

WHERE DO ARTISTS WORK?

Exploring the Careers of Arts Graduates in Illinois and the U.S.

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Executive Summary

With tuition rates and student debt rising, there is a growing concern among students and families about the risk reward ratio of a college education. This may be especially true for students considering an education in the arts. In addition to facing some of the highest college tuition costs and debt loads, arts graduates hoping to secure well-paying jobs in their field of study must contend with the known precarity and lower-than-average wages of many arts jobs (Jahoda et al., 2014; Paulsen, 2023). Why, then, do thousands of students in the U.S. and Illinois earn arts degrees each year? What jobs are they doing? Do these jobs amplify their creative or artistic skills? And are these skills and their potential contribution to the workforce fully understood and realized by educators, employers, legislators, and workforce development agencies?

This issue brief is the first of a series of reports that address these questions with the goal of:

- a) Understanding the strengths, values, and experiences that artists and arts graduates bring to the workforce.
- b) Using this knowledge to inform how Illinois promotes, nurtures, trains, and engages arts graduates and arts workers.

The present report uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) to provide a broad overview of the occupational outcomes of graduates with bachelor's degrees in the arts in the United States (U.S.) and Illinois, looking at how these vary by creative programs. To provide some context to these findings, it also asks how the number of arts graduates working in-field compares to graduates from other programs, including Education, Health, and Information Technology. While the findings presented in this paper are significant from an education, workforce, arts policy, and employment perspective, they will take on greater import when examined in tandem with subsequent reports that use interviews and surveys to provide more variegated insights into the motivations, experiences, and transferrable skills of individuals with training in the arts.

Key Findings

- One fifth (20%) of the estimated 148,901 arts graduates in Illinois' civilian workforce have primary jobs in arts occupations. The rest work in other occupational categories such as Management (15%), Education (13%), Office and Administration (9%), Sales (8%) and Business and Finance (8%).
- These statistics closely follow national trends. Of the estimated 3.2 million arts graduates in the United States, 22% have primary jobs in arts occupations while 78% are employed in other occupational categories.
- The occupational distribution for arts graduates in Illinois varies by program. Architecture and Commercial & Graphic Design graduates have the highest percentage of primary jobs in arts occupations (40% and 29% respectively), while Art History and Drama graduates have the lowest (6% and 10% respectively).
- Music graduates have the highest percentage (26%) of primary jobs in Education occupations whereas Architecture graduates have the lowest (3%).
- The percentage of Illinois arts graduates with primary jobs in their field of study is low when compared to graduates from other programs such as IT, Healthcare, and Education.

Where Do Artists Work?

Exploring the Careers of Arts Graduates in Illinois and the U.S.

Despite a growing literature among researchers and specialists about the value of creativity in the workplace and the role of artists as entrepreneurs and innovators (Paulsen, 2021; Boyles, 2022) there is a deficit in our understanding of the career trajectories of arts graduates and arts workers and the nature and transferability of their skills and experiences to sectors and industries both within and outside the arts. This is especially true of artists who have pursued non-traditional training pathways, or the specific abilities and experiences that artists from underheard or underrepresented communities bring to the workforce.

This issue brief is conceived as part of a suite of studies that use a multipronged approach to grapple with this complex set of issues. Together, they seek to present a fuller picture of the diverse roles that creative workers and arts graduates perform within the state's economy and workforce and provide a more contextualized understanding of the skills and experiences they contribute.

The present report examines the occupational distribution of arts graduates and how this varies by creative program. It asks: Where do artists work? How many have primary jobs in arts occupations and the arts industry (where occupation refers to the kind of work they do, and industry refers to the sector they work in or the type of service or activity their company provides) and how many end up working in other occupations and industries? How do the career outcomes of arts majors compare to students with other majors? Right now, there is a paucity of literature on the number of U.S. graduates working in the field for which they are trained, and the little information available is informal (Cachero, 2022) or outdated (Abel & Deitz, 2012). In 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began publishing new Field of Degree data on its online Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) to provide some insights into the employment outcomes of U.S. college graduates, including Fine and Performing Arts majors (Torpey, 2021). While drawing upon these findings, the present study and subsequent reports seek to provide further insights into the college-to-career trajectories of arts graduates in the U.S. and Illinois within and beyond the arts.

