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● **STRATEGIC
NATIONAL
ARTS ALUMNI
PROJECT**

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 2

How COVID-19 Has Impacted the Needed Skills of Arts Graduates

We expect that arts graduates will emerge from their degree programs having developed skills that they will need and use throughout their careers. However, to succeed in a constantly changing world, alumni need to continue developing and refining both arts and non-arts skills. A past [SNAAP annual report](#) showed the spread of sixteen skills and abilities that alumni might acquire or develop while enrolled at their institution, comparing those to the skills and abilities that alumni say are important for their work. The three largest gaps in the skills that alumni need and those they use are for financial and business management skills, entrepreneurial skills, and networking and relationship building. In each case, alumni reported the skill as more important for their work, compared to how much of it they acquired or developed at their educational institution.

Largest Gaps* Between Skills Artists Acquired or Developed at Their Institution and Those They Need for Their Job (2015 – 2017)



58%

Financial and Business
Management Skills



43%

Entrepreneurial Skills



32%

Networking and
Relationship Building

*Percentage difference between those who said skill was “very important” or “somewhat important” for their work and those who acquired “very much” or “some”

We have learned that arts graduates develop and acquire skills through [coursework](#), [internships](#), and a wide range of co-curricular activities while at their educational institutions. However, skill acquisition is not evenly distributed among arts alumni. A [SNAAP DataBrief](#) that examined differences in acquiring entrepreneurial skills by major reports that overall, just 26% of arts

graduates acquire these skills (“very much” or “some”), ranging from 63% (arts administration majors) to a low of 18% (art history majors). Additional research using SNAAP data indicates that skill acquisition and needs differ by employment type; arts alumni who founded their own arts organization have differing needs and use for skills in finance and business management skills and in entrepreneurial skills compared to freelancers. Increased focus on addressing precarity in artistic careers through business and entrepreneurial skills has shaped research, curricular development, and programming for arts majors and arts graduates. New uncertainties and realities during the COVID-19 pandemic may further contribute to different skills needed for arts careers.

HOW DID THE NEED FOR AND DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS EMERGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR ARTS ALUMNI?

Arts alumni pursued and refined a variety of skills during the pandemic. Among these skills were an increased need for the kinds of *financial and business management, entrepreneurial, and networking skills* that are well-established in past SNAAP research. The ability to successfully plan and implement the business side of artistic work, particularly in a time when established organizations and clients may have cancelled or delayed work, is essential. Some alumni used these skills to transform their existing employment into more flexible and lucrative freelance work while others started new ventures. However, networking skills were more difficult to use and develop given social distancing and cancellation of events and opportunities.

Aside from these established skill needs, two broad categories of skill emerged as increasingly relevant compared to pre-pandemic artistic work: *technological skills* and skills related to *interpersonal relationships and working collaboratively*.

New and enhanced *technological skills* were essential in responding to social distancing requirements, and arts graduates quickly adapted to new obligations to work remotely and digitally. Technological skills were already a requisite for arts alumni. However, this was magnified during the pandemic, with technology mediating interpersonal interactions, work, and making or performing art to a degree not previously experienced.

Arts alumni used technology in new ways to make and market their artwork, enhance teaching pedagogies, create new revenue streams, maintain and expand their networks, and learn entirely new arts and non-arts skills.



"I was still writing music. I was still doing sound effects, what I would have done pre-pandemic. It was just the medium in which I was working was different, so there was certainly a shift in learning some new skills and figuring out how to collaborate in that way, which wasn't an in person environment with the same sort of technology."

Musical Theatre, 32

Performance artists orchestrated new ways to create and share work across digital platforms, allowing for a break from some tradition-bound modes of working and collaboration. The lean into digital production provided accessibility to formerly in-person performances in ways that had not been fully engaged with prior to the forced limitations of COVID-19. For instance, the push towards digital production and performance allowed the reach of a formerly regional non-profit to expand their membership base as they gained audiences from around the country and the world. Arts educators innovated with new teaching strategies as many shifted to online teaching for the first time in their careers.



"It's usually enough time for us all to deal with any of those weird hanging details that we need each other for but also have time to just say, 'How's your day going, and how are you feeling' and talk about it."

Arts Administrator, 30

Arts graduates reported that *interpersonal relationships and working collaboratively* were in high demand during the pandemic. Paradoxically, the need for social and emotional skills were increased in the absence of physical togetherness. Reflecting the acute changes and ongoing challenges of the pandemic, nuanced relational skills were needed in daily work and to support co-workers, family, and friends who were also dealing with heightened uncertainty and stress during the pandemic.

Those who developed stronger skills in this area were able to better adjust to the lack of informal, in-person moments for interaction, idea generation, and collaboration that happen more naturally when people are in the same physical space. One arts administrator created blocks of unstructured 30-minute office hours for co-workers to digitally stop in and ask questions, which has led to opportunities for work-specific conversations and collaboration as well as time to connect and check in with one another. Others made similar efforts to intentionally build in interactions while balancing “Zoom fatigue” or burnout from hours of video meetings.

This skill set was particularly important for teachers of the arts. One art teacher said that he had to learn “How to connect with students on a little screen...how to read their face and their body language, how their day’s going, and that sort of thing.” The emotional work of maintaining social ties required that people support colleagues even when, as one visual artist working in higher education said, “everyone is sad all the time.” He saw this work as important for supporting his colleagues in not losing “their soul and their *raison d’état*.” The interpersonal skills deployed by arts graduates in their work were essential for maintaining purpose and productivity during the challenges of COVID-19.

Arts alumni develop a diverse array of skills during their education, but the abrupt transformation of work and life during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that alumni needed different skills. Lack of access to the people and places that typically structure artistic careers pushed arts graduates to develop compensatory skills in other areas. As reported in the [first DataBrief in this two-part series](#), the experiences of arts alumni during COVID-19 were primarily mediated by differences in occupational roles, caregiving responsibilities, and previously existing imbalances due to sociodemographic positions. Although skill needs varied across occupational roles and artistic disciplines, [SNAAP research](#) suggests that the skills acquired by recent art graduates are generally more aligned with the uncertain, changing world of artistic work during the pandemic. Despite skills that were a closer fit with the challenges of work during this time, shorter career histories and an already more precarious position in the labor force remained challenging for these arts graduates in early career stages.

Skills developed during COVID-19 were often complimentary and layered. For instance, effectively teaching students on a digital platform required new technological skills, new interpersonal relationship skills, and new strategies for working collaboratively. Individuals learning, developing, and teaching themselves new skills shows an adaptability and innovation that arts alumni apply in their working lives. In particular, technological skills will continue to be important to arts graduates' work, even if their arts discipline is not historically digital. Knowing how to utilize other skills within a digital modality will be essential for continued persistence and success in an arts career. We know that after graduating, arts alumni continue to learn and develop new approaches to problems and teach themselves techniques to assist in making, performing, and selling their work. This was also the case during the pandemic. These skills may prove to be stopgaps in an arts sector that is likely to continue changing during the recovery from the pandemic, or they may lead to entirely new opportunities.

These initial findings emphasize a clear need for actionable information to help higher education institutions, arts organizations, and policymakers respond to the needs of arts majors and arts graduates. Questions such as those addressed in this DataBrief are important for understanding the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on arts graduates and contribute to the development of survey items for the 2022 administration of the SNAAP survey.

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SNAAP set out to garner insights on pressing information needs within post-secondary arts and design fields as they relate to understanding and improving the careers and lives of graduates of related degree programs through a series of focus group conversations and interviews with faculty and administrators. The insights garnered through this process are presented in this report

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