The Tip of the Iceberg:
The Transferability of Arts and Design Skills

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INTRODUCTION

[**" THINK OF AN ICEBERG. YOU'RE AN ARTIST AT THE TOP, BUT BENEATH THAT IS A WEALTH OF TIME SPENT AND RESOURCES ACQUIRED AND NOVEL WAYS OF THINKING. "**

(CIARA, VOCAL PERFORMANCE MAJOR)]

In 2023, around 150 thousand students in the U.S. graduated with degrees in the arts.[1] Given the well-documented challenges facing arts graduates in securing well paid and stable jobs in their industry and the mounting costs of higher education, why do so many students choose this path (Bennet, 2009; Frenette and Ocejo, 2019; Morgan et al., 2013)? What do artists and arts graduates feel they gain from their experience or training in disciplines such as theater, dance, graphic design, music, and art history?

This report explores the value individuals place on their artistic training and experiences. It is part of our Branching Out Series that uses in-depth interviews and surveys to learn about the pathways and experiences of Illinois artists and arts graduates who are working in fields outside the arts. Building upon the first series report, which looked at the push and pull factors prompting artists and arts graduates to pursue non arts occupations (Motlani, 2025), the present paper asks how those working in non-arts occupations perceive and describe the skills they have gained from their arts training or experiences and how these skills transfer to sectors and occupations outside the arts. As the interview participant cited in the epigraph puts it, artistic credentials or training are just the tip of the iceberg. This report explores the skills and experiences undergirding them. It also briefly explores the gaps artists and arts graduates describe in their training.

Quantitative studies of this segment of the workforce have shown that most people with arts degrees end up applying their skills and training to work outside the arts (BFAMFAPhD, 2014; Motlani, 2024a; Wasser & Alper, 2018),[2] yet there is still a relative dearth of qualitative or quantitative research on the career pathways of artists and arts graduates employed in non-arts occupations (Ashton, 2015; Brook & Comunian, 2018; Hearn et al., 2014; Throsby & Zednik, 2011).[3] The present report contributes to our understanding of how artists perceive the connections between their arts and design training and their employment (Lindemann & Tepper, 2017; Novak-Leonard, 2024) as well as the different opportunities and stimuli for skills stretch that occur across different employment contexts (Hénaut et al, 2023). It also provides insights into how artists and arts graduates understand creativity as an intrinsic part of their work identity that has value beyond the creative industries (Brook & Communian, 2018).

This research is also significant from an education and workforce standpoint, especially given the increasing pressure placed on academic institutions to demonstrate the employability outcomes of different types of degree and training programs and the decline in linear employment trajectories (Brown et al., 2004). Examining the ways in which artists and arts graduates describe and contextualize the transferable skills they have gained from their artistic training and the skills gaps they identify in their non arts work can help educators to expand opportunities for career-focused learner engagement among this and other segments of the workforce. It can also help to counter negative perceptions among parents and students that arts training will not lead to a "real job."Learning about the transferable skills of artists and arts graduates is also important from an employer and policy perspective. Post-pandemic labor restructuring and rising student debt have prompted many state governments and companies to rethink the value of using degree requirements as an indicator of an applicant's ability to do a job (Dodd, 2023; Flynn, 2024; Peterson et al., 2024). Understanding how artists and arts graduates describe and contextualize the skills they have gained from their training and practice can help improve stakeholder understanding of the skills and employability of this constituency and encourage policies and practices that work to expand those employability outcomes. This knowledge can also help those entering the workforce. Learning how others with similar training describe the skills they have gained from their artistic training and experiences during the research interview can help artists and arts graduates to describe their own skills and experiences in their resume and during the job interview process.

It must be noted that this paper does not claim to provide an empirical understanding of the skills that artists and arts graduates possess. Instead, we focus on how they narrativize their skills and experiences during the research interviews. As one researcher has noted, such narratives are a manifestation of a "strategic practice" that "makes good use of the research interview as an opportunity to exercise professional skills" (Brook & Comunian, 2018, p. 130). Put another way, the way in which artists and arts graduates describe the adaptability of their skills may itself be prompted by the interview process and may also be based on shared assumptions between interviewer and interviewee about what it means to be an artist. To that end, I must state my own positionality as a creative labor researcher with a background in art, design, and humanities. Given my training in these fields, I have a vested interest in learning about the employability outcomes and adaptability of arts training.
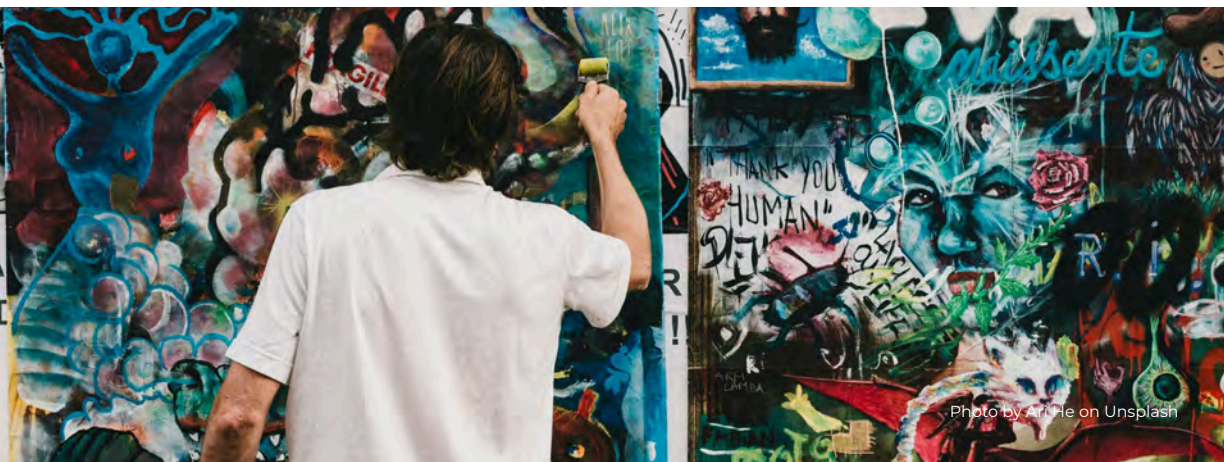
METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

Participation in this study was open to any arts graduate or creative professional 18 years of age or older who was: a) working in a non-arts job; b) had a background or training in the arts; and c) either currently worked in Illinois or had completed their arts training in Illinois. Noone was excluded on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, education level, artistic discipline, or the non-creative job or industry in which they worked. Artists and arts alumni could self-select for the study by responding to recruitment materials distributed on social media. People were also invited to participate via email and word of mouth.