Gaining a firmer understanding of where arts graduates work is important for several reasons. It can inform students' and families' understanding of the potential career outcomes of arts degrees; it can help educators tailor programs to the needs and experiences of arts graduates; it can motivate workforce development agencies to expand the services and opportunities they offer to arts graduates or workers; it can support the efforts of advocacy organizations and policy makers to garner greater support and resources for artists and arts graduates seeking to stay within or venture beyond their fields; and it can help companies and industry leaders to identify and augment the pool of highly skilled workers that may already exist within their ranks.

Knowing more about where artists work can also expand our definition of what creative workers do and how they contribute to the state's labor force. While the findings in this report are significant in themselves, they will take on greater meaning and nuance when examined in tandem with and in the context of subsequent reports issuing from more qualitative approaches, including interviews and surveys.

Methods

To find the occupational outcomes of arts graduates, this study uses the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey's (ACS) 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) spanning 2018-2022. BLS Field of Degree data is used to compare these outcomes with graduates from other degree programs.¹

The ACS only collects information on bachelor's degrees and primary occupations.² For this reason, the term "arts graduate" in this report refers to individuals with a bachelor's degree in the arts, specifically those with a degree in Architecture, Fine Art, Drama, Music, Visual and Performing Arts, Commercial Art and Graphic Design, Film, Video, and Photographic Arts, Art

¹ The BLS Field of Degree data is from 2021 and is therefore one year older than the 2022 ACS data set that is used to determine the occupational outcomes of arts graduates in this study.

² ACS primary occupation data refers to the job an individual held the previous week. If they held more than one job, it refers to the job where they worked the greatest number of hours.

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/guidance/industry-occupation/overview2019.pdf>

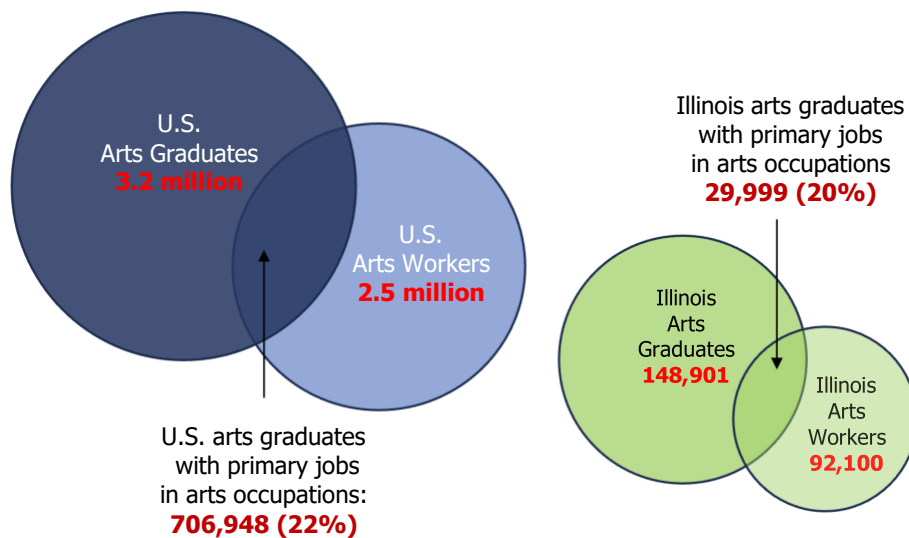
History and Criticism, or Studio Arts. “Arts Worker” refers to an individual with or without a degree in the arts who has an “arts occupation” as their primary occupation. “Arts occupations” refer to the occupations outlined by the National Endowment of the Arts as “Artist Occupations,” with the addition of Archivists, Curators, and Museum Technicians.

