

Artists Report Back

A National Study on the Lives of
Arts Graduates and Working Artists

A report by **BFAMFAPhD**, 2014

About this report

As artists and art school graduates, we often find ourselves in conversations about the difficulties of continuing our practice as writers, authors, artists, actors, photographers, musicians, singers, producers, directors, performers, choreographers, dancers and entertainers. We struggle to support ourselves with jobs outside of the arts and we struggle to earn a living in the arts. Yet art school administrators and “creative class” reports assure us that arts graduates make a living in the arts.¹ Loan officers insist that art students can afford art school tuition, repaying student loans over time by working in the arts. This is not our experience. We decided that it was time make our own report.

Connecting our lived experiences to national trends, we wanted to know: What is the impact of rent, debt, and precarity on working artists and arts graduates nationally? How many of us are there? If we are not supporting ourselves as working artists, what jobs do we work?

We looked at artists’ demographics, occupations, educational attainment, field of degree, and earnings as recorded by the Census Bureau’s 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is the largest survey that collects data about artists, surveying roughly 1 out of every 100 persons in the nation. With this data in hand, we made this report to reframe conversations about the current conditions and contradictions of arts graduates, and to make informed decisions about the ways we live and work. At the end of the report, please see our recommendations for organizational change and interpersonal action.

Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy, Vicky Virgin, and Caroline Woolard

BFAMFAPhD

1 Creative Economy Report. Otis College of Art and Design, 2013. Web. <<http://www.otis.edu/creative-economy-report>>

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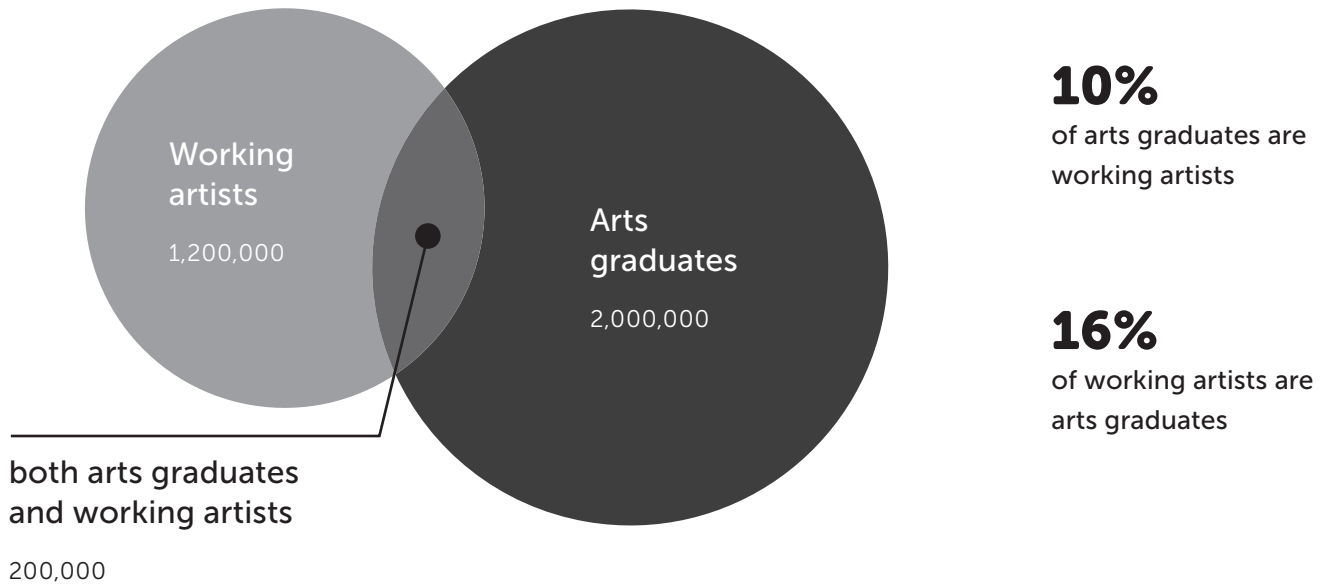
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Summary



Most surprising was the lack of overlap between working artists and arts graduates. In the United States, 40 percent of working artists do not have bachelor's degrees in any field. Only 16 percent of working artists have arts-related bachelor's degrees. Though arts graduates may acquire additional opportunities and skills from attending art school, arts graduates are likely to graduate with significant student loan debt, which makes working as an artist difficult, if not impossible. We acknowledge that some arts graduates are satisfied with work in other fields, but the fantasy of arts graduates' future earnings in the arts should be discredited. Since 7 of the top 10 most expensive institutions of higher education in the United States (after financial aid is taken into consideration) are art schools, the corresponding proportion of student loans are higher than those for graduates from non-art schools.² The majority of arts graduates work in non-arts fields. Out of 2 million arts graduates nationally, only 10 percent, or 200,000 people, make their primary earnings as working artists. Given the discrepancy between working artists and arts graduates, as well as the rising cost of tuition at art schools, we end this report with recommendations for policy makers, administrators, and educators in our field.