The interviews took place over a 10-week period and during that time we interviewed and surveyed 40 artists and arts graduates (see interview participant data in Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Prior to the interview participants filled out a brief online survey that included short answer, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. Topics for short answer and multiple-choice questions included participant demographic characteristics, artistic training, whether they would work full time in the arts if they could, and whether they maintained a creative practice. Long form, open ended questions asked about barriers participants have faced to working full time in the arts, their current non-arts work, and skills they have learned from their arts training that are applicable to their non-arts work. We also asked them about the skills, experiences, or knowledge they wished they had acquired through their artistic training. They could enter short written responses and most opted to do so in a list format. We used these survey responses to help guide our questions during the interviews, using a semi-structured format that provided participants with an opportunity to elaborate upon or add to their survey responses. During the interview, we also asked participants additional questions about their post-graduation experiences, how they ended up in their current non-arts occupation, and how they feel that artistic training can be improved to expand career pathways for artists and arts graduates. We used the cloud-based application Dedoose to analyze the interview and survey data, using both deductive and inductive coding for the interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses. We looked at co-occurrences between codes and explored connections between skills and demographic or disciplinary data.

40
ARTISTS &
ARTS GRADUATES

13
DISCIPLINES
REPRESENTED

11
NON-ARTS
EMPLOYMENT SECTORS

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Table 1 uses data gathered from both the survey and interviews to provide information on the demographic characteristics, disciplinary backgrounds, employment experiences, and other aspects of our interview pool. Our interview sample includes participants from a wide variety of artistic disciplines and industries. It is broadly reflective of the demographic trends we see in the Illinois arts workforce: The majority identify as White, are aged between 25 and 44, and have at least a bachelor's degree in the arts (Novak-Leonard and Banerjee, 2022). We have oversampled women as well as musicians and actors. That said, our previous research has shown that the majority of arts graduates in Illinois are women and a larger proportion of female arts graduates work in non-arts occupations (Motlani, 2024b). We have also seen that music and theater graduates are among the most likely to have primary jobs in non-arts fields (Motlani, 2024b). This aligns with national research that shows that musicians and actors are among the most likely to work part-time in the arts and have arts jobs as their secondary occupations (NASERC, 2022; NEA, 2019).

Figure 1. Interview participant information (out of 40 participants).

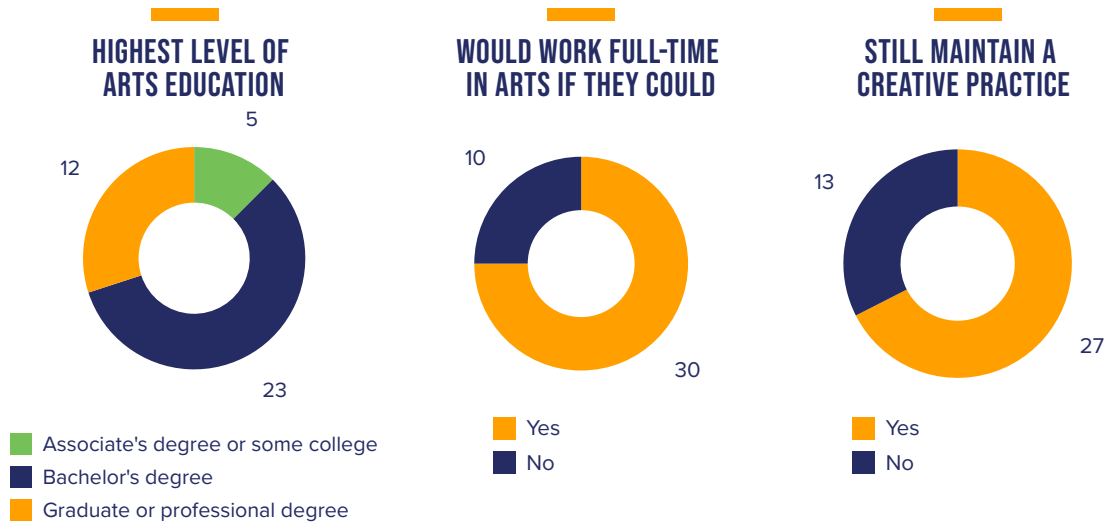**HIGHEST LEVEL OF ARTS EDUCATION**

5
12
23

- Associate's degree or some college
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree

WOULD WORK FULL-TIME IN ARTS IF THEY COULD

10
30

- Yes
- No

STILL MAINTAIN A CREATIVE PRACTICE

13
27

- Yes
- No

Table 1. Interview participant information (out of 40 participants).

FROM ILLINOIS		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
No	21	52.5%
Yes	19	47.5%

RECEIVED ARTS TRAINING IN ILLINOIS		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	29	72.5%
No	11	27.5%

STATE OF RESIDENCE		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Illinois	34	85.0%
Washington	2	5.0%
California	2	5.0%
Arizona	1	2.5%
Missouri	1	2.5%

AGE		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
18-24 years old	2	5.0%
25-34 years old	19	47.5%
35-44 years old	12	30.0%
45-54 years old	6	15.0%
55-64 years old	1	2.5%

GENDER		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Male	14	35.0%
Female	25	62.5%
Non-binary/ third-gender	1	2.5%

RACE & ETHNICITY		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
White	24	60.0%
Latino/Latina/LatinX	4	10.0%
Black or African American	5	12.5%
Two or More Races	2	5.0%
Asian	5	12.5%

HIGHEST LEVEL OF ARTS EDUCATION		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Some college credit, no degree	4	10.0%
Associate's degree	1	2.5%
Bachelor's degree	23	57.5%
Master's degree	11	27.5%
Doctorate degree	1	2.5%

WERE PLANNING TO WORK IN ARTS PRIOR TO GRADUATING		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	28	70.0%
No	5	12.5%
Maybe	7	17.5%

DISCIPLINE		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Acting	12	30.0%
Art History	5	12.5%
Dance	5	12.5%
Film	7	17.5%
Fine and Studio Arts	11	27.5%
Graphic Design	8	20.0%
Literary Arts	4	10.0%
Music	21	52.5%
Photography	8	20.0%
Set or Exhibition Design	5	12.5%
Other	3	7%
Interior Design	1	2.5%
Museum Work/ Conservation	1	2.5%

NON-ARTS SECTOR		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Business and finance	10	25.0%
Education	8	20.0%
Information Technology	7	17.5%
Healthcare	4	10.0%
Non profit	3	7.5%
Advertising/ Marketing	2	5.0%
Staffing/ Recruitment	2	5.0%
Entertainment	1	2.5%
Manufacture	1	2.5%
Service design and research	1	2.5%
Retail	1	2.5%

FINDINGS

In this section we explore how the artists and arts graduates in non-arts occupations that we interviewed perceive and describe the skills they have learned from their arts training and how these skills transfer to sectors and occupations outside the arts. We begin by examining the most frequently cited skills across all disciplines, elaborating on the top five. We then explore how demographic characteristics and disciplinary background impacted how artists and arts graduates described their skills. We end this section by examining the skills and abilities that our interview participants wished they had gained from their arts training.