Findings

Occupational Distribution of Arts Graduates in the U.S. and Illinois

An estimated 148,901 arts graduates make up 2.4% of Illinois’ civilian workforce. This percentage is comparable to the national statistic, where an estimated 3.2 million arts graduates comprise 2% of the U.S. civilian workforce. There are also 92,100 arts workers in Illinois that account for 1.5% of the state’s civilian workforce. Again, this statistic follows national trends, where an estimated 2.5 million art workers comprise around 1.5% of the U.S. civilian workforce.

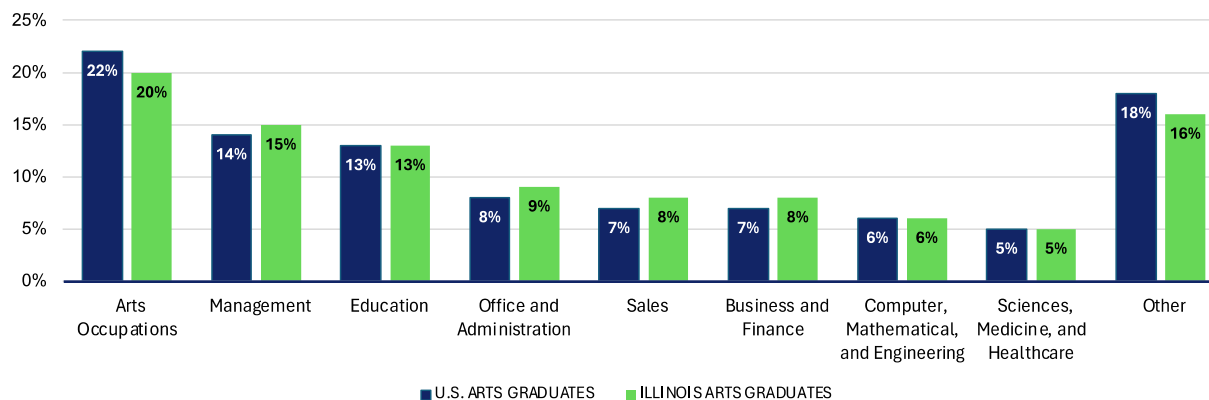
One might expect a greater overlap between the number of arts graduates and the number of arts workers in Illinois and nationwide. Yet, only 29,999 (20%) of arts graduates in Illinois and only 706,948 (22%) of U.S. arts graduates are arts workers (have primary jobs in arts occupations).³ This suggests that while they may engage in creative work, most arts graduates in Illinois and the U.S. do not have arts occupations as their main occupation.



³ Inspiration for this data point and accompanying diagram was drawn from Jahoda et al. (2014).

Figure 1 shows that the remaining 80% of arts graduates in Illinois have primary jobs in other occupational categories. After the arts, the top occupational categories for arts graduates are Management (15%) and Education (13%) followed by Office and Administration (9%), Sales (8%) and Business and Finance (8%). The occupational outcomes of U.S. arts graduates closely follow these trends, give or take one or two percentage points.

Figure 1. Occupational Distribution of Arts Graduates in Illinois and United States.

