Illinois Creative
Workforce Partnership

Branching Out Series:
Artists and Arts Graduates Beyond the Creative Fields

PART ONE

SPECIAL REPORT   MARCH 2025

Should I stay or should I go?

Factors impacting the career transitions of artists and arts graduates beyond the creative fields

By Aisha Motlani

Introduction

Illinois has one of the biggest creative economies in the nation and is home to one of the largest populations of workers employed in the arts and culture sector, according to analysis conducted by the Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA).[1] Illinois is also one of only 9 states that import more graduates than they produce, with a net gain of more than 20% (Conzelmann et al., 2024). These factors, combined with recent historic government investments in the arts, have likely contributed to Illinois ranking sixth in SMU DataArts' newly released Arts Vibrancy Index, placing ahead of states like California and Washington (SMU DataArts, 2024a). If artists are such a big part of our state's economy, why do so many of them end up seeking employment outside the arts? (BFAMFAPhD, 2014; Motlani, 2024; Wasser and Alper, 2018).[2] How are artists entering and adapting to these fields? How does their creative training prepare them for these diverse occupations or industries? Finding answers to these questions is important for understanding how we can better support employment outcomes and improve working conditions for Illinois artists and arts graduates. It is also important for workforce and industry stakeholders as well as policymakers to learn about the experiences, skills, and opportunities this segment of the workforce contributes to the state.

Branching Out: Artists and Arts Graduates Beyond the Creative Fields is a series of reports that address these questions. Using in-depth interviews and surveys, we examine the pathways and experiences of Illinois artists and arts graduates who are working in fields outside the arts. Each report will focus on a different aspect of their experiences transitioning into non-arts careers, including the factors prompting them to make this transition, the opportunities or barriers they faced along the way, the transferrable skills they bring to diverse industries, and the support they need to maintain careers in the arts and beyond.

The present report explores why artists and creatives transition to careers outside the arts. We examine the "pull" factors that have made these careers appealing to them and the "push" factors that have prompted artists and creatives to relinquish or postpone their plans to pursue fulltime careers in the arts.

Background

Much has been written about the precarities of artistic work (Bennet, 2009; Bridgstock, 2005; Fine, 2017; Frenette, Martin, and Tepper, 2018; Frenette and Ocejo, 2019; Morgan et al., 2013). Recent scholarship has examined the additional challenges facing artists in the post pandemic economy (Caust, 2021; Dowd et al., 2022; Skaggs et al., 2025). This study contributes to this body of scholarship, yet it also makes a case for expanding how we define professional creatives (Lindemann and Tepper, 2014) and what "success" means for an artist beyond securing full-time work in the arts (Novak-Leonard, 2024). We join a growing body of arts labor researchers that employ surveys and interviews to gain a more textured understanding of the diverse career pathways, work experiences, and working arrangements of people with creative backgrounds or training (Brook and Comunian, 2018; Carey, 2015; Lindemann et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2013).

Our findings build upon previous reports that use both quantitative as well as a qualitative data to explore the conditions of the state's arts and culture workforce (Greenlee, 2023; Motlani, 2024; Motlani, 2025; Novak-Leonard, 2022; Novoa and Guske, 2023). Through this research we hope to gain a better understanding of how artists figure in a labor economy where "portfolio" careers and "polyoccupationalism" are becoming more prevalent.[3] Moreover, by exploring both the push and pull factors that prompt artists to transition to other sectors, this study also provides an opportunity to test the assumption that artists only pursue non-arts work out of necessity rather than by choice (Throsby & Zednik, 2011).

We intend this research to provide artists and arts graduates, prospective students, and parents with a deeper understanding of the existing and potential career outcomes of arts degrees and the challenges and opportunities of creative careers. We also hope it will provide arts educators and workforce development stakeholders with more pointed insights into how they can better tailor programs and opportunities to suit the needs and experiences of artists and arts graduates. Finally, the findings from these reports should encourage policymakers to provide greater support and resources to artists and arts graduates who wish to stay within or venture beyond their fields, and to better appreciate the myriad ways in which artists and cultural workers contribute to the state's economy.

Methods

Participation in this study was open to any professional who was: a) working in a non-arts job; b) had a background or training in the arts; and c) either worked in Illinois or had completed their arts training in Illinois. No-one was excluded on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, discipline, or industry. Artists and arts alumni could self-select by responding to recruitment materials posted on social media. People were also invited to participate via email, and word of mouth. The interview period lasted 10 weeks between May 6 and July 15, 2024. During that time, we interviewed and surveyed 40 artists and arts graduates (see interview participant data in Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Prior to the interview participants filled out a brief online survey that included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Topics included participant demographic characteristics, artistic training, current occupation, barriers participants have faced to working full time in the arts, and whether they would work full time in the arts if they could. During the interview, participants were asked about their artistic training, their post-training experiences, how and why they came to work in their current occupation or industry, the skills they have acquired through their arts training, and how they apply these skills in their present non-arts work. We used the cloud-based application Dedoose to analyze the interview and survey data, using both deductive and inductive coding for the interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses.

Interview Participant Information[4]

Table 1 reveals the demographic characteristics of our interview pool. While none of our interview participants work full time in artistic occupations, most of them maintain a creative practice (27/40) and, when asked if they still identify as a creative, 39 out of 40 answered "yes." This supports findings on the ongoing importance of creative identity (Carey, 2015). Our interview sample includes participants from a wide variety of artistic disciplines and industries. It is broadly reflective of the demographic trends we see in the Illinois arts workforce: The majority identify as White, are aged between 25 and 44, and have at least a bachelor's degree in the arts (Novak-Leonard and Banerjee, 2022). We have oversampled women as well as musicians and actors. That said, our previous research has shown that the majority of arts graduates in Illinois are women and a larger proportion of female arts graduates work in non-arts occupations (Motlani, 2024b).