Out of 2 million arts graduates nationally, only 10 percent, or 200,000 people, make their primary earnings as working artists.

² How Does Your School Rank?. The Wall Street Journal, February 19, 2013. Web. <<http://online.wsj.com/news/interactive/BORROW021620130216?ref=SB10001424127887324432004578306610055834952>>

Methodology

All statements in this report are based upon data collected by the Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey (ACS), unless otherwise noted. This is an annual survey that is designed to sample one percent or about 3 million households in the United States, gathering detailed data that was previously collected in the Decennial Census.

A myriad of issues arise when using data to study artists. For this report we used two variables to identify this population: "primary occupation" (secondary occupation is not collected in this survey) and "field of degree," a relatively new variable directed at those who have a bachelor's degree. We will refer to people who have bachelor's degrees in the arts as "arts graduates" and to people whose primary occupation is writer, author, artist, actor, photographer, musician, singer, producer, director, performer, dancer choreographer, and entertainer as "working artists."

Arts Graduates

We looked at people with bachelors degrees in music, drama and theater arts, film, video and photographic arts, art history and criticism, studio arts, and visual and performing arts, living in the United States in 2012. The ACS does not collect the field of degree for master's degrees, so we define "arts graduates" in this report as people with BAs or BFAs in the arts, who may or may not have an MA or MFAs in the arts. With only 15,929 MAs and MFAs graduating in 2012, compared to 91,222 BAs and BFAs in the arts that year, our focus on undergraduates represents a broad population of artists.³