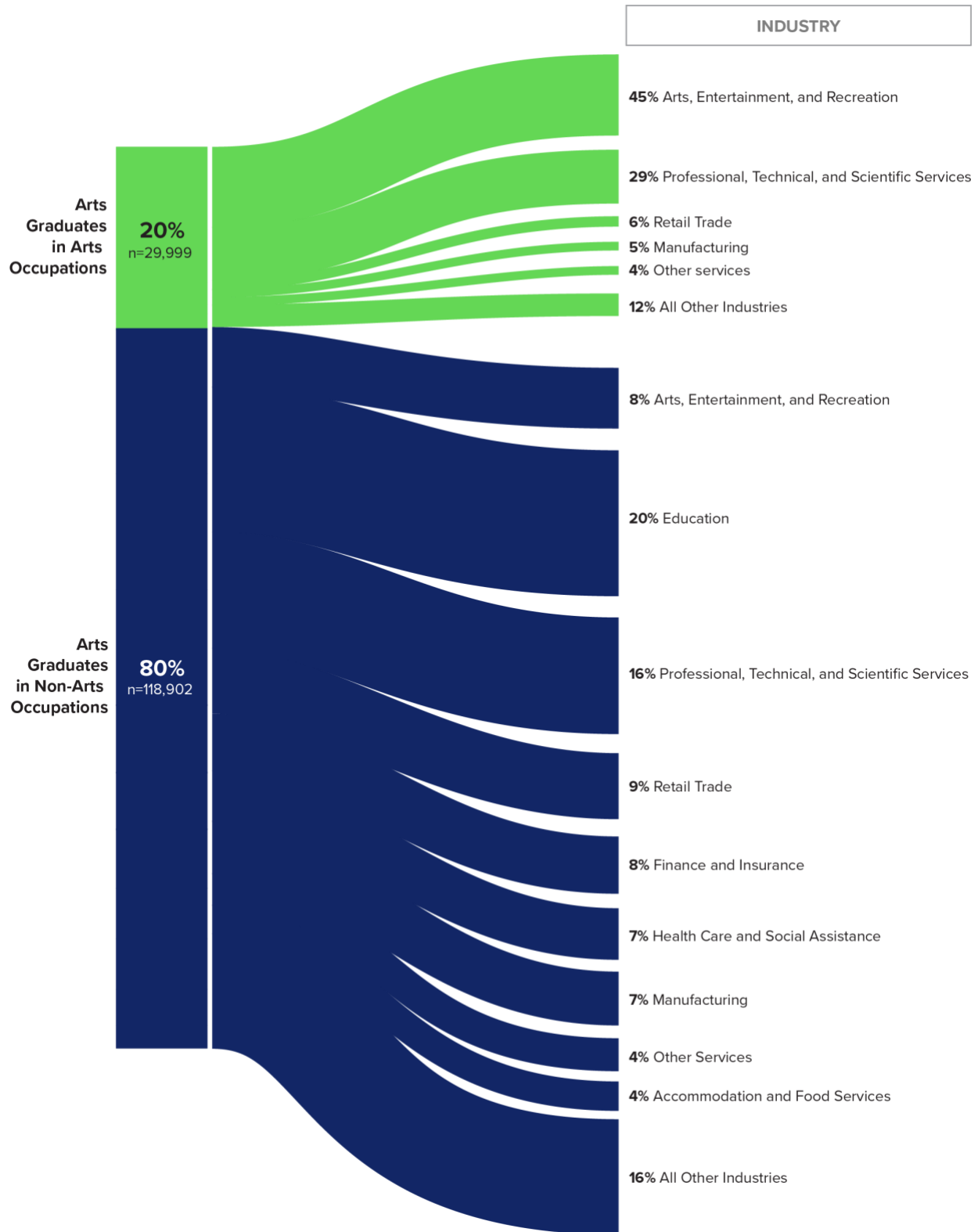


Arts and Non-Arts Occupation by Industry

Figure 2 shows that most arts graduates in Illinois who are engaged in arts occupations work in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation (45%) and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services industries (29%). The remainder have artistic occupations within Retail, Manufacturing, and other industries. This could include an individual working as a creative strategist for a construction company, a content writer for a cosmetic company, or the fashion director for a clothing chain.

Conversely, the majority of arts graduates in Illinois with non-arts occupations work in the Educational Services (20%) and Professional Services (16%) industries. Only 8%, or an estimated 9,173, work in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation industry. **Adding this to the 29,999 arts graduates who work in arts occupations means that around 26% of arts grads work either in an arts occupation or in a non-arts occupation within the arts industry as their primary job.** This could be someone working as a human resource manager at an art museum or an accountant working for a performing arts company.

