Strategic Alignment in Arts Higher Education: Embedding Core Competencies Artists Must Possess to Survive in a Portfolio Economy

Article Author: Jeremy Peters

Research Brief prepared by Michael Weigel

Arts,
Entrepreneurship, &
Innovation Lab

Abstract

Artists who intend to build and sustain careers, especially those who are early-stage or newly graduated, must possess technical skills and core adaptability competencies that are necessary to survive, if not thrive. However, current pedagogical approaches to artistic preparation often focus on solutions and preparations for problems that no longer exist. Using two question batteries, an investigation into the nature of solutions to self-reported skill gaps takes place. The paper explores a range of strategies and actions available and proposes a course of action using strategic analysis tools to align curricula toward adaptability competencies.

Methodology and Data

This paper utilized two separate surveys. The first was the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), a longitudinal study of about 65 thousand graduates with arts degrees administered by Indiana University. The author conducted the second, tentatively titling it the Emergent Needs Analysis for Artistic Education (ENAAE). The ENAAE is a shorter survey only administered to about 1 thousand international respondents, but despite limited representativeness, it displayed similar response patterns to the SNAAP.

Defining the Problem(s)

Both SNAAP and ENAAE identified several significant areas of concern for arts alumni. These concerns include deficits in training for finance and business management, entrepreneurship, networking, persuasive speaking, project management, and leadership. Respondents to both surveys expressed high levels of frustration with the quality of education, and many graduates indicated a willingness to take extra courses to feel more prepared for the job market post-graduation. Previous literature has detailed the difficulty of finding and retaining employment in the arts sector. Additionally, research supports that the degree of sustained success in the arts labor market is less related to artistic skills and more related to the successful acquisition of social engagement and career-building skills. A growing body of research takes on the difficult task of analyzing arts graduates who do not "make it." Opportunities, therefore, exist to determine what adaptions are possible to reduce the number of graduates among those who are unsuccessful in the long-term.

Conceptual Framework

Researchers long predicted a move toward gig-work and portfolio careers. This move is, in many ways, currently afoot, and these forms of employment require high self-motivation and entrepreneurial skills. Technological changes at the same time, shift art consumers' patterns of consumption, views on value, and artistic experience. All of these shifts remove historical barriers to market participation creators and consumers. Simultaneously, the same changes create new intermediaries that develop monopolies of access. Increasing market participation on both sides begets increased

competition. Other patterns of consumption and production relevant for this framework are a tendency against ownership, a lack of economies of scale for creators, and difficulties in predicting future market trends.

Solutions

Arts programs can employ strategic management tools to aim toward improving the microeconomic decision-making of graduates. Utilizing Porter's "five forces" of competition, institutions can deliver educational experiences for artists that take in to account the competitive ecosystem. Examining how programs provide value to graduates and determine their flexibility to meet the emergent challenges their students will face will help determine a program's ability and speed of change. These models compare the needed capabilities of students against the existing rigidities in programs driven by humans, technology, and legacy systems. These models culminate in suggesting that steady arts careers may be achieved through investigation of how a program is aligned toward ensuring their graduates "make it." Strategic alignment allows programs to meet the other pedagogical goals of arts education while bolstering student career preparedness. The figure below models how
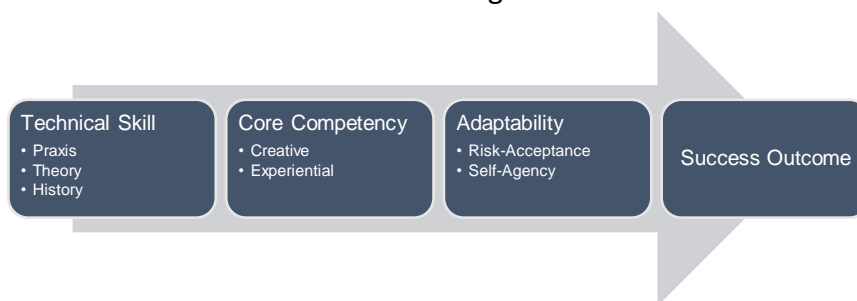
programs may align learning across the intended outcome of a career-resilient graduate versed in skills and competencies related to their artistic praxis and the environment that surrounds them.

Conclusion

The meta-strategic approach suggested in this paper yields a set of coordinated strategies and best practices for arts education programs. These include efforts to:

(1) Increase opportunities to practice self-agency
(2) Improve social capital generation
(3) Embed opportunities to build skills
(4) Weave effectuality into coursework
(5) Encourage a search for non-traditional career pathways in the arts
(6) Begin these efforts early

A great deal of exploration and research remains necessary to validate these findings, but conceptually, they contribute to an ongoing conversation about arts education outcomes. SNAAP and ENAAE results highlight areas for improvement and, although not simple, application of strategic models and frameworks could be instrumental in opening pathways for arts graduates.

Technical Skill
- Praxis
- Theory
- History

Core Competency
- Creative
- Experiential

Adaptability
- Risk-Acceptance
- Self-Agency

Success Outcome

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jeremy Peters, FRSA, MBA (Cantab), is an Assistant Professor of Music Business in the Department of Music at Wayne State University and is a co-founder of Quite Scientific Records. He maintains an active teaching, performing, researching, and publishing practice and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts

IU O'NEILL
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND
ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
Center for Cultural Affairs

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS
RESEARCH LABS