When asked whether their arts training or education has given them skills and/or abilities that are applicable to their non-arts work, almost all the artists and arts graduates we interviewed (39 out of 40) responded "yes." Table 2 ranks the skills cited based on the number of participants that cited each skill and the number of times each skill was mentioned by all participants. The top five skills were communication, emotional intelligence/empathy, problem solving/improvisation, out of the box thinking/creativity, and being a better learner. In the following pages we explore how our interview participants described and contextualized these skills. We also examine co-occurrences between transferable skills, highlighting instances where those who cited one skill also often cited another (Table 3).

Table 2. Skills cited by interview participants

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS OUT OF 40	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
Communication	25	43
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy	20	38
Problem solving/ Improvisation	20	33
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach	15	25
Being a better learner/ Learning new skills	13	18
Adaptability	13	16
Teamwork/ Collaboration	11	18
Organization/ Time management	11	16
Aesthetic judgement	8	15
Social orientation	8	10
Ability to take criticism	6	13
Project management	6	8
Self guided/ Self motivated	6	8
User-oriented perspective	6	8
Detail orientation	6	7
Active listening	6	6
Critical thinking	5	9
Professionalism/ Showing up with your best	5	8
Storytelling	5	7
Calm under pressure	3	6
Cultural awareness	2	3
Building/ Making	2	3
Curiosity	2	2
Leadership	2	2
Research skills	2	2
Marketing	1	1
Positive attitude	1	1
Vocal and physical expression	1	1

TOP FIVE SKILLS AND ABILITIES ACROSS ALL PARTICIPANTS

01 COMMUNICATION

02 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

03 PROBLEM SOLVING/ IMPROVISATION

04 OUT OF THE BOX THINKING/ INNOVATION

05 BEING A BETTER LEARNER

Table 3. Co-occurrence between selected skills

10 ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ 1

	COMMUNICATION	EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE/ EMPATHY	OUT OF THE BOX THINKING/ CREATIVE APPROACH	PROBLEM SOLVING/ IMPROVISATION	TEAMWORK/ COLLABORATION
Ability to take criticism	1	1	3	1	0
Active listening	1	4	0	1	0
Adaptability	1	0	3	5	0
Aesthetic judgment/ Design sensibility	1	1	4	1	1
Being a better learner/ Learning new skills	4	1	0	1	0
Building/ Making	1	0	1	2	0
Calm under pressure	2	0	0	0	0
Communication	0	10	1	5	5
Critical thinking	2	0	0	0	0
Cultural awareness	1	0	0	0	0
Curiosity	0	2	0	0	0
Detail orientation	0	2	0	0	1
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy	10	0	2	5	7
Leadership	1	0	0	0	0
Marketing	0	0	0	0	0
Organization/ Time management	1	2	1	3	1
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach	1	2	0	7	0
Positive attitude	0	0	0	0	0
Problem solving/ Improvisation	5	5	7	0	2
Professionalism/ Showing up with your best	1	0	0	0	0
Project management	0	1	1	2	0
Research skills	1	1	0	0	0
Self guided/ Self motivation	0	0	1	0	0
Social orientation	0	0	0	0	0
Storytelling	0	0	0	1	0
Teamwork/ Collaboration	5	7	0	2	0
User-oriented perspective	1	1	0	0	0
Vocal and physical expression	0	1	0	0	0

01
COMMUNICATION

Communication was the most frequently cited transferable skill across all interview participants (25 participants; 43 mentions). For Amelia, a vocal performance graduate who works in education research, this includes mastery with public speaking. She described how being on stage during weekly recitals and auditions gradually wore away her fears about performing in front of others. "I found that with repeated exposure to that sort of thing, public speaking—specifically with research presentations—became a breeze. I felt nowhere near as much anxiety over giving a presentation as I did before... I consider it one of my strengths now." Amelia adds: "One thing that I learned in my music training is, if you're prepared, you don't need to be nervous and freak out."

> " IN THE ARTS [THERE'S A LOT OF EMPHASIS ON] EXPRESSING EMOTION. YOU GET TO REALLY TALK AUTHENTICALLY ABOUT PEOPLE AND THEIR EXPERIENCES THAT ARE DIFFERENT FROM YOURS. "

For some participants, being an effective communicator means being able to connect with others, something that they feel was emphasized in their arts experiences and training. Juliet, an opera singer working in government finance, says "The hardest thing to teach is how to be a good person: How to have a conversation that is not pressured; how to make connections between yourself and the person that you're talking to; how to make connections between yourself and what you work on and what another person works on... you're taught that in the humanities, you're taught that as a history major, you're taught that as a psychology major, you're taught that as an artist. Your entire training as an artist is to find creative connections."

The ability to forge these "creative connections" has enabled our interview participants to bridge differences in background, discipline, or even language. Gael, a graphic design graduate working in account management and operations, says, "In the arts [there's a lot of emphasis on] expressing emotion. You get to really talk authentically about people and their experiences that are different from yours." For Fiona, a theater major working in customer success management for a tech company, this ability to speak authentically has especially helped her in client-facing roles where she needs to relay information in an effective and easy to follow manner. "I'm good at breaking things down and putting them into language that we can all understand.... I have a tendency to get on people's level. I try to meet them where they're at." She feels it is unlikely that she would have developed these skills were it not for her background in theater. "If you just grew up in this tight buttoned corporate society, I don't know if you would really be able to read someone...and try to relate to them on their level."