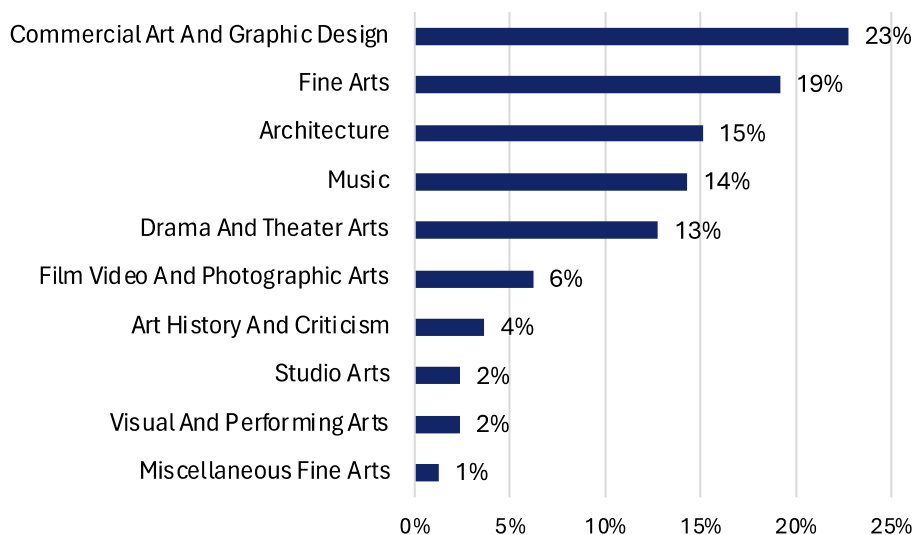
Figure 2: Arts and Non-Arts Occupations by Industry



Illinois Arts Graduates' Occupational Outcomes by Program

Figure 3 shows that the largest percentage of Illinois arts graduates (23%) study Commercial Art and Graphic Design while the smallest percentage study Art History and Criticism (4%), Studio Arts, and Visual and Performing Arts (2% each).

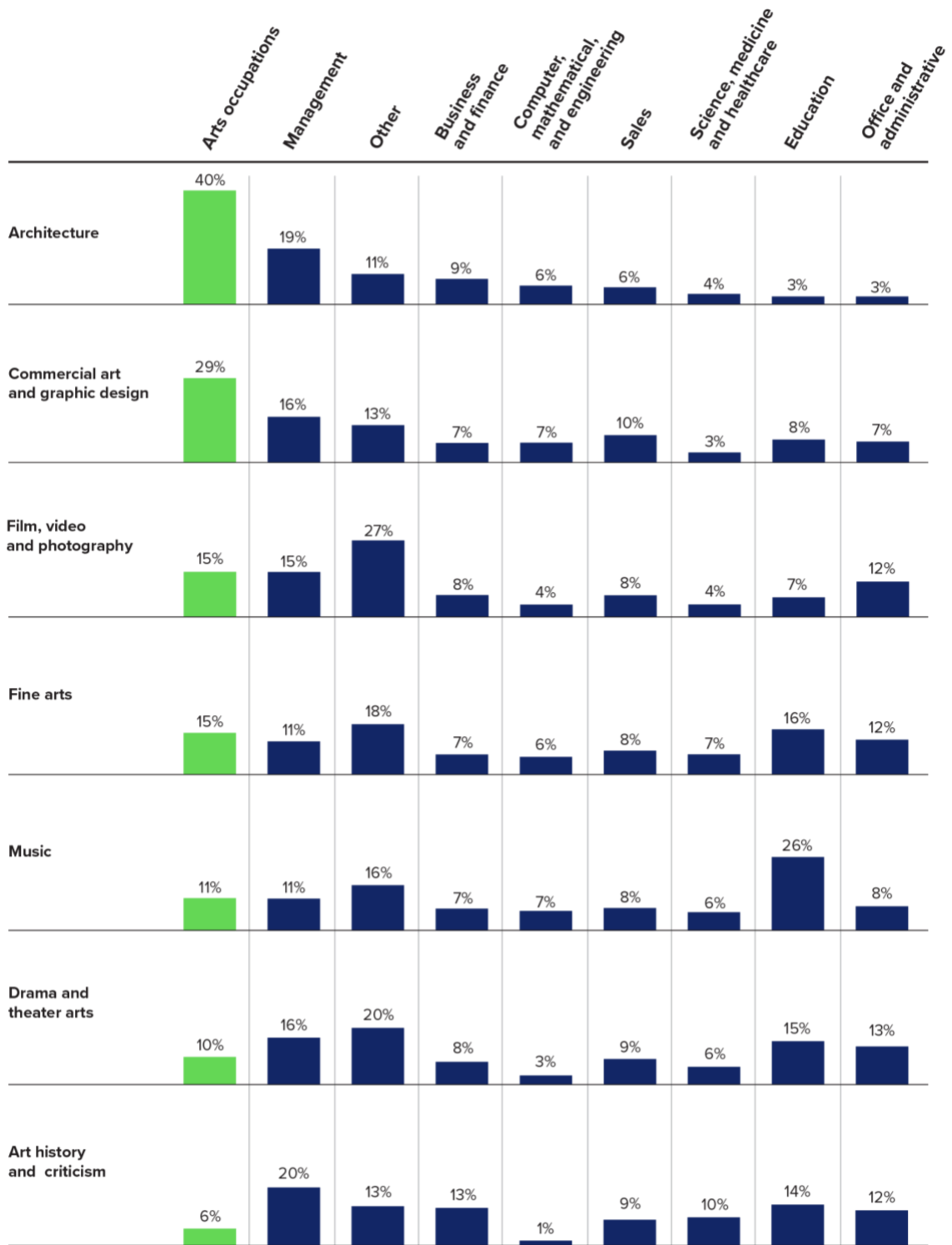
Figure 3: Illinois Arts Graduates by Arts Major