We have also seen that music and theater graduates are among the most likely to have primary jobs in non-arts fields (Motlani, 2024b). This aligns with national research that shows that musicians and actors are among the most likely to work part time in the arts and have arts jobs as their secondary occupations (NASERC, 2022; NEA, 2019).

Table 1. Interview participant information.

From Illinois			Received Arts Training in Illinois		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
No	21	52.5%	Yes	29	72.5%
Yes	19	47.5%	No	11	27.5%
State of Residence			Age		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Illinois	34	85.0%	18-24 years old	2	5.0%
Washington	2	5.0%	25-34 years old	19	47.5%
California	2	5.0%	35-44 years old	12	30.0%
Arizona	1	2.5%	45-54 years old	6	15.0%
Missouri	1	2.5%	55-64 years old	1	2.5%
Gender			Race & Ethnicity		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Male	14	35.0%	White	24	60.0%
Female	25	62.5%	Latino/Latina/LatinX	4	10.0%
Non-binary / third gender	1	2.5%	Black or African American	5	12.5%
			Two or More Races	2	5.0%
			Asian	5	12.5%
Highest Level of Arts Education			Were Planning to Work in Arts Prior to Graduating		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Some college credit, no degree	4	10.0%	Yes	28	70.0%
Associate's degree	1	2.5%	No	5	12.5%
Bachelor's degree	23	57.5%	Maybe	7	17.5%
Master's degree	11	27.5%			
Doctorate degree	1	2.5%			
Worked in the Arts Prior to Non-Arts Job			Have Postsecondary Non-Arts Training		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	28	70.0%	Yes	20	50.0%
No	12	30.0%	No	20	50.0%
Would Work Full-time in Arts if They Could			Still Maintain a Creative Practice		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	30	75.0%	Yes	27	67.5%
No	10	25.0%	No	13	32.0%
Discipline			Non -Arts Sector		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Acting	12	30.0%	Business and finance	10	25.0%
Art History	5	12.5%	Education	8	20.0%
Dance	5	12.5%	Information Technology	7	17.5%
Film	7	17.5%	Healthcare	4	10.0%
Fine and Studio Arts	11	27.5%	Non profit	3	7.5%
Graphic Design	8	20.0%	Advertising/Marketing	2	5.0%
Literary Arts	4	10.0%	Staffing/Recruitment	2	5.0%
Music	21	52.5%	Entertainment	1	2.5%
Photography	8	20.0%	Manufacture	1	2.5%
Set or Exhibition Design	5	12.5%	Service design and research	1	2.5%
Other	3	7.5%	Retail	1	2.5%
Interior Design	1	2.5%			
Museum Work/Conservation	1	2.5%			

Findings

During the interview, we asked participants what drew them to their present non-arts occupation. Their coded responses were used to determine "pull factors" and are shown in Table 2. We also asked what were the push factors that prompted them to pursue careers outside the arts. In the pre-interview survey that each participant filled out, they were asked to describe the barriers that were preventing them from working full time in the arts. These interview and survey responses were combined and coded to determine "push factors," and the results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

We begin by examining these pull and push factors in turn, beginning with the most frequently cited ones before exploring the relationship between responses and demographic characteristics of our interview sample where appropriate. We also highlight differences between the responses of interview participants who answered "yes" to the question of whether they would work full time in the arts if they could, and those who answered "no." Finally, we look at themes that cut across both pull and push factors, including inequality in the arts, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Chicago-specific responses.

Table 2. Pull Factors

PULL FACTORS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Job aligns with interests/skills	28
Well paid jobs	24
Feel positively about the company/ employer	14
Access to benefits	13
Flexible hours and/or remote work possibilities	12
Location	10
Work/life balance	10
Chicago-specific	8
Facilitates pursuit of creative practice	7
Advancement/ growth opportunities	5

Pull Factors

Table 2 shows that the most frequently cited pull factors that drew arts and culture workers to non-arts occupations were: a) Their non-arts job aligns with their interests and skills; b) Their work is well paid; and c) They have positive feelings towards their company or employer. The following pages explore these pull factors in more detail.

a. Job aligns with interests and skills

28 out of 40 interview participants said that their current occupation aligns with their interests or skill sets. This category includes people who feel their work gives them a sense of purpose, enabling them to make a positive contribution to the world. One fine arts graduate who works as chief of staff for a university research unit said: "I have always liked being an advocate. And being in a position where I could help people feel supported and feel like the institution was invested in their success was important to me." Another participant who studied art history stated that pursuing a career in nursing provided her with a sense of purpose that she felt lacking in her academic career. "I wanted to do something very material that would be of use, and a value which I think is also something I always struggled with in art history."

> "I've been so curious my entire life, and what I really appreciate about software is that there's always more to learn, no matter what."

Other participants view their current job as a new outlet for their creativity. A graphic designer who now works as an event planner said, "This was a chance to be creative and come up with solutions that aren't on paper...my canvas, if you will, wasn't my computer, it was this big space full of open air and people walking through." Another participant notes similarities between his current work as a software developer and his former work as an author and musician: "Instead of writing to evoke emotions or a reaction out of a person, you're writing to evoke a reaction out of a machine." He feels that both his artistic and IT occupations provide him with an opportunity to keep learning and developing his skills: "I have to do a lot more investigation and learn a lot more, which is something that really motivated me in journalism and what motivated me as a musician as well. I've been so curious my entire life, and what I really appreciate about software is that there's always more to learn, no matter what."

b. Well Paid Jobs

24 out of 40 interview participants cited access to well-paid jobs as a major pull factor that drew them to their current job or industry. For some it provided a way out of the financial precarity and anxiety that they felt in their creative occupations. As one vocal performance graduate puts it: "Being in debt, and all these years of worrying about how I am going to take care of myself—that self-sufficiency piece for me—being in finance has solved a lot of that. It definitely solved a lot of that anxiety." For others it's about having a reliable source of income both now and in the future. One fine arts graduate who had tried several career paths before becoming a data analyst came to the realization, "I can't pivot anymore." Data analytics, he felt, was more "future proof" than some of his prior occupations: "This career has longevity. It's not going to, you know, die out"

"There's this trope of the artist struggle; that if you're not struggling you're not an artist…I don't think we have to do that."