Layla, an actor and dancer who works in education, uses psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to describe how the visual, audible, kinesthetic, and linguistic aspectsof the arts make them effective tools for communicating with people from diverse backgrounds and ways of perceiving the world. In her experience, arts-integrated education has helped break down barriers within multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic classroom settings: "I ended up visiting schools where there were 30 languages...how could we get teachers [in those schools] to measure and grade what learning is happening with each [student]? In that sense the arts help the teachers to know how much the [student] knows. Because sometimes it's not through English or through written language that they will be able to express what they are understanding. But there's other ways in which the [student] will be able to express what they know."

> " TO APPROACH BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION FROM THAT MORE HUMANISTIC LENS AND MORE POST-POSITIVISTIC LENS IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE [STUDENTS] NEED STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING THAT TAKE OTHER PEOPLE DEEPLY INTO ACCOUNT. "

Peter, a poet, says that his literary training has greatly informed his approach to teaching business and professional writing. "I think it has a lot to do with being attuned and alive to the ramifications of language in the exact situation that you're currently experiencing. You build up a repertoire of resources for communication. And some of them are useful in some situations and some of them are useful in other situations." His creative background has encouraged him to take a more humanistic approach to business writing than those customarily expounded in textbooks. "Feeling is always involved in everything that we do as communicators, and it is impossible to eliminate it from communication. ... To approach business and professional communication from that more humanistic lens and more post-positivistic lens is important because [students] need strategies for communicating that take other people deeply into account...it's about attuning yourself specifically to these situations."

02
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence was the second top ranked transferable skill across all interview subjects (38 mentions by 20 participants). Given our interviewees' emphasis on the role of effective communication in overcoming barriers and attending to the feelings and experiences of others, it is not surprising that we found a strong co-occurrence between communication and emotional intelligence skills in our interview sample, meaning those who cited one skill often cited the other (see Table 3).

> **" EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS MORE THAN JUST EMOTIONS. IT'S UNDERSTANDING HOW THAT TRANSLATES INTO A SPACE AND HOW EVERYONE ELSE IS BOUNCING OFF EACH OTHER. I THINK IT IS REALLY IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY IN A CLIENT FACING ROLE. "**

Alice, a dancer who works in marketing for a tech firm, says "Emotional intelligence is more than just emotions. It's understanding how that translates into a space and how everyone else is bouncing off each other. I think it is really important, especially in a client facing role. What makes you really successful is being able to read the other person and knowing how to respond to them and adapt to them." For her, this comes from a deep understanding of your own emotions and how they manifest in your physical occupation of space: "I'm constantly manipulating my body and the textures in my body and what I'm trying to portray in my body…It makes you more observant of how other people are holding themselves and then it makes you better able to work with them if they don't know how to communicate, if they're having a sh**** day, or they're really stressed out … I think that it's made me a lot better at listening in a marketing corporate team building space."

Miles, an actor who works as an executive assistant for a non-profit said that putting yourself in someone else's shoes was a big part of his training. "As an actor I studied human behavior a lot and human intention—why people do the things they do and how they do them to achieve a goal they may or may not be aware of… I think that's allowed me in this position specifically, because I interface with the whole staff and then a wide variety of stakeholders, to become better at adjusting how I communicate with certain people based on who they are, what they need, and how they fall in the organization. And I think that's just primarily from having to embody and understand other people in my work and my creative practice."

For others, emotional intelligence surfaces in a deeper intuition about how to make things more user friendly. Says Brady, a fine artist now working in data analytics, "A lot of our work [as artists] involves being very emotionally engaged and so when I'm at work, I feel I have a very strong intuition about how certain things make me feel. Maybe that is an artistic superpower, because I'm able to see 'Oh, the way that we do this whole process is very unintuitive. This should come here first, then this step should be last.'" This has enabled him to design new processes for communicating data in way that are "more efficient and more visually apparent," he says.

03

PROBLEM SOLVING / IMPROVISATION

The ability to problem-solve earned 33 mentions by 20 interview participants. Some attribute their problem-solving skills to the experience of having to pivot and embrace new materials, approaches, and techniques when producing artworks. Says Nathan, a carbon fiber company owner with fine arts training, "I definitely think to be an artist you have to get pretty comfortable with failing, especially when you go into critiques and the number of times that you're told that your piece isn't [conveying] what you're trying to convey. The amount of tough criticism—it's the same thing as failing, right?" Ryan, a fine artist and graphic designer who works as a business analyst for an insurance company, expressed similar sentiments: "I don't think I'd be a good [business] analyst if I wasn't [an artist] because as a creative, we tend to think out of the box or [look for] other ways to solve problems. We could put together a painting and it didn't turn out how we want it, so we take a new direction, and that painting becomes phenomenal." He equates this to finding alternative approaches to working with data: "If you're looking for 2 plus 2 equals 4, you're going to always find that. But as a creative, we might say 'Oh, wait a minute, what if we divide this in half to get to this point?...What's another way to look at it?"

> **"AS CREATIVES, WE TEND TO THINK OUT OF THE BOX OR [LOOK FOR] OTHER WAYS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS. WE COULD PUT TOGETHER A PAINTING AND IT DIDN'T TURN OUT HOW WE WANT IT, SO WE TAKE A NEW DIRECTION, AND THAT PAINTING BECOMES PHENOMENAL."**

For Nathan, problem solving equates with resourcefulness and a can-do, entrepreneurial spirit. He describes it as a "get it done" mindset, channeling Tim Gunn's "make it work" catchphrase from the Lifetime reality show *Project Runway*. For him, having to work within a limited budget to produce his life-sized canvases, which required hundreds of dollars of paint supplies, taught him how to find new ways to achieve the same ends: "It taught me, and I'm sure it taught others, how to stretch a dollar as far as you can. I started learning how to find the best value for what I could get ... that was a lesson that I took from it... that "get it done" attitude. I feel a lot of artists learn that. That's something that being in art school teaches you." He often hires people with similar arts backgrounds and thus brings an employer's perspective to the value of arts training: "The people that I work with in my business that have art degrees—I see that in them as well. They bring that to the job, and I think that's a huge benefit for me as an employer."

04
OUT OF THE BOX THINKING/ INNOVATION

Out of the box thinking or the ability to come up with innovative solutions was mentioned 25 times by 15 participants over the course of our interviews. Lucia describes her ability to innovate within the context of her work as a personal fitness trainer: "In a typical environment if you hired a personal trainer, they might have a notebook and exercises and check things off and be like, here's the workout and here's what we're doing. But because I came from a different kind of background, I took each moment as it was, which is what I think our creativity is. You don't know how the art is going to look, but you are there, and it organically happens. You're tapping into this other place. And that's how I treated my movement. Anyone who has taken a class of mine or worked out with me would say the same thing: 'We don't know what she's going to do and neither does she until it happens.'" This experience has helped Lucia to work effectively with clients with physical or cognitive challenges: "I have a client with dementia right now and he's 91. I was seeing what he was doing with the occupational therapist. He has to read, and he finds it boring. We started doing karaoke where he's on the mike and I'll play the music, and he can read it. That way he's getting the brain and the body at the same time."