There is a significant variation in the occupational outcomes of Illinois arts graduates from different programs, as shown in Figure 4.⁴ Architecture graduates have the highest percentage of primary jobs in arts occupations (40%), followed by Commercial Art and Graphic Design graduates (29%). Conversely, Art History and Drama graduates have the lowest percentage of primary jobs in arts occupations (6% and 10% respectively). More than one quarter (26%) of music graduates have primary jobs in Education occupations. Architecture graduates have the lowest percentage of jobs in this category (3%). This is not to suggest that Music, Drama, and Art History graduates are not engaging in creative work as their secondary or tertiary source of income, or working in the arts on an informal or voluntary basis. The data presented here accounts only for primary occupations and suggests that graduates with these degrees are less likely to have primary occupations in the arts than Architecture or Graphic Design graduates.

⁴ The category of Dance is not included in this analysis as the ACS Field of Degrees does not contain a separate category for Dance. It may be included with Visual and Performing Arts but because of the breadth of this category and the possible overlap with Drama and Fine Arts we have not included it in our analysis of the occupational distribution of Illinois arts graduates by arts program.

Figure 4: Occupational Distribution of Illinois Arts Graduates by Arts Program



Comparing Arts Graduates to Other Graduates

As a benchmark to see if the percentage of U.S. arts graduates with primary occupations in their field is low or high, their outcomes were compared to 25 other bachelor's programs using Field of Degree data published by the BLS on its online Occupational Outlook Handbook.

Figure 5: Percentage of Graduates from Other Programs with Primary Occupations Related to Field of Study