For some interview participants, having more disposable income has provided them with access to a lifestyle and amenities that they could not otherwise afford. One theater graduate who works as a customer success manager for a tech company observes : "There's this trope of the artist struggle; that if you're not struggling you're not an artist. I thought a lot about that at the beginning. I was like 'oh I have to be scrappy, I have to be struggling, I have to feel like I'm barely making ends meet in order to be a struggling artist." She describes coming to the realization that "I don't think we have to do that. I have in-unit laundry and that became a huge thing for me that I really desired. I was like, I want to have a washing machine, I want to have central A/C. Those things became really important to me as I got older."

For this participant, and for others, having a stable, high-paying job now means that they may be able to engage in their creative practice more fully in the future: "If I can support myself doing this day job for now and live the life then maybe in 10 years, who knows… I could support myself in the way that I want to as an actor. But right now, I have high expectations of my life and so I think the money is definitely a big factor." A fine arts and theology graduate who is a development director for a social justice organization while also working in real estate expresses similar sentiments. She was intentional about choosing a career path that would enable her to pursue her creative passions at a later time. "Several years ago, I made the

conscious choice of knowing, okay, real estate is more profitable. I'll work on that in the evenings, on weekends. Once that's settled, I'll have the flexibility to then concentrate on something more creative that might take time to build up, and it may not generate as much revenue, but it will give me that joy in my life that I'm craving. And in my thirties, I think that is a priority, that work-life balance."

c. Feel positively about the company/ employer they work for

14 interview participants said there were aspects of their industry, company, or workplace that served as a pull factor. For some it was a sense of mission alignment for the place they work or the job they do. One participant said: "A philosophical sort of intuition led me to work with a sustainable local food investment group...I wasn't interested only in the financial piece, on what kind of return can we get? I was interested in investing in making our food system better, more resilient, more equitable, more healthy. Those were the entry points that I was interested in." A fine arts graduate working for a tech innovation hub expressed similar sentiments about her transition to a career in UIUX: "I think from a mission standpoint this career feels more substantial because you're solving problems for people... I feel like the job is very impactful ... I like how the work is really centered around humans; on making things intuitive. I think that is very much aligned with how I operate in the world—I really like making things easy for people."

> "A philosophical sort of intuition led me to work with a sustainable local food investment group... I wasn't interested only in the financial piece, on what kind of return can we get? I was interested in investing in making our food system better, more resilient. "

Other participants brought up work culture and environment as a positive factor in their present work. A dancer who works in trauma therapy stated: "Since I moved to the organization I'm at now, I've had much more of a sense of community just with working with folks who, even though they weren't dancers, had a foundation of valuing the body, movement, creativity, and human connection." For others it is about being able to expand one's community and encountering people from different backgrounds and cultures. A graphic designer who works as a senior business analyst in rural Illinois said: "It's amazing when you work with a diverse company or culturally diverse people, it expands you... as soon as I got that, I was like, I'll never go back to just one set group of people. I don't think I could do it... there's too much group think."

Other pull factors

Other pull factors that were frequently cited by our interview participants were access to benefits such as healthcare, retirement savings, and paid time off (13 out of 40 participants). Given the fact that many arts workers are contract workers and often lack access to these benefits, it is hardly surprising that this ranked highly as a pull factor for those seeking work outside the arts. To illustrate the difference between employment norms in the arts and those in other sectors, one participant noted the amount of maternity leave that workers in the finance industry receive, in addition to contributions towards doctor's bills: "That is truly unheard of in the arts world. Like completely unheard of. And the fact that this is just like an industry standard definitely makes you think."

Several participants cited flexible hours and/or remote work possibilities as a pull factor (12 out of 40 participants). For example, a musician who works as an economic analyst said "I am still striving to achieve a full-time career in music and one of the nice things about my company I work for is it's very flexible because the work is so independent. I can take a couple of hours off one day and make it up another day or work lunch a couple of days and take up a couple hours. I'm able to leave the workday or start late depending on if I have gigs or rehearsals or need to go to auditions." He also mentions the role that employee benefits and remote work play in making this dual career possible: "I've got PTO I can take for certain things, or we also have the capability to work remote one day a week. I can move that around or on occasion take an extra remote day if I need to be you know, in [another city] for a couple of days for rehearsals or something."

Photo credit: vectorfusionart/stock.adobe.com

Push Factors

Table 3 shows that the most frequently cited push factors prompting our interview subjects to pursue careers outside the arts were: a) Low wages for arts and culture jobs; b) Negative experiences within the arts and culture industry; and c) The lack of long term/secure employment. The following pages explore the most frequently cited push factors as well as relationships between push factors and demographic characteristics where appropriate.

Table 3. Push Factors

PUSH FACTORS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Low wages	29
Negative experiences	22
Lack of long term/secure jobs	20
Impact of COVID	15
Personal	14
Difficulty of getting into some arts industries	13
Lack of access to resources/ opportunities	10
Lack of successful role models/exemplars	9
Chicago-specific	7
Lack of benefits	7
Not being able to do the kind of work you want	7
Burnout	7
Challenges creative industries are facing	6
Student loans to pay	6
Negative education experience	5
Lack of family support for creative career	5
Not wanting to work full time in arts	4
Lack of time to devote to creative practice	4
Age as a push actor	3
Not feeling like you're good enough	3
Lack of creative community	2

a. Low wages

Despite high levels of educational attainment, on average artists earn lower wages than professionals from other occupational categories, such as Business and Finance, IT, and Healthcare.[5] There is also a great deal of variation both across and within arts and culture disciplines, with architects earning more than the median hourly wage for all workers and photographers and actors earning less. Indeed, acting exhibits one of the widest ranges of earnings.[6] It is hardly surprising, then, that 29 out of 40 participants cited low wages as a graduate push factor preventing them from working full time in the arts. A musician from Chicago who works as a recruiter for a HR firm by day and as a musician by night said, "The reason I'm not doing [music] full time isn't for any reason other than the money. If I made the exact amount of money doing this as I did my day job, I would not have two jobs. I'm working 13 hours of the day." An actor and film maker now working as a project manager for a DEI consulting company expressed similar sentiments: "I love making theater, I developed a love of filmmaking. I want to do those things, but I can't keep only making $75 for a 3 week or 3-month period… I have to do this other stuff."