> " A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT COME UP WITHIN CORPORATE STRUCTURE OR WITHIN COMPUTER SCIENCE ARE TAUGHT TO THINK, OKAY, YOU CAN DO IT THIS WAY OR THIS WAY OR THIS WAY. IT'S ALL BINARY. YOU STAY WITHIN THIS STRUCTURE. WHERE FOR ME IN THEATER … YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE BUDGET TO MAKE THIS SOUND VECTOR OR HAVE THIS PROP. SO, YOU FIGURE OUT HOW YOU CAN GET TO THAT POINT. "

Our analysis shows a co-occurrence between out of the box thinking, problem solving, and adaptability. Rory, an IT support specialist trained in theater and lighting design, says: "I bring something to the table that's different than almost anyone else, and that is adaptability and the ability to find the solution outside of the box. A lot of people that come up within corporate structure or within computer science are taught to think, okay, you can do it this way or this way or this way. It's all binary. You stay within this structure. Where for me in theater … you might not have budget to make this sound vector or have this prop. So, you figure out how you can get to that point. And it's not always going, 'Oh, just go buy it.' You don't have that option." He says "that's helped me approach different obstacles within the corporate structure. For example, if we can't purchase the solution and it'll take too long to make the solution, how about we link these two platforms that we already pay for in a different way to get a similar outcome until we have budget next year to provide that final solution."

05
BEING A BETTER LEARNER

13 interview participants mentioned 18 times that their training or experience in the arts has helped them to be better learners, enabling them to learn new skills required in their non-arts job. Alice, the dancer who works in marketing for a tech firm, says: "I believe that [my dance training] makes me a quicker learner in a marketing space ... I can quickly pick up skills and I think that a lot of that comes from figuring out how to do that in dance because while you're using the body, you're still using your brain to learn routines."

For Rowen, her art history graduate studies helped her to reflect more deeply upon the learning process in ways that apply to her career as a registered nurse: "The point is being able to be very self-aware about your learning process and about the construction of knowledge. I think that's a huge advantage, because...for me, it means that there's nothing out there that I can't really learn at this point."

> " BEING AN ACTOR TAUGHT ME TO BE VERY CURIOUS ABOUT THINGS AND TO LEARN EVERYTHING I DIDN'T KNOW. [SO WHEN IT COMES TO LEARNING ABOUT] AN ENDOWMENT OR THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN IN-KIND PAYMENT—I HAD TO LEARN A LOT BUT I FELT LIKE I WAS PREPARED TO DO THAT. "

Colin, a strategic innovation advisor, says that his training in fine art and design imbued him with an abiding curiosity and thirst for knowledge. "I think just learning how to learn—that's what our school actually gave me. There was curiosity, this endless empathy. And just a hunger for more knowledge, more tools." Briony, an actor who now works in university constituent engagement, echoes similar sentiments. "Being an actor taught me to be very curious about things and to learn everything I didn't know. [So when it comes to learning about] an endowment or the difference between an in-kind payment—I had to learn a lot but I felt like I was prepared to do that."

VARIATIONS WITHIN GENDER AND DISCIPLINARY GROUPS

In addition to examining the responses of all interview participants, we also wanted to understand how gender and artistic discipline impacted how interviewees identified and described the transferable skills they have gained from their arts training.[4] (Tables 4 and 5).

GENDER

Table 4. Top skills by gender with number of participants (out of 40) and mentions

MALE	FEMALE
Communication (8, 13)	Communication (16, 29)
Adaptability (8, 11)	Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (13, 23)
Problem solving/ Improvisation (7, 14)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (12, 18)
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (7, 11)	Teamwork/ Collaboration (9, 16)
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (6, 12)	Organization/ Time management (9, 13)

HIGH RANKING SKILLS FOR FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

04
TEAMWORK/
COLLABORATION

05
ORGANIZATION/
TIME MANAGEMENT

The highest ranking skills identified by male interviewees were the same as the overall participant group with one exception. For male participants, adaptability joined the list (8 participants and 11 mentions). For Thomas, an actor working for a staffing company, the ability to adapt and pivot that he gained from his theater training has been especially useful in a startup environment: "We're starting from scratch. 'Here's the new thing. Move along.' I was just so used to that because I've been in show processes where a number is cut or we're re-choreographing this part or we're taking this out and we're putting this in or we're holding this a beat longer. There's just a constant feedback loop and so you have to be open and receptive to it, implement it, and keep moving. ... It's that agility to be able to just quickly do it and not let it be something that is setting everyone back and creating all kinds of conflict and push back that's been really helpful to be able to implement."

For female participants, the top three skills were the same as those cited by the overall participant group (communication, emotional intelligence, and problem solving/improvisation). However, teamwork/collaboration and organization/time management were the fourth and fifth top-cited skills. Khadija, an education administration professor with a background in musical performance, asks her students to consider how they fit into the wider scheme of things: "What role do you think you play?" Using the analogy of an orchestra, she suggests that everyone can benefit from understanding that they are part of a larger dynamic. "Even as the [orchestra] principal, you don't have to do everything all by yourself. When I was a concert mistress, I didn't play the whole thing by myself. Literally, I couldn't—it's impossible. You might be the face of the organization, the 'leader,' but I encourage other people [to understand] you don't have to do this all by yourself. What is a collaborative way that you can get this done? It's very different from the individualistic way that we think about the world, where you've got to be the best. But you don't have to be the best. You just have to be a really good team player. And sometimes it's being the person who jingles the bell or [strikes] the triangle."