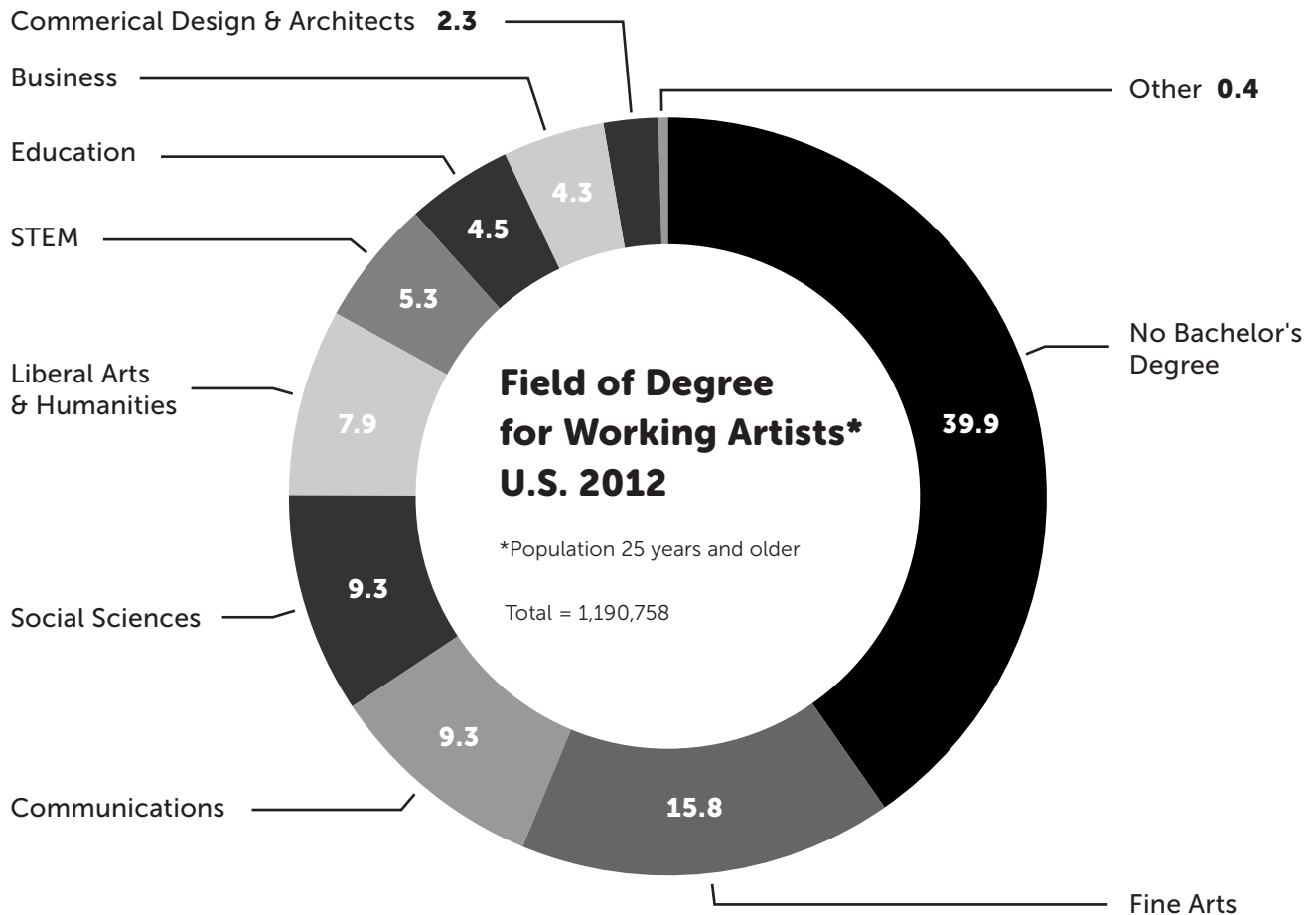
Working Artists

We defined working artists as people whose primary earnings come from working as writers, authors, artists, actors, photographers, musicians, singers, producers, directors, performers, choreographers, dancers, and entertainers. We excluded designers and architects from both the data related to "arts graduates" and from the data based on primary occupation (working artist), because the higher earnings of designers significantly alter the median earnings of our field. We understand that "working artists" are often identified by their level of commitment, and not remuneration,⁴ but we cannot track practicing artists who do not make their primary earnings in the arts using the ACS. In fact, no nationally representative data exists for practicing artists. While many artists are missed in our report, we chose to investigate the data we could isolate to learn more about working artists and arts graduates nationally.

3 National Center for Educational Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2014. Web. <<http://bfamfaphd.com/projects/art-degrees-per-year/>>.

4 Notice to Applicants Re: Artist Certification. New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, n.d. Web. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/downloads/pdf/artist_certification.pdf>

