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Alumni of the arts are often happier than most

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Regional

Alumni of the arts are often happier than most

One of the stereotypes about the arts and higher education is that graduates in creative activities such as performance, design, creative writing, music composition, choreography, film, illustration and fine art are, for the most part, unemployable.

In fact, oftentimes when parents accompany their kids on college visits they seem pretty apprehensive about them choosing a major – or even a minor – in an arts discipline. They may, however, want to rethink this prejudice. An annual study by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) gives us data that show that such stereotypes are highly inaccurate.

SNAAP is based at the Center for Postsecondary Research at the Indiana University School of Education. It investigates the educational experiences and career paths of arts graduates nationally, providing the findings to educators, policymakers and philanthropic organizations with the goal of improving arts training, informing cultural policy and supporting artists. It is partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

SNAAP has surveyed more than 90,000 alumni in the arts from hundreds of institutions of higher education in the United States. Their latest report, titled “Making it Work: The Education and Employment of Recent Arts Graduates,” is a window to a better understanding of an arts education.

Among their findings are that recent graduates, compared to older ones, are more likely to report having learned “soft skills”—persuasion, networking, project management, and working with the community—at their educational institutions. This is very significant in

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

more than one way because given that art graduates tend to depend more on self-employment and the deployment of artistic skills across different contexts, these are essential skills for them. In fact, 75 percent of arts alumni have been self-employed at some point in their careers.

The other finding of this study is something that is plaguing all of postsecondary education in this country: escalation of student debt. This affects particularly this type of graduate given that many art schools are among the most expensive in higher education when factoring in tuition and fees and the average aid and scholarship packages available. Clearly, we need to provide more scholarships to our students, but we also need to consider the costs. This inevitably leads to university administrators contemplating two aspects of its financing. They must somehow reduce the cost of delivery while increasing student aid. The first one is difficult to obtain because most of the teaching of these subjects take place in studio environments, which means a very low student/faculty ratio. Unlike most introductory courses in other disciplines you cannot teach these subjects in large classrooms with dozens or even hundred students at the same time.

This also means that institutions of higher education – whether public or private – need to intensify their fundraising efforts in this arena because most of the competition for good students is based on the kinds of

scholarships they can offer. And the competition can be fierce. This is why 17 percent of respondents reported that student loan debt had a major impact on career and education choices.

On the positive side, and unlike the stereotypes mentioned earlier, recent graduates from arts training institutions are more socially engaged in many roles, whether as teachers, volunteers, or patrons of the arts. They often use their artistic talents to tackle social problems. In fact, 80 percent of art alumni report their artistic technique as being important for their careers, even if they are not art related. And 75 percent continue to practice art as an avocation.

We can draw some general conclusions from this and other studies. Students with artistic training are leaving universities well qualified in art techniques that allow them to be more creative, better problem solvers and better able to use their critical thinking abilities. These are the exact skills that will help them succeed regardless of their ultimate profession. One way they are getting that training is through internships, which are becoming more and more common in the offerings at institutions of higher education. The other advantage of these internships is that they allow students to test their true vocation under real circumstances while networking with potential employers.

All of this helps to explain how a number of other studies have shown that arts graduates are among the happiest workers in the U.S., with only 16 percent reporting being “very dissatisfied.” Further, the majority of them report a balance between satisfaction at work and their salaries. In other words, they feel well compen-

sated for what they like to do, something most people do not.

According to this report, “...six of every 10 currently employed arts graduates described their current jobs as ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ to their training (...) a greater percentage than graduates from journalism, accounting, or biology majors.”

And finally, since it is not all about individual happiness, it is important to underline that alumni of the arts significantly contribute to and invest in their communities by volunteering as teachers, working for non-profits and through charity events. In fact, this study shows that arts alumni are “...14 times more likely than the population at large to volunteer within the arts, and this engagement begins while they are still in school.”

In conclusion, we can say that arts graduates are not only employed and employable once they leave school, but also seem happier than the majority of other college graduates nationwide. A combination of the skills they acquire, the fulfillment of their professional dreams and their contributions to society are the basis to explain such results.

Hopefully data like the one provided in this report will help not only to increase institutional support for these kind of programs in higher education, but also encourage students to pursue a major in the arts regardless of their final career choice. After all, what we are talking about here is one of the bases for the American Dream: the pursuit of happiness.

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