Photo by Manuel Nägeli on Unsplash

Table 5. Top skills by artistic discipline with number of participants (out of 40) and mentions

MUSIC	ACTING
Communication (16, 26)	Communication (11, 19)
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (8, 12)	Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (10, 18)
Organization/ Time management (8, 12)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (8, 11)
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (7, 13)	Organization/ Time management (7, 9)
Being a better learner/ Learning new skills (7, 9)*	Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (4, 5)
FINE AND STUDIO ARTS	**GRAPHIC DESIGN**
Problem solving/ Improvisation (9, 16)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (5, 8)
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (7, 12)	Communication (4, 10)
Aesthetic judgement/ Design sensibility (5, 12)	Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (4, 6)
Ability to take criticism (5, 12)	Aesthetic judgement/ Design sensibility (4, 6)
Communication (5, 11)	User-oriented perspective (3, 5)
PHOTOGRAPHY	**FILM**
Problem solving/ Improvisation (7, 11)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (5, 6)
Communication (5, 11)	Communication (3, 6)
Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (5, 6)	Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (3, 5)
Ability to take criticism (4, 10)	Storytelling (3, 4)
Aesthetic judgement/ Design sensibility (3, 6)**	Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (2, 6)
ART HISTORY	**DANCE**
Problem solving/ Improvisation (5, 7)	Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (5, 8)
Communication (3, 6)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (3, 4)
Social orientation (3, 4)	Communication (3, 4)
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (2, 5)	Being a better learner/ Learning new skills (3, 4)
Critical thinking (2, 4)	Organization/ Time management (3, 4)
SET OR EXHIBITION DESIGN	**LITERARY ARTS**
Problem solving/ Improvisation (4, 5)	Adaptability (4, 5)
Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (3, 6)	Emotional intelligence/ Empathy (3, 6)
Project management (3, 5)	Out of the box thinking/ Creative approach (3, 5)
Communication (3, 4)	Problem solving/ Improvisation (2, 3)
Organization/ Time management (3, 4)	Being a better learner/ Learning new skills (2, 2)

When we analyzed and ranked transferable skills by disciplinary background, we found that participants from almost all the artistic disciplines represented in our interview group ranked communication, emotional intelligence, problem solving/improvisation, out of the box thinking, and being a better learner among their top cited skills. Below we discuss some additional skills that ranked highly among specific disciplinary groups.

HIGH RANKING SKILLS ACROSS SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES

01
ABILITY TO
TAKE CRITICISM

02
USER
ORIENTED
PERSPECTIVE

03
PROFESSIONALISM
AND A STRONG
WORK ETHIC

01

ABILITY TO TAKE CRITICISM (FINE ARTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY)

Participants with fine arts and photography backgrounds cited the ability to take criticism as one of their top skills . Amber, who works as chief of staff for a university research unit, associates the practice of critique – an integral part of art and design education - with the ability to problem-solve in a non-arts setting. "I don't know if that's really duplicated [in other fields]. I'm sure maybe that exists in other creative areas, maybe creative writing or something, but it did not exist in the graduate program in public administration. There was not this aspect of going back in and figuring out other ways to accomplish [things], to like say 'What are you trying to do? Are you successful? Are there other ways you could go about doing that?' ... I don't see that in people who've only come through an MBA program, for example. They bring the skills, but they don't necessarily come ready with alternatives or different ways of going about a problem."

**02**

USER ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE (GRAPHIC DESIGN)

One of the top five skills for design majors was a user-oriented perspective. Jennifer says her graphic design background has impacted how she approaches her event planning work: "I still approach an event the same way I would have approached a brochure or whatever project I had for graphic design and that is to start at the end. I have to understand what the end goal is. And I have to know, what does our audience need to come away with at every event ... They all have a larger purpose and so I have to know what that purpose is. I have to know the goals. I have to know everything that the finale should be in order to plan it appropriately. And that was the same way I approached brochures and viewbooks and all those sorts of things...I have to know that end goal so that I can work backwards."

03

PROFESSIONALISM AND A STRONG WORK ETHIC (MUSICIANS AND ACTORS)

While it was not among the top cited skills within any discipline, we found that professionalism and a strong work ethic was cited as a transferable skill exclusively by actors and musicians. Briony, the actor working in university constituent engagement, said that the competitive nature of acting and the limited number of acting jobs available means you always have to show up with your best:

> " THERE IS A HUGE EMPHASIS [IN PERFORMANCE] ON BEING RELIABLE AND BEING PUNCTUAL AND SHOWING UP PREPARED TO REHEARSE… BEING PROFESSIONAL, BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR [STUFF] AND KNOWING YOUR PART. "

"When you're an actor, you're always replaceable. If you don't know your lines, you're going to be fired. There's always another actor waiting right outside that's going to come take your job…What I learned is you have to be on time, you have to always hit deadlines. We're going to show up and we're going to be as effective as we possibly can because we're so used to being able to be replaced." For Amelia, the education researcher with a background in vocal performance, it's about making sure you are playing your part: "There is a huge emphasis [in performance] on being reliable and being punctual and showing up prepared to rehearse… being professional, being responsible for your [stuff] and knowing your part." She adds that in musical training there is a great emphasis on following a routine and maintaining a regimented schedule: "That was very much part of the culture that I think can translate well into work when it comes to being detail oriented, doing things by the book, doing thorough work."

Photo by Ahmed Raza Kz on Unsplash
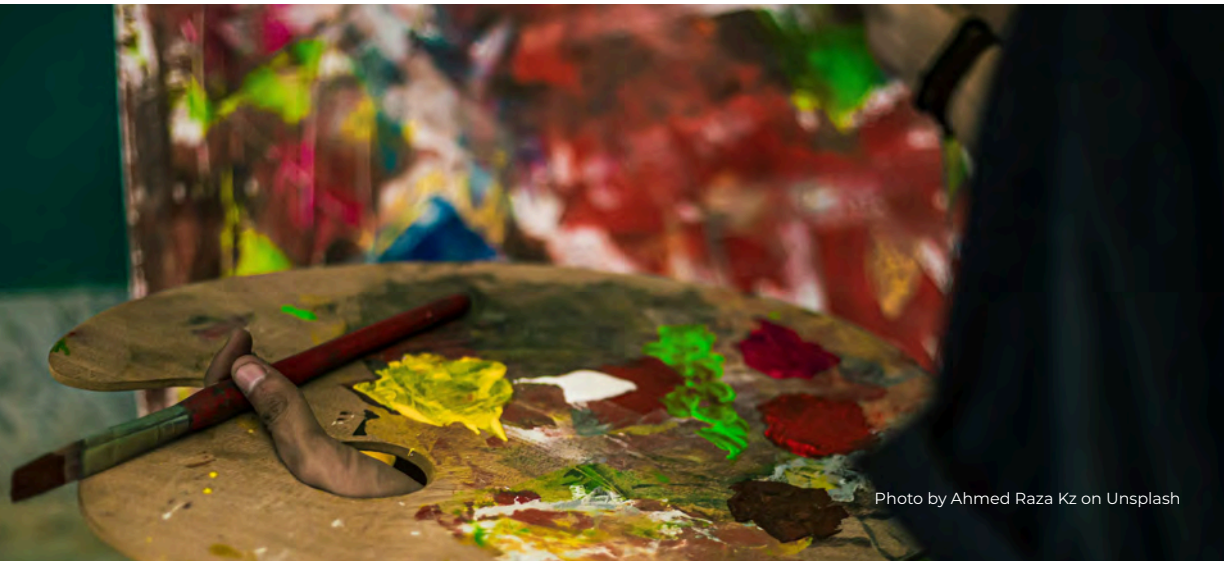
SKILLS NEEDED