Findings

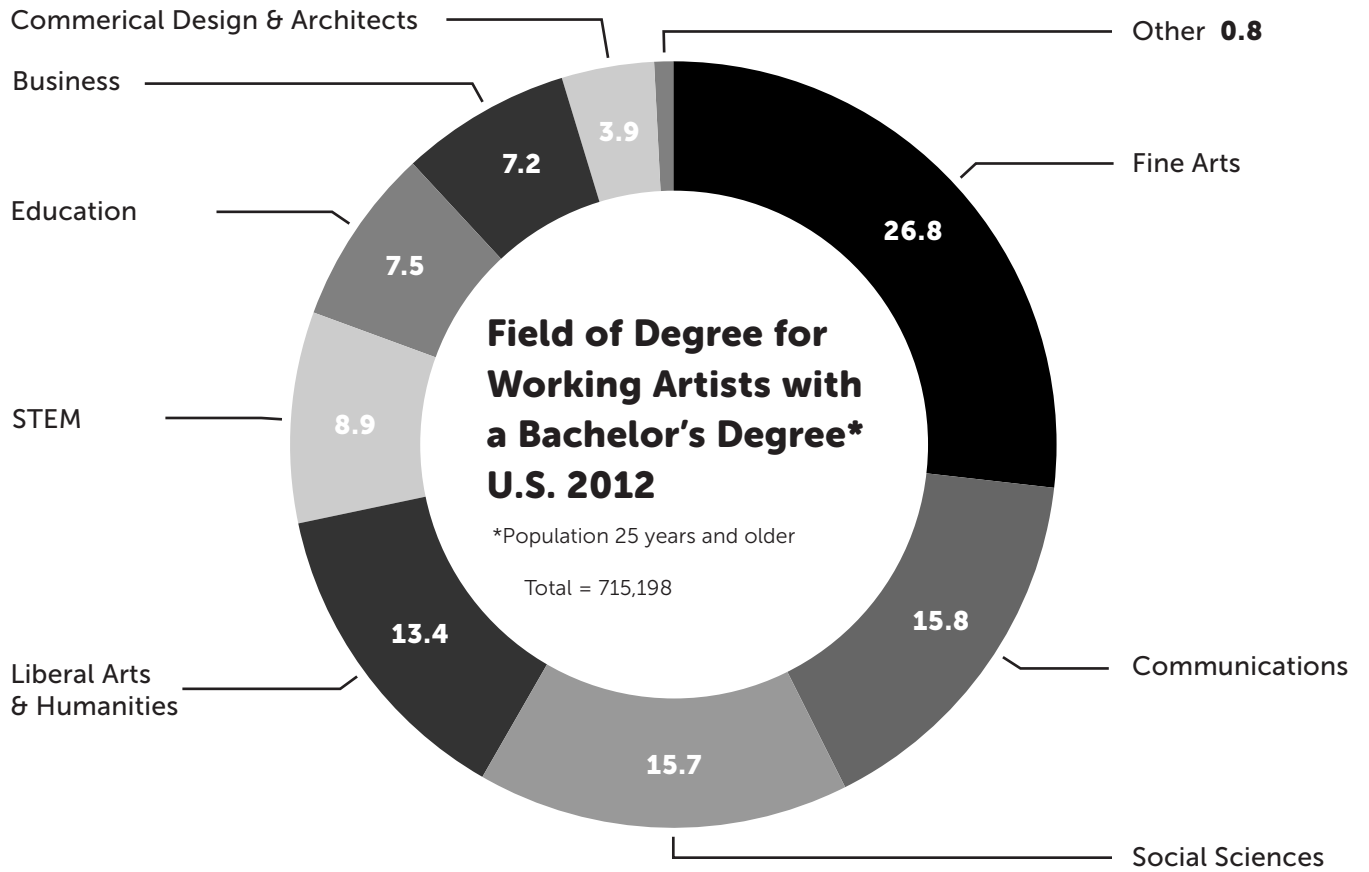


Source:
U.S. Census Bureau
2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

1.4 million Working Artists

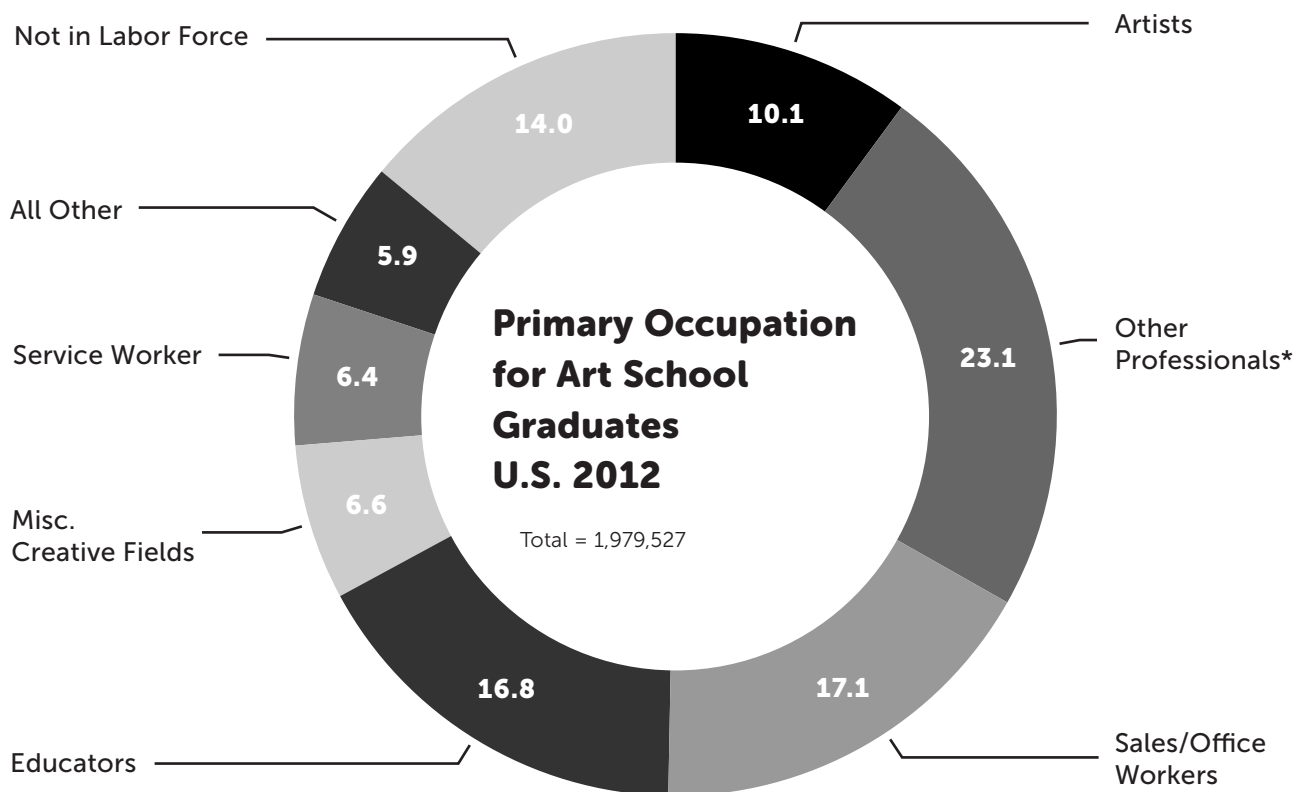
ACS data reveals that there are 1.4 million working artists. Of those over the age of 25, or 1.2 million working artists, 476,000 did not get a bachelor's degree. That means that 40 percent of working artists over the age of 25 attended high school or got associate's degrees, but do not have bachelor's degrees in any field. Only 16 percent of working artists have an arts-related bachelor's degree.