Some of our interview participants felt the lack of financial remuneration for arts and culture workers means that a full time career in the arts is only affordable for those with other means of financial support—a sentiment that is supported by studies that reveal a positive relationship between family income and the likelihood of an individual taking up a creative occupation (Borowiecki, 2019; Whitaker and Wolniak, 2022). Says an vocal performance graduate working as an executive administrative assistant for a finance firm: "I was really excited to see how all these professional musicians were living because I had a lot of questions. And what I learned is that you can't do it yourself. You do it because your husband works at Amazon, or you have family money, or you do it because you live at home." For her, the ability to focus solely on her creative practice feels out of reach: "I'm single and 27 so I'm the only person that can provide myself health insurance and I'm the only person that can help pay my rent."

> "The reason I'm not doing [music] full time isn't for any reason other than the money. If I made the exact amount of money doing this as I did my day job, I would not have two jobs."

For some interview participants, the financial worries attending an arts career were compounded by college debt. This aligns with research that shows arts graduates are more likely than graduates from other majors to have taken on student loans and are less likely to be able to pay back these loans while working in an arts occupation (Paulsen, 2023 and White, 2016).[7] One participant said, "I had to pay for my own education and that is something that I'm working on right now—still paying off my student loans." Her current work in finance makes that possible: "The salary range is like night and day from working at a nonprofit, especially a music nonprofit. You just feel so much more security...I feel like I have a much better handle on [student loans] working where I do."

b. Negative experiences within the arts and culture industries

"It's sort of like a race to the bottom for a lot of artists and graphic designers to get basically any full time job. So, they'll accept very, very low wages. Whereas a software engineer has more leverage with their wages."

Out of all 40 participants, 22 cited negative experiences within the arts and culture industries as a push factor. These include unhealthy work environments or cultures, unreasonable expectations, exploitative practices, and inequality (see Cross-Cutting Themes, p. 12). A graphic design graduate states that companies are trying to get the best design graduates for the lowest wage possible. "If they are hiring new grads, they're going to hire you for the lowest that they can get you for, and the pool of people who continuously are graduating from art school is so vast, the supply is so vast, that they can [do that]." He says "It's sort of like a race to the bottom for a lot of artists and graphic designers to get basically any full time job. So, they'll accept very, very low wages. Whereas a software engineer has more leverage with their wages." His comments speak to a broader tendency to exploit and undervalue creative workers based on the assumption that their work is a passion project and is therefore its own reward (Kim et al., 2020).

Another arts industry that our interview participants associated with exploitative practices and toxic work environments is acting. One actor noted how age and sex can often serve as grounds for poor treatment: "I finally landed a theater job, which was cool. But then that was hard. The theater felt really toxic as well. I look younger than I am. People treat me

differently when they think I'm younger... Like, 'how could she be so smart or so this or so that or talented because she looks really young?'" She also references abusive behavior by directors: "They can be very harsh with you sometimes. Some can yell at you. It can be a very belittling or demeaning type of space."

An interview participant who works in retail while also pursuing an acting and screenwriting career feels that women are especially exploited within her industry. Speaking of the shortage of acting jobs in Chicago, she notes that, "The one person who was consistently posting paid jobs for women required nudity for all of them." She added, "I don't want to take my clothes off. I don't want to be in this weird situation where I'm at other people's whims." While high profile figures have brought attention to the exploitation and harassment of women within the acting industry, these practices persist and remain under researched (Weir and Perminiene, 2022). When combined with the lack of worker protections that self-employed actors face, particularly those who are non-union, women like the one I interviewed feel squeezed out of the industry.

> "I felt like I was watching all of my loved ones continue on with their life and I felt like I was existing in this space that I just wasn't progressing."

Several participants cited long hours and the resulting burnout as a major push factor, particularly those working theater jobs. Says a lighting designer who now works for a software company, "The other impact that they don't really discuss in college is if you're working that much, especially in theater, most of your work is nights and weekends. You don't see friends and family. And that was kind of detrimental to my own personal emotional health. I had friends in theater that I was seeing because we're working on shows together but it was very hard to actually get together with my own family. And I'm close to my family, so that was a hard time to get past." An actor now working for a staffing firm expressed similar sentiments about missing out on time with family and friends, saying that while working as a musical actor on a cruise ship: "I felt like I was watching all of my loved ones continue on with their life and I felt like I was existing in this space that I just wasn't progressing....Your contract ends, everyone's all sad, and then a lot of people will just rinse and repeat and line up their next ship contract and go. But I just didn't feel like I was progressing. I felt like I was ready to meet somebody. I wanted to just really settle in somewhere."

Another factor cited by some interview participants was the lack of formal pay structures and protections for workers within the industry, an issue that especially impacts those working on a freelance or contract basis. Says a photographer now working as a public school teacher: "I was really shocked by the net 30 net 60 net 90 terms where you could work a whole week and then they bill their client and the client pays them back in 30 days or whatever, but then after the client pays them, they have like 30 or 60 days to pay you. The huge delay in paycheck was ridiculous." She recalls an incident with a client who did not pay: "[The client] wasn't answering my calls... I hadn't found a good pocket of people or clients that I could build on." She compares this situation to her current job as an educator: "At least these standards don't get stretched. There is an objective set of limits of behavior and rules and contracts that are negotiated, there's a lot of thought put into those things. People can sort of go back on that when you're working on that kind of freelance basis."

c. Lack of long term, secure jobs

Artists are almost four times more likely to be self-employed than other workers and are more likely to be mixed earners who work multiple jobs (NEA, 2019; Throsby and Zednik, 2011; and Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019). It therefore stands to reason that a push factor for many interview participants (20 out of 40) was a lack of access to secure, stable employment or long-term contracts in the arts. This appears to be especially prevalent within music and theater. Says a trumpet player who works by day as an economic analyst: "There's no direct transition or line from education to career, especially in classical music. A performance career is incredibly competitive because the primary way that you can make money is as an orchestral musician. In Chicago there are about seven positions for trumpets that are full time....and that's probably more than most cities that probably have three, if that. If you're looking at a national level, it's probably one of the most competitive fields out there."