In the pre-interview survey, participants were asked about the skills, experiences, or knowledge they wished they had acquired through their artistic training. They could enter short written responses and most opted to do so in a list format. During the interview we also asked participants: "What do you think educators can do differently to prepare arts and design students for the workplace?" Our analysis of the coded responses of both survey and interview responses are presented in Table 6. They reveal that the most widely sought after skills among our participant pool were career development/planning and business and finance. Other skills or knowledge that our interview participants identified as areas of greater importance included sales and marketing, and computer software and application skills.

Table 6. Skills Needed

SKILLS NEEDED	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS OUT OF 40	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
Career development and management	29	54
Business and finance	24	43
Sales and marketing	12	13
Computer software/ Application	7	8
Career-specific artistic skills	5	5
Networking	5	5
Professional writing/ Editing	5	5
Organization and time management	4	5
Administrative skills	3	4
Emotional resilience/ Self care	2	2
Art handling	1	1
Collaboration	1	1
Critical thinking	1	1
Foreign language skills	1	1
Fundraising	1	1
Project management	1	1

TOP SKILLS NEEDED

01
CAREER DEVELOPMENT
AND MANAGEMENT

02
BUSINESS
AND FINANCE

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Almost three quarters of all participants emphasized a need for more career guidance and career development insights (29 participants; 54 mentions). Colin, the strategic innovation advisor with a fine art and design background, says that knowledge of how to guide a career is one of the elements most prominently lacking in art school training: "They have a lot of Fulbright kind of things and there's a lot of things that are preparing you for renowned projects, but I don't know that there's a lot of thought around strategic career building." Our interview participants felt they would have benefited from learning about the career options that were available to them with an arts degree and how they could leverage their creative skills in different ways. Victoria, an opera singer working for a financial consulting firm, noted "I wish that there was just more understanding that every artist's path is going to look so different... I think highlighting all of the ways that you can be an artist and all the ways you can have a career in and outside of art would be so useful and I think it would encourage more people to get arts education."

> **‟ I WISH THAT THERE WAS JUST MORE UNDERSTANDING THAT EVERY ARTIST'S PATH IS GOING TO LOOK SO DIFFERENT… I THINK HIGHLIGHTING ALL OF THE WAYS THAT YOU CAN BE AN ARTIST AND ALL THE WAYS YOU CAN HAVE A CAREER IN AND OUTSIDE OF ART WOULD BE SO USEFUL AND I THINK IT WOULD ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE TO GET ARTS EDUCATION. ”**

Amplifying the skills and experiences they already had and presenting themselves on the best footing to potential employers was another aspect of career building our participants felt was lacking in their training. Fiona, the actor now working for a tech company, recounted her recent visit to a career fair at her alma mater that brought into relief the difference between her own career readiness and that of the students attending the fair: "I realized that all these kids that were coming over seemed to have their elevator pitch down. They were like, 'Hey, I'm so-and-so and over the past 4 years I've had a focus on this. I am really interested in XYZ. Here's my resume, etc.' … I never left school being like, 'Yep, here's my resume; here's what I'm interested in; here's my mission statement.… I don't even think I had a career resume. I only had my theater resume. But if I had [those other things] that could have helped me."

Fiona also notes that understanding one's worth as an employee and negotiating salaries was another career skill she felt she was lacking when she entered the labor force: "When I got my first job, they said we can pay you $35,000… something very minimal. And I said 'Okay, yes.' I did not even think to negotiate because I was scared that they were going to [say], you know what, now that we're thinking about it, never mind. I really thought that they were going to take it back if I said something. And I still feel like that today. I've done a little bit of negotiating in some of the offers that I've received, but I wish that I just had more [training] in how a business is run."

BUSINESS AND FINANCE

Twenty-four interview participants identified business and finance skills as areas in which they wish they had received more training. This included managing a budget and financial planning. Thomas, who works in recruitment, says he would have benefited from "more classes in place for juniors and seniors to learning budgeting. Things like: where are you hoping to go city wise? Are you hoping to go to Chicago, Seattle, Denver, New York? … Do you need to have a car? Do you care about the commute? Are you going to go with roommates? Do you need to line up timing with roommates? Are you planning on doing something that takes you out of city right away and then you have to find a sublet?…I felt lucky that I had friends that helped teach me that, but I feel like there were people in my program that didn't have those people and kind of try to just figure it out themselves."

Others wished they had received more guidance on how to sell their work or run a business. Sarah, a fine arts graduate working in academic operations, said "What I really wanted was that practical…nuts and bolts kind of thing…I don't want to learn anymore about how to paint. I want to learn how to make a career out of it." Dylan, an economic analyst who majored in physics and music expressed similar sentiments: "How do you create a freelance career? How do you make a website? How do you apply for grants? How do you organize as an LLC or structure a business? How do you set up a teaching studio? There's no practical career education. It's all craft." For them, that practical education is crucial: "Through that you'll get a lot more transferable skills to other industries as well."

Our interview participants also said they would have benefited from industry specific business insights. Aleksandr, a software developer who studied film, said he wished he knew more about how to sell films rather than just make them: "Here is how the film is distributed. This is how much you can make after you get a feature film done. This is how you get it to different streaming platforms." Others noted that having more business skills would help them to access jobs within the creative industries that end up going to people with business degrees. Talia, an actor and filmmaker working as a project manager for a consulting firm says, "There's this huge breadth of different jobs [in the creative industries] that then become only accessible to people who went to business school… And it's frustrating because the people who have the most passion for these roles don't end up getting to be on the business side of these industries."