Only 16% of working artists have an arts-related bachelor's degree.



Source:
U.S. Census Bureau
2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

Of the 715,000 working artists who do have bachelor's degrees, only 27 percent have arts-related degrees. The rest studied communication, social sciences, liberal arts and humanities, science, technology, math, engineering, education, business, commercial design and architecture, or another field.



Source:
U.S. Census Bureau
2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

*Other Professionals include such occupations as Managers, Accountants, and Chief Executives. Misc. Creative Fields include Architects, Designers, TV Announcers, etc.

2 Million Arts Graduates

There are 2 million arts graduates with bachelor’s degrees in music, drama and theater arts, film, video and photographic arts, art history and criticism, studio arts, and visual or performing arts living in the United States. Fewer than 200,000, just 10 percent, make their primary earnings as working artists. The rest are dispersed across other occupations: 23 percent work in professional and managerial occupations, 17 percent are employed as sales and office workers, and 17 percent work as educators. 14 percent are not in the labor force at all.

23% of arts graduates work in professional and managerial occupations.

200,000 Working Artists and Art Graduates

Although there are 1.2 million working artists over the age of 25 in this country, there are only 200,000 working artists with arts related bachelors degrees. The majority of working artists have median earnings of \$30,621, but the small percentage of working artists with bachelor's degrees have median earnings of \$36,105.

Default rates for Arts Graduates

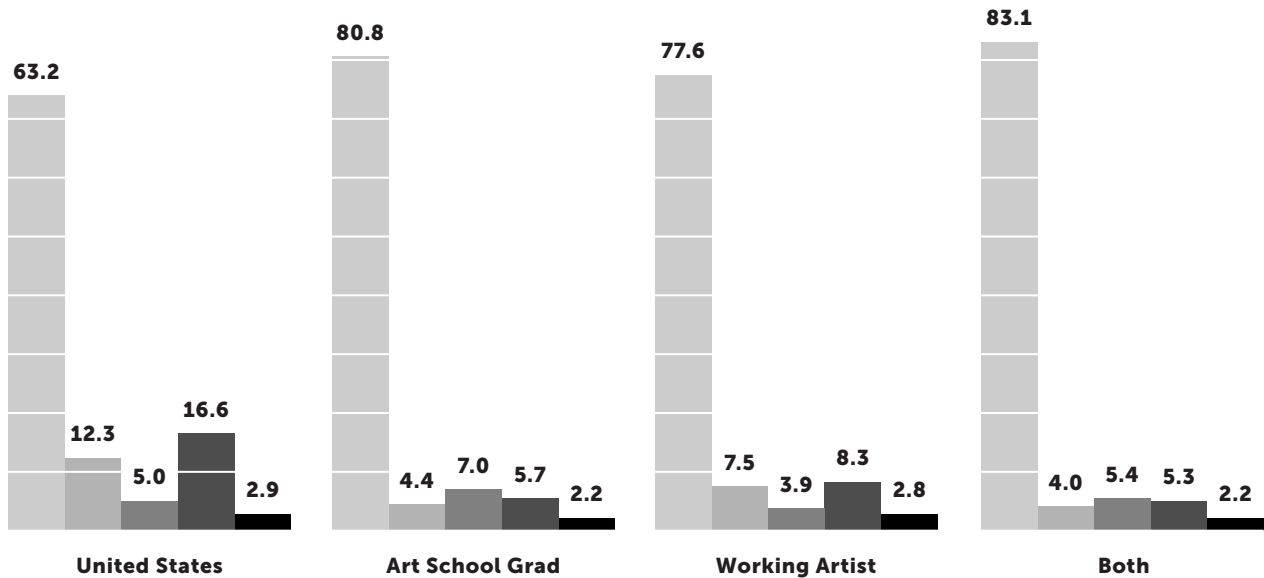
The U.S. Department of Education data show that 7 of the top 10 most expensive schools in this country (after scholarships and aid) are art schools, and arts graduates' debt loads are higher than those of non-arts graduates.⁵ The following percentages of students default on their loans.

7 of the top 10 most expensive schools in the U.S. (after scholarships and aid) are art schools.