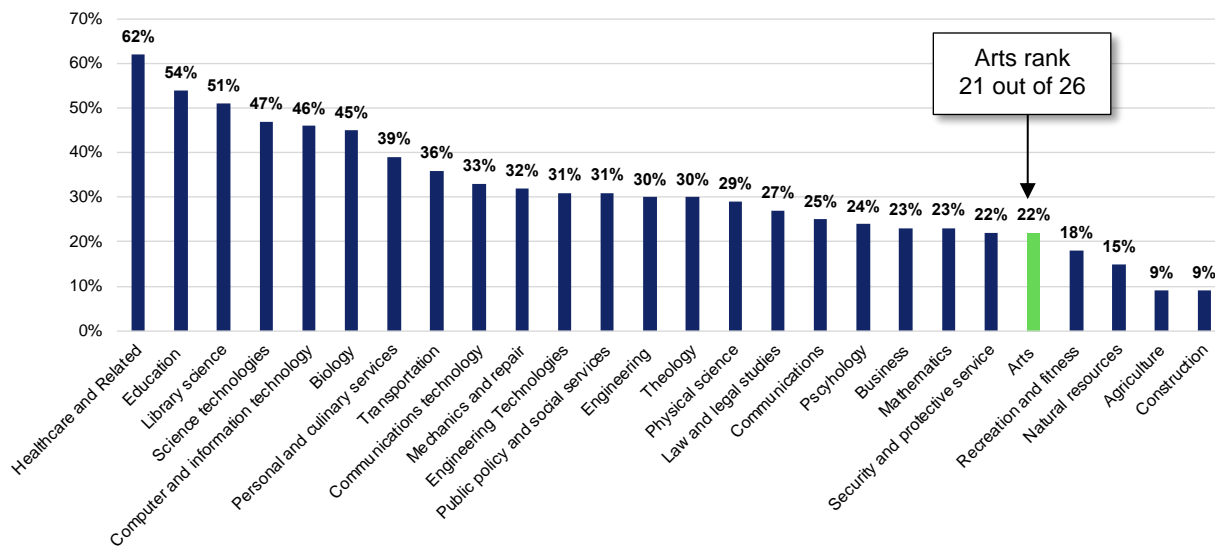


Figure 5 reveals that the arts are tied with Security and Protective Services for 21st place when it comes to the percentage of graduates with primary jobs in occupational categories related to their field of study.⁵ Arts graduates are far less likely to have primary jobs in-field than graduates from majors such as Healthcare, Education, and IT.

⁵ For the purpose of this comparison, I have only used programs that have a clear correspondence between degree type and occupational category. For this reason, degrees such as English, Philosophy, and Foreign Languages were not included.

Figure 6: Percentage of Graduates from Other Programs with Primary Jobs in Management Occupations

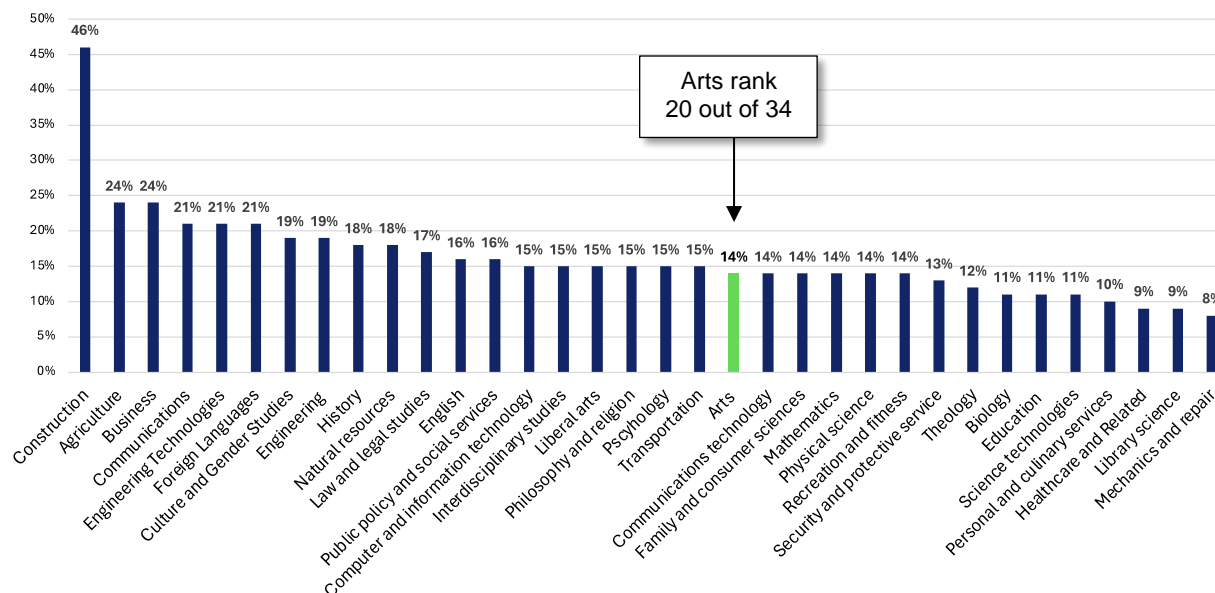


Figure 6 reveals that the arts ranked 20th out of 34 degree programs when it comes to the percentage of graduates with primary jobs in Management occupations. When viewed in this context, the percentage of U.S. arts graduates that end up working in Management occupations as their primary job (14%) does not seem especially high. It is close to the median percentage of graduates working in this occupational category across all programs.

