

But What Are You Going to Do With Your Life? Arts Majors, Future Plans, and Career Skills

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Abstract

This study investigates findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), comparing career plans and skills across 11 major fields. Responses from over 31,000 graduating seniors across 127 different universities suggest that while arts majors are more likely to have non-traditional career plans, including self-employment, they also have higher confidence in creative thinking skills and report greater coursework emphasis on creativity. However, arts majors were lacking confidence in other areas, including business and financial skills. The implications of these findings for parents, counselors, and artistically gifted high school students in the process of choosing a college will be presented.

Literature Review

- Creativity and “innovation” are high-impact words for the 21st century, as they reference essential capacities in an economy based increasingly on intellectual property, entrepreneurialism, and cross-disciplinary problem solving (Tepper & Kuh, 2011)
- In response to the needs of employers, organizations have added “creative thinking” as an essential learning outcome:
 - American Association of Colleges and Universities (www.aacu.org)
 - Engineering (ABET, 1997)
- Research suggests creativity can be influenced by environment and experiences (Amabile, 1996), including curricular experiences in a chosen major field (Miller & Dumford, 2015)
- Students' experiences in higher education will differ greatly by discipline, even at the same college or university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)
- Pitt and Tepper (2012) found that arts majors are much more likely than science and business majors to say their coursework encourages them to be creative, to take assignments in multiple directions, to make connections across classes and topics, and to further explore something about which they are curious
- Data indicates that some majors, including the arts, have disappointingly low income levels, especially among recent college graduates (Carnevale, Cheah, & Strohl, 2012)
- Arts majors are often considered “worthless” in the popular press (Cantor, 2012), but is this really true?

Participants

For the NSSE 2015 administration, 127 U.S. institutions elected to append the Senior Transitions module to their core questionnaire. Over 31,000 seniors responded to the module items.

Measures

Items from this study were taken from the senior transitions topical module on NSSE, exploring post-graduation plans, links between the academic major and future plans, and confidence in skill development.

The focus for this study was on three item sets from the module:

- 1a. After graduation, what best describes your immediate plans?
 - o Full-time employment
 - o Part-time employment
 - o Graduate or professional school
 - o Military service
 - o Service or volunteer activity (e.g., AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Teach for America)
 - o Internship (paid or unpaid)
 - o Travel or gap year
 - o No plans at this time
 - o Other, please specify
6. How much confidence do you have in your ability to complete tasks requiring the following skills and abilities? (Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little)
 - a. Critical thinking and analysis of arguments and information
 - b. Creative thinking and problem solving
 - c. Research skills
 - d. Clear writing
 - e. Persuasive speaking
 - f. Technological skills
 - g. Financial and business management skills
 - h. Entrepreneurial skills
 - i. Leadership skills
 - j. Networking and relationship building
7. To what extent has your coursework in your major(s) emphasized the following? (Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little)
 - a. Generating new ideas or brainstorming
 - b. Taking risks in your coursework without fear of penalty
 - c. Evaluating multiple approaches to a problem
 - d. Inventing new methods to arrive at unconventional solutions

Analyses

To look at differences across majors (among those reporting only one major), basic frequencies provided information for each subgroup by major field. Cross-tabulations with Chi-square analyses provided inferential statistical analyses for these comparisons.

Results

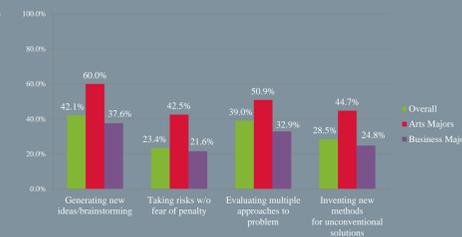
Arts majors were the most likely to report immediate plans for part-time employment and “other” plans (Table 1). Arts majors, along with humanities majors, were also more likely to report having “no plans at this time.” Furthermore, arts majors, along with communications majors, were more likely to report immediate plans for an internship.