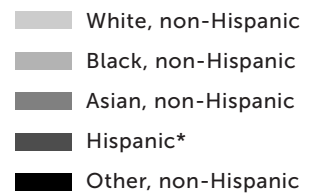
- 6%** of students from **Cleveland Institute of Music** default on their loans.
- 7%** of students from **the New School** default on their loans.
- 7%** of students from **California Institute of the Arts** default on their loans.
- 8%** of students from **the School of Visual Arts** default on their loans.
- 8%** of students from **the Art Center College of Design** default on their loans.
- 8%** of students from **San Francisco Art Institute** default on their loans.
- 9%** of students from **Maine College of Art** default on their loans.
- 10%** of students from **Pratt** default on their loans.
- 10%** of students from **School of the Artist Institute of Chicago** default on their loans.
- 10%** of students from **Minneapolis College of Art and Design** default on their loans.
- 11%** of students from **Berklee College of Music** default on their loans.
- 13%** of students from **Ringling College of Art and Design** default on their loans.
- 13%** of students from **Otis College of Art and Design** default on their loans.
- 16%** of students from **Southwest University of Visual Arts** default on their loans.

⁵ Simon, Ruth. Loan Defaults Refer to the Three-year Cohort Default Rate on Federal Student Loans. Wall Street Journal, 18 Feb. 2013. Web. <<http://online.wsj.com/news/interactive/BORROW021620130216?ref=SB10001424127887324432004578306610055834952>>

Predominance of White, Non-Hispanic Arts Graduates and Male Working Artists



Mutually Exclusive Race and Ethnicity for Total Population and Artists 2012, U.S.

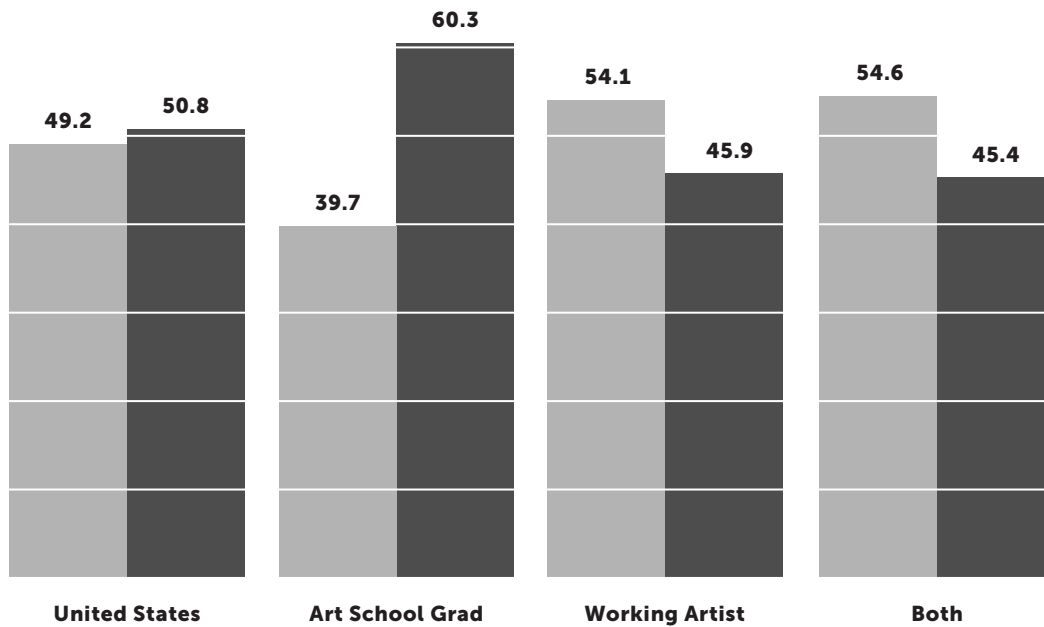


Source:
 U.S. Census Bureau
 2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

*Hispanics can be of any race

The population of arts graduates and working artists is not representative of our country. The population of the United States is 63 percent White, non-Hispanic, but 81 percent of arts graduates are White, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 12 percent Black, non-Hispanic, but only 4 percent of arts graduates are Black, non-Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Black, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 17 percent Hispanic, but only 6 percent of arts graduates are Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Hispanic.

The population of the U.S. is 17% Hispanic, but only 6% of arts graduates are Hispanic.



Gender for Total Population and Artists U.S. 2012

Male
Female

Source:
U.S. Census Bureau
2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

While the United States is split evenly between males and females, males account for only 40 percent of arts graduates but over 54 percent of working artists. Females make up 60 percent of arts graduates but only 46 percent of all working artists. Of the 200,000 working artists over 25 with an art degree, 55 percent are male.

Females make up 60% of arts graduates but only 46% of all working artists.