An executive administrative assistant for a finance company notes that much of the time, opera singers like herself rely on short term contracts as longer, nine-month contracts are highly competitive: "There are usually four spots: there's one for each voice type. As a soprano auditioning against 200 sopranos for one spot, the likelihood of me getting that is fairly low." She asks, "Is it worth spending $400 [on getting to auditions] not even to hear back from them ever again?" Another opera singer working in private equity expressed similar circumspection about the sunk costs of a musical career: "Voice lessons would be

about $100 a week. And then you pay for an accompanist as well. Let's say a $150 a week. At that time saving money to me was more important. Creating a nest egg for myself was more important than voice lessons."

Even getting into the arts and culture industry presents its challenges. Says a theater graduate who completed a master's degree with an eye to getting a teaching job: "My impression is that if you're wanting to be in an actor training program you either have to have worked somewhere before to even be competitive or you have to have a really impressive professional resume as a creative. As a mid-career performer who's just out of graduate school, I was not competitive for any of those Assistant Associate Professor, positions. And then I wasn't really finding even adjunct stuff." He adds, "I've done a little bit of coaching...and I was a teaching assistant while I was at [graduate school] so I do have the experience that should, maybe in conjunction with my professional practice and my private coaching studio practice, eventually make me competitive in that arena. But 9 months out, I was like, there's no way I'm going to get anything." Other acting graduates have pointed to other barriers. "I think there's fewer acting jobs in general. And then especially being non-union and not having an agent, your back is against the wall trying to find anything you can."

"Hardship is another layer if you're an immigrant... [Jobs] that offer work visas in the arts are extremely rare. That was another reason that I had to look for work outside of the art field because just looking at the numbers it's almost impossible."

The shortage of jobs and barriers to entry can be even more intense for those who are in the United States on a student visa. A film graduate now training to be a software developer says: "[Student visas] really restrict what I could do during college. I had to get approval for every job that I wanted to do ...it's called optional practice training, and it needs to be connected to your field so I could only do video editing." A fine arts graduate says her immigrant status was also instrumental to her shift in careers. "Hardship is another layer if you're an immigrant," she says. "[Jobs] that offer work visas in the arts are extremely rare. That was another reason that I had to look for work outside of the art field because, just looking at the numbers, it's almost impossible. There are more opportunities to get job visas if you work in a tech company or like a larger company."

Differences in Participant Responses

Pull Factors

As part of this study, we were interested to see if there were any qualitative differences between the push and pull factors cited by those interviewees who answered "yes" to the question "Would you work full time in the arts if you could?" and those who answered "no." Our analysis reveals that for those who said "yes" to working full time in the arts (30 out of 40 participants), two of the top pull factors were the same as the overall participant pool (job aligns with interests/skills and access to high-earning, stable jobs). However, the third pull factor was access to benefits. For those who said "no" to the question "Would you work full time in the arts if you could?" (10 out of 40 participants) the top pull factors were the same as the overall participant group.

Push Factors

Those who said "yes" to working full time in the arts cited the same top push factors as the overall interview sample (low wages, negative experiences in the creative industries, and lack of access to secure/stable employment). However, for those who answered "no," the top push factor was "negative experiences within the creative industries." The second highest response was "personal reasons." This included a fine arts graduate who went on to establish a service design and strategic research company. For him, having a family was pivotal to his career shift: "Having a kid after graduate school was a hugely motivating force for me to reconcile a lot of the economics in my life, which had never made any sense before as an artist, right? ...Chronically, you know, I was always figuring out how to make everything work, but there was never surplus, never kind of an abundance. And I didn't think that was fair for a family to be dealing with. I had to figure out how to reconcile that."

The third most frequently cited push factor for those who answered "no" to the question "would you work full time in the arts if you could?" was the feeling that they are not good enough to excel in their field. Significantly, all of the participants who cited this push factor identified as female and were trained in the performing arts. For example, a dancer who now works in healthcare said "Early on, when I was probably preteen or an early teenager, I had this awareness or assumption that I was not going to be someone who would be able to dance in a traditional company. And I think that came from lots of places. I studied classical ballet, which has a lot of pretty rigid training... and some not so healthy

things happening and so I think that was probably part of it. I had primarily teachers that didn't waver from the old school, rigid, harsh ways." A music graduate who is now an education professor also says that her college experiences made her feel she was not good enough. "I didn't feel I had the prerequisite skillset to be competitive with everyone else. I really thought I was going to get that in my undergraduate institution." She says that her institution further undermined her confidence: "I remember my mentor saying to me, 'Yeah, we don't think that you're going to ever get it, so we're just going to graduate you.' That's what I'm leaving with, really?"

Another observation that we made is that all interview participants who cited a lack of family support in the pursuit of a creative career as a push factor (5 out of 40) were either Black or African American or Asian. This reinforces the lack of racial diversity within both arts education and arts employment, a theme we discuss in the following pages.

Photo credit: mehaniq41/stock.adobe.com

Inequality and Lack of Diversity in the Arts

Labor force and education statistics reveal that the arts have an acute equity and diversity problem. For example, white, male, and able-bodied artists earn more on average than other artists, and management and leadership positions are disproportionately held by White arts alumni (D'Andrea, 2023). Our own research has shown that Black and Latino students are already underrepresented in terms of arts graduate populations in Illinois and even further underrepresented among the population of arts graduates with arts jobs when compared to the state's civilian workforce (Motlani, 2024).

