In this way, he said, artists may be charting a path forward for members of an increasingly uncertain workforce in general. "I think the creative economy is one that's flexible. It's not a direct career path from A to B," said Tepper. "It's very much based on relationships. More of the economy is resembling that."

But if arts graduates exhibited a tendency toward resourcefulness and entrepreneurship, it was not because of help from their institutions, the survey results suggested. More than half of undergraduate alumni said they were dissatisfied with the career advising their art school or college offered, and 43 percent of graduate alumni said the same (it is worth noting that graduates of other, more vocationally minded disciplines, such as [law schools](#) [7], have reported even stronger feelings on this subject).

Alumni dissatisfaction with job training demonstrated convincingly what faculty and staff members of arts programs have long suspected, said Douglas Dempster, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, which participated in the survey (Dempster is a member of SNAAP's advisory board).

"It's clear that we need to be doing a better job of preparing our students for the business realities that they face after graduation," Dempster said in an e-mail, though he added that such changes, while urgent, may not be easy. "Most of the professional fine arts degrees are saturated with regimented requirements that leave little room for additions," he said. "So every call for curricular reform has to address the zero-sum realities of what we must squeeze into a curriculum and what we can afford to leave out."

The negative assessments of job preparation contrasted sharply with the general fondness that arts alumni felt for their institutions: more than three-quarters of respondents said they would attend their respective institutions again, and nearly the same share said their institution contributed a great deal to developing their artistic technique. More specifically, those who were currently working or had worked as artists (and even those who never had) listed the faculty at their institution as having more influence on their careers than alumni and classmates.

The survey also revealed the deep impact that training in the arts can have in later life. Of those who found work outside the arts, 54 percent said their arts training has been relevant to their non-arts jobs. This group of graduates also did not stop producing art on their own time. Among this group, 70 percent told SNAAP that they still make or publicly perform their art. Among all arts graduates, nearly 4 in 10 volunteered at an arts organization.

Arts alumni who were not professional artists at the time of the survey cited three main reasons for their change in path. More than half said they wanted to become artists but did not do so because they couldn't find work. More than half of a separate group -- those who started working as artists but later stopped -- said it was because higher or steadier pay was more readily available in other fields.

About one-third of those who abandoned the goal of becoming artists cited debt burdens. Debt weighed most heavily on those trained in fine and studio arts: about one-third said that their cumulative debt had a "major impact on their career and educational decisions." In contrast, fewer than 20 percent of dancers reported the same concern.

Data collection for the 2011 survey will begin in the fall.

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