Recommendations

We have shown that 7 of the top 10 most expensive institutions of higher education in the United States (after financial aid is taken into consideration) are art schools, and that the corresponding proportion of student loans are higher than those for graduates from non-art schools.⁶ With more student-loan debt than credit card debt in this country, we are in the midst of an educational and social crisis.⁷

We ask that artists, administrators, and teachers acknowledge the current financial and political economies in arts education: those of rising costs and student debt. To begin to imagine and enact economies of equity and cooperation in the arts, we must address the needs and capacities of both working artists and arts graduates. What follows are three recommendations toward the adequate nurturing of creativity in art education, visibility, and workforce development.

To begin to imagine and enact economies of equity and cooperation in the arts, we must address the needs and capacities of both working artists and arts graduates.

Art School

While this report reveals that an arts degree is not necessary for future earnings as a working artist, as 40 percent of working artists do not have a bachelor's degree in any field, the authors of this report believe that arts degrees remain valuable for critical thinking, skill building, identify formation, and creative innovation that is necessary in the arts and beyond.⁸ We acknowledge that some arts graduates are happy to work in other fields, but we hope to show that the fantasy of future earnings in the arts cannot justify the high cost of arts degrees. We know that expensive art schools leave arts graduates with high overhead in the form of student debt, making risk-taking and innovation after graduation more difficult, if not impossible. Still believing in the power of arts education, we point prospective art students toward low-cost and tuition-free arts programs and we defend the liberal arts as integral to higher education nationally.

6 How Does Your School Rank?. The Wall Street Journal, February 19, 2013. Web. <<http://online.wsj.com/news/interactive/BORROW021620130216?ref=SB10001424127887324432004578306610055834952>>

7 FinAid, The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid. FinAid, 2014. Web. <<http://www.finaid.org/loans/>>

8 Whitehead, Frances. What do artists know? The Embedded Artist Project, Artetal, January 2006. Web. <<http://embeddedartistproject.com/What-do-artists-know.gif>>

Visibility

Knowing that 40 percent of working artists do not have bachelors degree's in any field, cultural institutions should honor artists and culture workers who do not have experiences of formal, higher education. Philanthropic and civic institutions should create programs to address the needs of working artists, looking beyond the written application, the lecture hall, the journal, and the museum for emerging talent. While working artists and arts graduates legitimate ideas and find rigorous debate in their spaces and distribution networks, cultural institutions could require that presenters, curators, and publishers look beyond networks of arts graduates. Programs to address the gap between working artists and arts graduates could create informal or formal channels for communication and could establish policies for evaluation and presentation of artists, regardless of educational status.

Cultural institutions should honor artists and culture workers who do not have experiences of formal, higher education.

Workforce Development

We must close the gap between arts graduates and working artists, understanding that little overlap exists currently, and that both populations have key insights to share with one another. We can provide opportunities for dialogue. Arts graduates have knowledge of elite social norms, shared jargon from lecture halls, shared regard for artists named in journals, and shared contacts at elite institutions. Working artists have an understanding of the market for their work, valuable business networks, and a familiarity with production and management. Both populations could benefit from worker and producer cooperatives, affordable arts institutions, and resource sharing networks.

Art graduates and working artists could benefit from worker and producer cooperatives, affordable arts institutions, and resource sharing networks.