"There are thousands of other Black women in Chicago who were also told to move their dreams for this, and we're all competing for [the same] roles. And a lot of times, theaters will reuse the same people, and they'll cast somebody in multiple shows, or you'll see the same, let's say 30 Black women in plays in Chicago. It's like once you're in, you're in. But it's getting in that's the hard part."

Several interview participants cited inequality within the arts and culture industries as a push factor. One actor and filmmaker from Chicago pointed to the shortage of roles for women of color in the city, particularly plus-size women. This was partly why she moved to LA and why she has had to work outside the arts in order to support herself: "As someone who is Black, who's a woman, who's plus size, I would maybe only be able to do maybe 25 shows that would cast me, that I would actually be able to be a part of......There are thousands of other Black women in Chicago who were also told to move their dreams for this and we're all competing for [the same] roles. And a lot of times, theaters will reuse the same people, and they'll cast somebody in multiple shows, or you'll see the same, let's say 30 Black women in plays in Chicago. It's like once you're in, you're in. But it's getting in that's the hard part."

Another interview participant who returned to Chicago from San Francisco noted the lack of diversity on operatic stages in the city— a circumstance that contributed to her decision to leave the industry: "It was so different in San Francisco. I felt like they really wanted to embrace diversity on stage. It was twofold, I would say, because some people would be

like, wow, we want different faces on stage. Instead of the typically blonde tiny person who plays this role, we want to cast the complete opposite...No typecasting at all. And then to see a more traditional opera house very much sticking to typecasting—it just depends on the organization." For others, the issue is not only a shortage of roles for people of color but also a shortage of opportunities to advance within the industry combined with unequal pay. Says one musician and actor: "I started to feel like I wasn't getting paid enough or I wasn't advancing when watching my white peers advance. It is stressful."

One of the artists we interviewed, however, feels that thanks in part to new technologies and means of disseminating their art, creatives from historically minoritized communities are now beginning to find ways to surmount some of the barriers presented by the creative industries: "I feel fortunate to be surrounded by artists of color, who also feel less inclined or feel less of a need to seek approval from these big industries ...eventually they [the industries] will come calling." She adds that "more creators nowadays, because of the Internet, because of access to our phones, etc., can make stuff on our own. We can boost and create our own audiences and microcosms of people who are interested in our work. And then those industries, they come because they see that."

Lack of opportunity for creatives from low-income backgrounds

As noted, research has shown there is a positive relationship between family income and the likelihood of an individual taking up a creative occupation (Borowiecki, 2019; Whitaker & Wolniak, 2022). Several of our interview participants noted that being from low-income backgrounds made it difficult for them to advance within their creative pathways. This was especially true for the musicians we interviewed. One participant who studied vocal music and music education said: "[There was] not really a lot of financial support for music educators. And another thing that always really bothered me is that in my Teacher Education Curriculum [there was no] transportation to those internships and I didn't have a car. And no one in my family could afford to give me a car. ... I felt very anxious about that because...there was no bus system at the time. I was stressing out about how am I going get to my internship? How am I going to complete my degree not having a car? I felt very frustrated very unseen and unsupported by the music faculty and the education faculty.

They're like, well, you know, you're... out of luck. You're too broke to afford a car. I guess you can't get your degree." She adds: "That's another reason why I was so frustrated with music education is because those sorts of challenges were not seen. Sometimes it felt like they were willfully overlooked. 'That's not our responsibility' and that's another way in which it kind of perpetuated the middle upper-class stratification in music education. It cuts out people from low-income backgrounds."

We also heard from individuals who had studied opera and found the expenses of attending summer young artists programs presented an especially significant barrier to advancing their careers beyond college. One interview participant said: "You pay to sing well into your twenties and early thirties as a musician. When I say pay to sing [I mean] these summer programs are very expensive … I never thought those opportunities were available to me because I couldn't afford them." She also noted that having to work her way through college also limited performance opportunities. "Waiting tables on the weekends meant I couldn't participate in the school performances…I did miss out on some of those key opportunities to kind of build the momentum towards a career while in my undergrad because I was waiting tables Friday, Saturday, Sundays."

> "You pay to sing well into your twenties and early thirties as a musician. When I say pay to sing [I mean] these summer programs are very expensive … I never thought those opportunities were available to me because I couldn't afford them."

In this participant's experience, success in music seems to be largely the preserve of the wealthy or the extremely tenacious: "For the colleagues that now are professional musicians, they're either very well resourced: trust funds, parents make over a million a year, they win grants, so there's continuous cash flow from an external source being routed into their development. And then there's the other group of students where they'll just own being a starving artist—waiting tables for as long as it takes….they're very hungry and they're going to do this no matter what. So there are those groups. [Then] there's folks like me who after graduation realize that the return on investment for a master's degree wasn't going to be viable for a long-term career and a lot of us either decided to go to law school (I have friends who are now lawyers) or for me I went into finance."

Inequities around health

Our participants also shared concerns about inequities around health and neurodiversity. A theater and graphic design graduate who works as a systems trainer for a marketing logistics company says: "Something I've been thinking about a lot lately is how art education approaches people who are neuro divergent and whether or not there is enough space being made in the art world for people that do operate a little differently." She adds that the impacts are especially felt by those that identify as female: "There's also a gender bias for ADHD diagnosis. There hasn't been a lot of research… Being able to identify when people need messages a little differently or making sure instructions are written down when you're giving them and you're not just like throwing something out at the end of the class."

"Something I've been thinking about a lot lately is how art education approaches people who are neuro divergent and whether or not there is enough space being made in the art world for people that do operate a little differently."

This lack of attentiveness to neurodiversity can also contribute to people with conditions like ADHD feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in artistic spaces: "It always felt very restrictive in those environments and I felt like I had a lot to express but was [forced into] these lanes…I don't know that I necessarily feel like I achieved my full potential in college and it was for a myriad of reasons, but part of it was me having a hard time because of ADHD and the things that go along with that too."