Interpretation of Findings

This report provides some high-level answers to the question: Where do artists work? U.S. and Illinois arts graduates are to be found working in a wide range of occupations and industries. Despite some variation between programs, most arts graduates have primary jobs outside the arts.

The findings in this report raise important questions and highlight areas for future research. For example, why are a smaller percentage of arts graduates working in-field as their primary occupation than graduates from other degree programs? Do those other programs have tighter linkages to professional occupations than arts programs? If so, does the “looser” linkage mean

that arts graduates have skills that are more flexible and widely applicable to a variety of occupations and industries? Or are they having to develop new skillsets altogether because of a shortage of secure, high-wage, high growth jobs in their own industry or occupational category? What are the push-and-pull factors prompting artists to pursue occupations outside their field of degree? And how do these vary by race, ethnicity, gender, and income? Addressing these questions will be significant from an equity, education, workforce, advocacy, and policy perspective.

Limitations

Using Census data to assess the occupational outcomes of arts graduates poses several limitations. Firstly, as the Census only collects information on bachelor's degrees, we cannot gauge the occupational outcomes of arts workers who have pursued non-traditional or informal arts training, have no post-secondary education (around 12% for the U.S. and 9% for Illinois), arts graduates with 2-year degrees or postsecondary certificates (around 25% for the U.S. and 21% for Illinois), or advanced degrees in the arts (around 17% for the U.S. and 20% for Illinois) (Novak & Banerjee, 2022). Second, the ACS PUMS data only contains information on primary occupations. As such, it does not convey the experience of the many artists who work in creative jobs as their secondary occupation (NEA, 2019) or engage in creative work on a voluntary or informal basis.

Finally, Census data provides a single snapshot of an individual's career trajectory. In reality, arts graduates may pivot from an arts occupation to a non-arts occupation over time, or vice-versa. They may work in the arts when they are young and then transition to a career outside the arts when they are older. Some may never have intended to work in the arts at all. Subsequent reports will adopt a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a more detailed and variegated picture of the career trajectories of arts graduates and arts workers and the skills and experiences they bring to the workforce.

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Technical Appendix

Table A1. U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata (PUMS) Field of Degree codes used to define arts graduates.

DEGREE CODE	DEGREE TITLE
1401	Architecture
6000	Fine Arts
6001	Drama and Theater Arts
6002	Music
6003	Visual and Performing Arts
6004	Commercial art and Graphic Design
6005	Film Video and Photographic Arts
6006	Art History and Criticism
6007	Studio Arts
6099	Mischellaneous Fine Arts

Table A2. Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) Codes used to define the artist labor force.

2018 SOC Code	Occupation Title
171011	Architects, Except Landscape and Naval
171012	Landscape Architects
254101	Archivists, Curators, and Museum Technicians
271010	Artists and Related Workers
271021	Commercial and Industrial Designers
271022	Fashion Designers
271023	Floral Designers
271024	Graphic Designers
271025	Interior Designers
271026	Merchandise Displayers and Window Trimmers
27102X	Other Designers
272011	Actors
272012	Producers and Directors
272030	Dancers and Choreographers
272041	Music Directors and Composers
272042	Musicians and Singers
272091	Disc Jockeys, Except Radio
272099	Entertainers and Performers, Sports and related Workers, all Others
273011	Broadcast Announcers and Radio Disc Jockeys
273043	Writers and Authors
273099	Media and Communication Workers
274021	Photographers

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