

Unpacking the Entrepreneurial Skills Gap: Educational Experiences and Career Outcomes among Arts Graduates

Arts, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Lab

Research Brief No. 2020-11

June 8, 2020

Article Authors: Alexandre Frenette, Rachel Skaggs, and Megan Robinson

Research Brief prepared by Michael Weigel



Arts,
Entrepreneurship, &
Innovation Lab

UNPACKING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS GAP

Introduction

In a post-industrial economy, workers increasingly need a college degree to fend off “precarious” jobs and higher education institutions face pressure to deliver strong student outcomes. Recent education efforts have focused on labor market preparation and this paper in turn focuses on arts entrepreneurship offerings. Artists are more likely to be self-employed, hold multiple jobs, suffer periods of unemployment, and engage in multidisciplinary work than the average worker, and their precarity is such that arts sector employees are sometimes described as “canaries in the coal mine” for broader economic instability. Navigating a challenging labor market requires arts graduates to be entrepreneurial, yet research shows a skills gap in this area; these graduates report needing these skills but did not develop them in school. One-third of schools with arts programs have implemented arts entrepreneurship courses, but questions remain for how to emphasize these courses in a manner that best suits artists’ creativity, opportunism, experimentation, and distinctiveness and avoids regimented curriculum that assumes just one type of artist or entrepreneur. This paper explores whether artists in recent cohorts have attained different skills than earlier graduates as well as the prevalence of artistic, business, and entrepreneurial skill gaps among arts graduates. By using SNAAP data on arts alumni, this paper makes contribution in the following areas:

- (1) what predicts who develops artistic technique, business skills and entrepreneurial skills during postsecondary education;
- (2) how developing these skills relates to entrepreneurial career outcomes; and
- (3) implications for future research

Data and Methods

SNAAP surveys arts alumni (from majors such as performance, design, architecture, writing, film, and fine arts) to investigate their educational and career patterns. This paper sampled nearly 26 thousand alumni from 101 institutions between 1976 and 2017. Dependent variables included variables for self-reported development of artistic technique, financial and business management skills, and entrepreneurial skills, as well as variables indicating if respondents were business founders or freelancers. Independent variables were measured via responses to questions measuring skill acquisition and perception of the importance of acquiring those skills. Control variables included gender, race, first-generation college graduate, marital status, number of dependent children, an artist relative, cohort, type of institution, major, level of arts social engagement, graduate degree, and closeness of first job to undergrad degree. A mixed-effects logistic regression was used to analyze the relationship between artistic, business, and entrepreneurial skill acquisition and career outcomes.

UNPACKING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS GAP

Results

The first set of analyses showed that a one-unit increase in cohort was associated with a 15% decrease in artistic skill acquisition and a 3% increase in the odds of entrepreneurial skill acquisition, demonstrating a changing curricular landscape. Social engagement in arts beyond classroom settings was also associated with significant increases in all three skills areas. The second set of analyses investigates which characteristics and conditions were associated with the career outcomes of becoming a founder of a non-profit or for-profit organization or becoming a freelancer. Business and entrepreneurial skill gaps were significant and positively associated with becoming a founder, while artistic skills gaps, matches, and excesses increased the likelihood of becoming a freelancer. This suggests two “types” of cultural entrepreneurs with predominant orientations toward either commercial or artistic skills. Results also indicated those who were first-generation college students, unmarried, or female were less likely to be either founders or freelancers. White alumni are 24% less likely to become founders but 13% more likely to be freelancers compared to non-white graduates, and cohort is negatively associated with becoming a founder but positively with becoming a freelancer.

Conclusion

There is a significant increasing likelihood of more recent cohorts acquiring entrepreneurial skills, which is a positive development that also involves the cost of acquiring significantly less artistic skill. Results indicated two types of entrepreneurial career outcomes: those of founders (who developed entrepreneurial and business skills) and freelancers (developed artistic technique). Arts school administrators and faculty should keep artistic skills central to their education while also helping to uncover and operationalize methods to assist arts graduates to navigate uncertain careers. Further research is needed on the sociodemographic variables included to gain a greater understanding of how individuals from various backgrounds experience arts education and transfer into arts careers, with special attention granted to the sources of inequities of outcome in skill acquisition based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (though these could be a result of self-reported results). Additional study could also determine what factors and variables create different types of founders and freelancers and assist in the development of expertise and best practices for arts entrepreneurship education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis or the NEA. The Arts Endowment does not guarantee the accuracy or completeness of the information included in these materials and is not responsible for any consequences of its use. This NEA Research Lab is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts (Award#: 1844331-38-C-18).



Alexandre Frenette is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Associate Director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University. His writings on artistic workers and the intern economy have won awards from the Society for the Study of Social Problems as well as the Labor and Employment Relations Association.

Dr. Rachel Skaggs is the Lawrence and Isabel Barnett Assistant Professor of Arts Management at The Ohio State University. Her research has focused on topics such as the importance of social networks in arts careers, arts entrepreneurship, how artists deal with rejection and failure, and public perceptions of artists in local communities.



Megan Robinson is a doctoral candidate and research assistant at Vanderbilt University's Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy. Her research focuses on the relationship between creative city development policy and stratification by race-ethnicity. Other research includes unpacking the relationship between creativity in the arts and creativity in other domains, such as entrepreneurship.