This participant's response highlights a gap in existing scholarship. While there is research that explores the impact of neurodivergence on female college and graduate school students' experiences and on career choices, as well as research on the role of the impact of arts activities on those who are neurodivergent, there is not enough research on its role as an accessibility issue in arts and culture spaces like museums (Devol and Sun, 2024 and Henley, 1998).

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID 19 pandemic had a devasting impact on the arts and culture economy, which shrank nationwide at nearly twice the rate of the economy as a whole (NEA, 2022b). In Illinois the outlook was similarly bleak. The state was one of the hardest hit in the nation in terms of creative revenue and job losses (Florida and Seman, 2020). While some of the arts and culture industries have been rebounding, many segments of the industry are still struggling, including theaters, which are still experiencing attendance rates well below pre-pandemic levels (Voss et al. 2023).

Given this context, it is no wonder that the pandemic figured prominently in interview responses, serving as both a push and pull factor. For many, the shutdowns precipitated by the pandemic and the dearth of contracts they received during the health crisis had a detrimental impact on their creative careers. One actor and arts instructor said, "Since the pandemic, I haven't been able even to this day to recover my life as an instructor or in education." She adds, "I was completely disconnected from art forms in general."

> "Since the pandemic, I haven't been able even to this day to recover my life as an instructor or in education…I was completely disconnected from art forms in general."

A musician who now works in tech said that leading up to the pandemic, he had been hopeful about building up his creative career. "Maybe 4 or 5 years ago I thought that I would live my life as a musician, if not as a performer [then perhaps as] a music producer for other people… It was a brief window, because right after [February 2020] the whole world shut down and there were no networking opportunities. There were no opportunities for me to do shows, because shows didn't really exist anymore."

For some, the pandemic introduced new complexities to their already challenging search for employment. Says one actress who now works in university constituent engagement: "Post COVID, everything audition-wise went online…You would have to film all your auditions at home so you would have to find someone to read the other lines with you. You would have to set up the camera, you'd have to film it, you'd have to costume yourself, do different takes …so it just became time consuming and very, very self-critical."

Others said that the pandemic forced them to view their career in a new light. An opera singer says the pandemic brought the precarity of a career in performance into sharp relief: "There was no end in sight. When [the pandemic] happened there was really no plan ... They don't prepare you for what happens if you get sick and you can't audition for a year. There are no rules for you in a company. What if there's a pandemic or you have to take time off or you want to have a baby and get married when you're 25 and you don't want to wait until your thirties. There isn't a plan for any of that."

"...They don't prepare you for what if you get sick and you can't audition for a year. There are no rules for you in a company. What if there's a pandemic or you have to take time off or you want to have a baby and get married when you're 25 and you don't want to wait until your thirties. There isn't a plan for any of that."

For her and others, the pandemic served as a catalyst for seeking a career less vulnerable to future crises. An actor now working as a talent care partner in a design staffing firm said: "it was really tough on artists ...it really took a toll on a lot of people's mental health seeing how quickly my industry went away while others were able to stay a bit longer and knowing that this industry is the first to go away and will be the last one to come back." For a musician now working as the director of a tutoring company, the pandemic highlighted the need for other options: "I don't like to put my eggs in one basket. I think it's good to have a bunch of things that you can do so that whatever things come... you still have things to do"

According to some of our interview participants, the pandemic also helped them to clarify their goals in life or find time to do things they wouldn't normally be able to do. A fine artist now working as a data analyst said, "during the pandemic when everything shut down, I just spent a lot of time at home watching YouTube videos on how to use Excel and that built my confidence with that program and I think the program naturally introduced me to other important technical skills like SQL, data visualization." For another participant, the pandemic opened up new remote arts education possibilities: "At that point I had always wanted to start a teaching studio, and it was the perfect time to do it because everything was virtual. Everyone was learning virtually. Parents were going crazy with their kids at home. And that is something that I actually continue to do today is teach voice lessons, virtually and in person. And I just love it so much. It just helps me stay connected."

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Chicago-Specific Challenges and Opportunities

In 2024, Chicago-Naperville was ranked 11 out of the top 20 communities in SMU DataArts Vibrant Communities Index, a measure that is based on a range of factors that include the number of artists and arts providers in a city, the dollars the arts generate, and the amount of government support for the arts (SMU DataArts, 2024b). The responses of some interview participants suggest that it deserves this ranking while others suggest it didn't. For many, living and working in Chicago has played a big role in their career trajectory, sometimes presenting opportunities and sometimes presenting barriers to working full time in the arts.

Opportunities

All of the participants who commented upon the opportunities that Chicago offers for arts and culture workers came to the city from outside Chicago or outside Illinois. One participant who went to school in central Illinois noted that an internship opportunity at a museum in downtown Chicago opened her eyes to the possibilities the city offered that weren't available in rural or suburban areas of the state: "I started to meet people who went to various theater programs or art schools that were in a major city. And the access that they had to creative internships and creative opportunities that helped set them up for future opportunities after college was crazy to me, because we were never really encouraged during summer vacations or whatever to go and seek internships or opportunities to connect and build relationships in college."

Others have noted Chicago is a good starting place for those pursuing an acting career. Said one actor who grew up and did his undergraduate studies in New York and his graduate degree in Chicago, "Being sort of ahead of the game [in Chicago], in a smaller pool, keeps me here. Usually, I go where the work is, and I've had work here in Chicago since I graduated." He also notes that the city's theater industry is more amenable to artists who have day jobs: "There are a lot of theater companies in Chicago that recognize that they don't have the capacity to pay a living wage, so they structure their rehearsal and performance schedules around people who work full time jobs. So, I'm going to be in a play right now ...we rehearsed in the evening and the weekend and then perform around the evenings and the weekends. I can work full time during the day, and I work remote so it's a little more flexible to negotiate travel and location and all of that."