> " THERE'S THIS HUGE BREADTH OF DIFFERENT JOBS [IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES] THAT THEN BECOME ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO PEOPLE WHO WENT TO BUSINESS SCHOOL… AND IT'S FRUSTRATING BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE MOST PASSION FOR THESE ROLES DON'T END UP GETTING TO BE ON THE BUSINESS SIDE OF THESE INDUSTRIES. "

CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates that artists and arts graduates working in non-arts jobs feel they have gained numerous transferable skills from their artistic training and experiences. As noted, the top skills that they described as emerging from this training and practice were communication, emotional intelligence/empathy, problem solving/improvisation, out of the box thinking/creativity, and being a better learner. These align with findings from the most recent survey conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), which show that creative thinking/problem solving, communication, and the ability to evaluate multiple approaches to solving a problem were among the skills most often acquired from institutions according to arts alumni (Novak-Leonard, 2024).

The artists and arts graduates we interviewed felt they need more training or experience in career development/planning and business and finance. Once again, our findings align with research conducted by SNAAP, which revealed that the overall largest gap that survey participants identified between skills acquired and skills needed in the workplace were for business and financial or entrepreneurial skills (Novak-Leonard, 2024).

Photo by Jakob Owens on Unsplash

A WORD ON CREATIVITY AND ARTISTIC IDENTITY

When asked whether they considered themselves to be creative, regardless of their occupation, 39 out of 40 interview participants answered "yes." Yet the word "creative" did not figure prominently in how interview participants described their skills. That, however, does not preclude creativity from being a factor in our interview responses. The findings from a recent study that used data from the National Survey of Self-Perceptions of Creativity & Arts Participation to examine public perceptions of creativity found that among the most salient characterizations of creativity were innovation and problem solving (Novak-Leonard et al., 2022). This aligns with our findings, suggesting that terms like problem solving and out of the box thinking might be more precise proxies for creativity.

We also found that when asked to provide a summary of their artistic background, 33 out of 40 interview participants traced their artistic interests, pursuits, or exposure to the arts to their youth – either high school or much earlier. This suggests that artistic pursuits and interests are an intrinsic part of the personal and vocational narrative for most of our interview subjects.

This is aptly summed up by a comment by Ciara, a vocal performance major working in finance, with which the report began: "From the perspective of a musician, [arts education] starts when you're a child….when you're 5 or 6 years old. You work consistently for decades to even be able to have a seat at the table to be a professional musician. When I got into the working world, I was so fearful that I'd be up against folks that have been working in IT or econ for decades. But that's not the case. …So, that would be another thing that I would impress upon hiring managers: think of an iceberg. You're an artist at the top, but beneath that is a wealth of time spent and resources acquired and novel ways of thinking."

These findings suggest that creative or artistic identity remains an important facet of how artists and arts graduates working in non-arts jobs perceive themselves, regardless of their occupation or industry. It is not surprising, therefore, that 27 out of 40 participants still maintain a creative practice, and when asked if they would work full time in the arts if they could, 30 out of 40 participants said "yes." This supports research that shows that artists often retain a strong compulsion to create, regardless of their primary occupation (Lindemann and Tepper, 2017).

> " FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A MUSICIAN, [ARTS EDUCATION] STARTS WHEN YOU'RE A CHILD….WHEN YOU'RE 5 OR 6 YEARS OLD. YOU WORK CONSISTENTLY FOR DECADES TO EVEN BE ABLE TO HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE TO BE A PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN. "

TAKEAWAYS

The findings in this report go some way in answering the question posed at the outset of the report: Why do so many individuals each year choose to study the arts? For our interviewees, one answer appears to be that they have gained skills from their artistic training that are valuable both within and outside the creative industries.

Our findings also help to provide nuance and expand the definition of success when it comes to the employment outcomes of artists and arts graduates (Woronkowicz, 2023). They reveal that "Beyond defining success as employment as an artist or designer in a creative industries sector, another understanding of what counts as success for arts and design alumni is the leveraging of transferable skills and abilities developed through training and studies in arts or design to other occupations and sectors" (Novak-Leonard, 2024, p.5).

How artists perceive and leverage their artistic training has workforce and education policy implications. The value that artists and arts graduates place on the transferable skills they have gained from their arts training supports research on the ways in which artistic expression and opportunity impact employability and job readiness (NORC, 2018). Moreover, many of the skills that our interview subjects identified as emerging from their artistic training or experience align with the skills that organizations and companies have highlighted as being crucial to helping workers adapt to disruptions caused by automation and that are currently in short supply. A recent report by the World Economic Forum showed that more than 70% of companies cited creative thinking as one of the top rising skills in the next 5 years and named adaptability, lifelong learning, attention to detail, empathy, and other soft skills as being key to workforce adaptation in the future (WEF, 2023). Another report by McKinsey reveals that as AI reshapes the workforce, demand for social and emotional skills is rising in the US and Europe as the number of jobs requiring empathy and leadership increase (Hazan et al., 2024).

Does the perceived acquisition or development of skills that employers identify as being in demand now and in the future mean that workers with arts training are especially well-positioned to adapt to the changing nature of work? In order to answer this question, we would need to gain a better understanding of how employers across different public and private sector companies and organizations as well as workforce development stakeholders perceive this segment of the workforce. Future studies might also explore the barriers that creatives have faced in transitioning to different careers, as well as the opportunities that have helped them.

NOTES

[1] This is based on data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)and includes first and second major completions for Architecture and Visual and Performing arts across all degree types.

[2] The studies cited use U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data to show that most people with arts education have primary occupations outside the arts. Surveys conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) suggest a much larger percentage of arts graduates in the workforce have an arts or design related job or arts and design related duties (56% and 75% respectively). See Novak-Leonard (2024). Reasons for the discrepancy between ACS and SNAAP data may be attributable to the fact that the latter has a smaller sample size and is free of some of the ACS' restrictions regarding primary and secondary occupation and occupational delineation.

[3] The term emerges from Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation's (CCI) Trident methodology. See Cunningham (2014).

[4] Only one of our interview participants identified as non-binary and therefore we did not have enough data to analyze their top 5 skills. For this reason, our analysis of transferable skills by gender focuses on interview participants who identified as male or female.

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ABOUT THE ILLINOIS CREATIVE WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP

Guided by the vital role of art and artists to the health of our state, the Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership seeks to advance our understanding of the realities and needs of arts workers and the larger cultural ecosystem to which they belong. A collaboration between Discovery Partners Institute, Arts Alliance Illinois, the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago, it funds research at the intersection of artistic labor, education, workforce development, government policy, and the social and economic impacts of the arts. The partnership's goal is to identify nation-leading and transformative improvements in how the state trains, educates, supports, and employs its creative workforce.

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