Table 1. Immediate Plans After Graduation by Major

	Full-time employment	Part-time employment	Graduate or professional school	Military service	Service or volunteer activity	Internship (paid or unpaid)	Travel or gap year	No plans at this time	Other
Arts (n = 1,529)	55.5%	8.3%	16.3%	0.3%	0.5%	6.4%	4.1%	3.7%	5.0%
Humanities (n = 1,490)	43.6%	6.3%	28.8%	1.0%	2.1%	4.5%	5.0%	4.7%	4.0%
Bio, Agric, & Nat Res (n = 2,452)	31.4%	3.7%	46.9%	0.5%	1.7%	4.7%	6.5%	2.2%	2.3%
Phys Sci, Math, CS (n = 1,286)	58.2%	2.6%	27.1%	0.9%	0.5%	3.5%	2.3%	3.0%	1.9%
Social Sciences (n = 3,163)	44.9%	4.6%	32.1%	1.1%	2.3%	3.9%	4.4%	3.0%	3.7%
Business (n = 4,118)	77.0%	2.3%	10.4%	0.8%	0.3%	3.1%	1.3%	2.1%	2.8%
Comm, Media, PR (n = 961)	65.0%	4.3%	10.1%	0.5%	1.8%	8.4%	3.9%	3.0%	3.0%
Education (n = 1,740)	81.6%	3.5%	8.0%	0.1%	0.9%	0.6%	0.9%	1.6%	2.8%
Engineering (n = 1,980)	76.5%	1.2%	14.4%	1.9%	0.3%	1.5%	1.1%	1.8%	1.4%
Health Professions (n = 4,479)	63.5%	4.5%	22.3%	0.8%	0.3%	3.1%	1.4%	1.7%	2.5%
Social Svc Prof (n = 1,546)	57.4%	3.9%	26.2%	2.0%	1.0%	2.5%	1.5%	2.3%	3.3%
Overall (n = 24,744)	60.2%	3.9%	22.4%	0.9%	1.0%	3.5%	2.7%	2.4%	2.9%

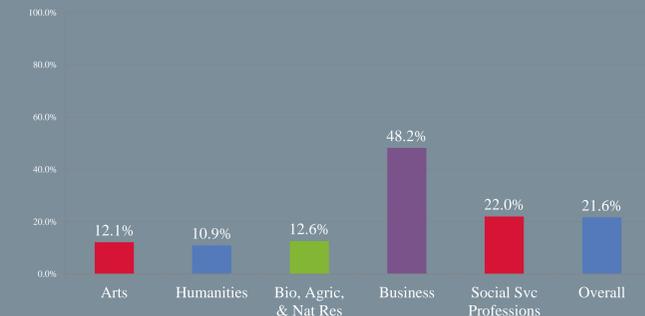
Arts majors (67.1%) and humanities majors (66.4%), followed closely by communications majors (64.2%), had the highest percentages of students reporting “very much” confidence in their creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Engineering majors (59.7%) were very close to the overall percentage (59.1%). Seniors in the biological sciences were least confident in their creative thinking and problem-solving, with 52.4% reporting very much confidence in these skills. Similar results were apparent in the items focusing on other aspects of creativity emphasized in coursework (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Major Coursework “Very Much” Emphasized These Skills



While arts majors seemed to excel in creative skills and experiences, we found deficits in other areas. Along with humanities and biological science majors, arts majors reported low levels of confidence in their financial and business management skills (Figure 2).

Figure 2. “Very Much” Confidence in Financial and Business Skills, by Selected Majors



Implications

- Findings inform curricular and programming enhancements for arts programs
 - ✓ Increased coursework concerning business and entrepreneurial skills may address the gap between arts majors' future plans for self-employment and their confidence in these areas
- These findings should also be considered by parents, counselors, and graduating artistically gifted high school students in the process of choosing a college and deciding on a major
 - ✓ Which schools/programs are the best fit with future plans?

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