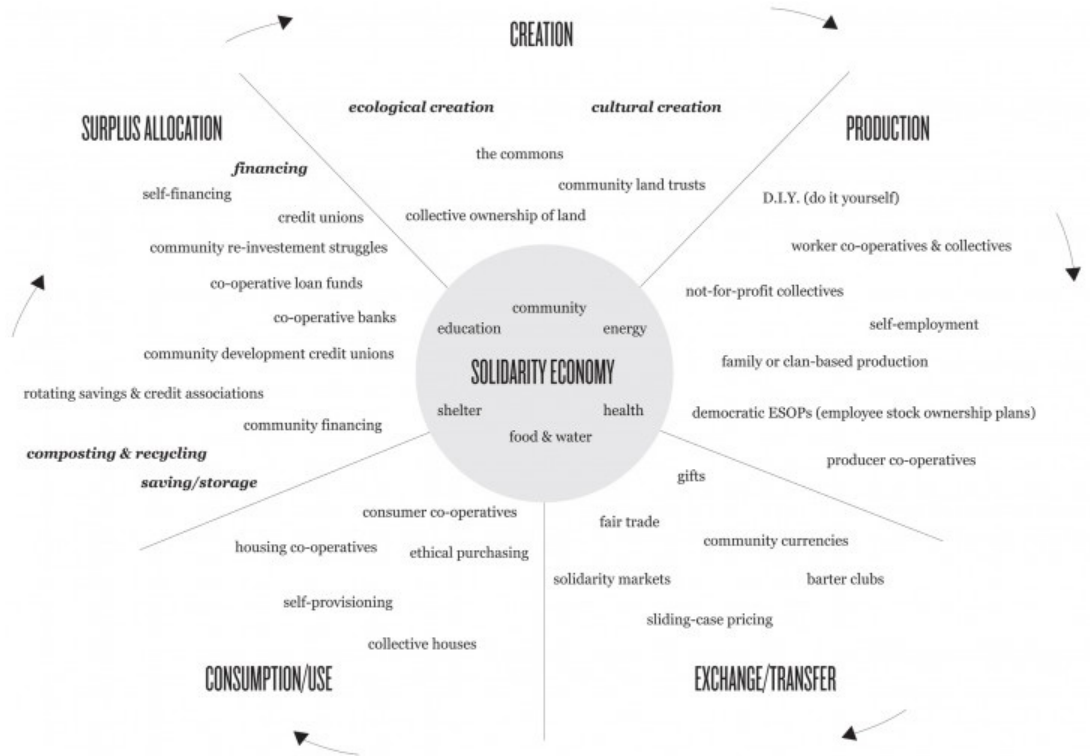


Image credit:
Ethan Miller, JED Collective,
and SolidarityNYC.org

This diagram represents a solidarity economy of cooperation and equity that could be adopted more explicitly in the arts, and could be supported intellectually and financially by arts institutions and arts schools nationally.

“ Adequately nurtured, creativity fuels culture, infuses human-centred development and constitutes the key ingredient for job creation, innovation and trade while contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability. ”

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development’s Creative Economy Report 2010

How might art education nurture culture? The majority of arts graduates work in non-art occupations to support themselves. Arts education should acknowledge and prepare art students for this eventuality. A disavowal of the connection between expensive tuition and future work and financial independence is no longer realistic or ethical. Preparation for artistic work in other fields, including arts management and administration, as well as training in artist-owned businesses, is essential. Arts graduates can prepare to see themselves as “artists in residence” in sales, education, service, and managerial jobs, while learning how to create an artist-owned business together with other artists, neighbors, and fellow low-income residents. We point prospective art students toward low-cost and free art schools, artist-run spaces, and independent communities of working artists, as we know that the time has come to speak openly about the political economies of art education.

Authors

Concerned about the impact of debt, rent, and precarity on the lives of creative people, BFAMFAPhD makes media and connects viewers to existing organizing work. We are artists, educators, curators, art historians, designers, makers, performers, statisticians, and software developers who want to understand the relationship between our lives and the bigger picture. On our website, visitors can download our datasets, make media with us, and connect that media to lived experience. We aim to underscore that the personal is political.

This report was written by Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy, and Caroline Woolard, overseen by Vicky Virgin, a demographic analyst, edited by Caron Atlas, Julian Boilen, Adam Forman, Tamara Greenfield, Stephen Kornis, and designed by Rich Watts.

Vicky Virgin is a demographic analyst, dancer, and choreographer. In 1987, Virgin moved to NYC to dance, supporting herself with the B.S. she received in economics. Her skills as an analyst were essential to this study, and illustrate the range of expertise that artists develop to support their creative work. In the meantime, she continues to live in NYC, creating art and crunching numbers.

Julian Boilen is a creative technologist and software engineer who is always searching for the intersection of technology, creativity, art, and politics. Currently studying software engineering at the Rochester Institute of Technology, he has also interned at Squarespace, Siteworx, and for the Democratic National Committee.

Susan Jahoda is an artist, organizer and teacher who lives in NYC and currently teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A member of three collectives, the Pedagogy Group, BFAMFAPhD, and NYCTBD, she is working toward developing equitable methods of teaching and commoning within the context of arts education. Jahoda's upcoming project, in collaboration with her daughter Emma Jahoda-Brown, Documents from the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, will open at Interference Archive in December 2014.

Blair Murphy is a cultural worker based in New York City with experience as a curator, writer, and non-profit arts administrator. Before moving to New York, she spent seven years in Washington, DC, working as an administrative jack-of-all-trades for various arts organizations. She holds a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art

and an MA from Georgetown University. She's currently participating in the Whitney Independent Study Program as a Helena Rubenstein Curatorial Fellow and working a non-art-world day job.

Caroline Woolard, an artist and organizer, moved to NYC in 2002 to attend the only tuition-free art school in the United States (Cooper Union). Since then, her artistic work has been subsidized by day jobs as a graphic designer, teacher, and non-profit administrator, and has been supported by low overhead due to labor-intensive collective living situations. After co-founding and co-organizing resource sharing networks OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop for the past five years, Woolard is now a core member of BFAMFAPhD and NYCTBD, focusing on the impact of debt and rent on artists in NYC, and options for affordable space stewardship for all New Yorkers.

BFAMFAPhD created this report without monetary support.

We welcome donations, reactions, suggestions, and anecdotes from readers of this report at BFAMFAPhD.com and info@BFAMFAPhD.com

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