Finally, participants noted that Chicago is a good city to live in. A graphic design graduate from Florida who hopes to enter the video game industry noted its progressive history as a pull factor: "Chicago, as the 3rd largest [city], has a rich history of giving a sh*t, so it has great public amenities, very walkable, beautiful parks, beautiful neighborhood culture, very diverse. The opportunities to get my quality of life up was a huge factor in getting here." He adds, "I do recognize that the video game industry is in L.A. and New York and a couple of other places...but I was very unwilling to live in those places as a trade off for that job opportunity." A musician who performs across the state and in neighboring states echoes these views: " [Chicago] is a good hub....it's an easy place to launch from to take auditions because you've got the large airports. He adds "It takes a long time to build a freelance career. If I were to go anywhere else, it would probably be a couple of years set back."

Challenges

The majority of the interview participants who alluded to Chicago's challenges are in film and theater. One of the main challenges they mentioned for those aspiring to work in these industries is that even when films or shows are filmed in this city, the roles are outsourced from other places. One interview participant said, "We have some stuff that's filming here, but I think the trend that I've seen, at least in my experience, is that things are being cast out of LA and then people are being brought to Chicago to work here."

> "There are a lot of theater companies in Chicago that recognize that they don't have the capacity to pay a living wage, so they structure their rehearsal and performance schedules around people who work full time jobs.

Another participant described it as a "vicious cycle," noting "we don't have the productions because we don't have people, but we don't have people, because [we don't have the] productions, so all the graduates tend to go to either L.A. or New York." The same participant also pointed out the dearth of mentoring opportunities compared to other cities: "I know some folks doing cinematography specifically, and they have mentors in the industry, and they can find connections and work on their mentors' sets, for example, helping them out, also shadowing. Not [so] much in Chicago."

For those in theater, the competion for acting jobs in Chicgo is a major factor. One participant put this down to the fact that so many actors flock to the city after graduating because they are told it is a "safer choice" than other cities. "A lot of us moved to Chicago because we're told it's a steppingstone. You don't want to go to New York or L.A., that's too big fish. You want to work in a smaller community where you can have a lot of opportunities, and when you're ready then you can go to Los Angeles, then you can go to New York... And then Chicago is so over saturated. So, it makes it a lot harder to actually get work as an actor."

One participant opined that the difficulties of securing work are compounded by the difficulties of getting an agent in Chicago and because of the fact that many jobs are not unionized: "I think it is harder to get an agent in Chicago because there are fewer of them, and they already have a full roster versus when I was in L.A. And then also, trying to be in the union because the good paying jobs are in the union, right... it's like this weird snake eating its own tail thing. You have to be in the union to get a union job, but you also can't get into the union without being on a union job. It's very difficult to even get your foot in the door without being in the union."

Finally, interview participants noted that in Chicago it is especially challenging to maintain a full time career in the arts that can sustain you. Art can't be your day job here; it has to be a side job because it does not pay enough. Said one participant: "One of the reasons I left Illinois, and I left Chicago, is because it did not feel like I could have a career in the arts. It felt like my artistic practice was a hobby. And that it would always be a hobby, this thing that I would always have to do after the day job, because I could never afford to."

Another actor made similar observations, stating that, "In the Chicago market most performing artists have more substantive parallel careers or side day jobs. In New York. I noticed that if I was working in my creative practice, it would probably be paying me enough to live. In Chicago, that's much rarer. And I realized that pretty quickly because I came out of [graduate school], and I was fortunate enough to be working as an actor pretty consistently since I finished but none of it was paying enough: it was not a living wage...I realized that even my very fancy faculty at [university] all have substantive creative practices in addition to their day job."

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Our study reveals that the most prevalent pull factors among our interview sample are: a) Their present job aligns with their interests or skills, providing some with a sense of purpose and offering others a new outlet or expression for their creativity; b) Access to well paid jobs which provided a way out of the financial precarity they had faced in their creative careers and providing access to a lifestyle and amenities that they would not otherwise have been able to afford; c) Feeling positively about their company or employer, including a sense of mission alignment with their company or organization or a work environment where they felt understood or valued. In addition to these factors, access to benefits such as health insurance and paid time off as well as remote work possibilities also featured prominently and were often cited concurrently as conditions that enabled interview participants to enjoy a work-life balance. This is especially significant given that many participants stated they do maintain a creative practice outside their regular work hours (27/40).

The most widely cited push factors were: a) Low wages, which combined with college debt made it difficult to pursue a creative career and made some participants feel that they had to make a choice that people from more affluent backgrounds are not forced to make; b) Negative experiences within the creative industries, including the lack of financial leverage for graphic design workers, toxic work practices and environments, the exploitation of and limited employment opportunities for women in the acting industry, a sense of overwhelm and burnout, and the lack of formal pay structures or industry standards to protect self-employed artists; c) Lack of access to secure and stable employment opportunities and the difficulty of getting a job in some industries, particularly for those who are in the United States on a student visa.

We also identified several themes that cut across push and pull factors, including: a) Inequity or lack of diversity in the arts, including racial, ethnic, gender, socio-economic, and neurological diversity, and in some interview responses we observed an intersection of these characteristics; b) The impact of COVID, which at times served as a push factor forcing creatives to look for work elsewhere when jobs in their creative industry became harder to come by and at other times served as a pull factor, prompting creatives to rethink their goals and values; c) Push and pull factors that were Chicago specific, some

describing the city as a major draw and site for opportunities and others citing the challenges the city offered, particularly to those in the film or theater industry.

As above, we observed that in many cases, the reasons why artists and graduates pursue non-creative occupations is discipline specific, especially when it comes to push factors such as a lack of diversity and a shortage of employment opportunities (or any combination of these issues), with most of these issues emerging in relation to the performing arts – namely acting and music. On one hand it is important to remember that the majority of our interview participants were from these disciplines. On the other hand, this fact also underscores the challenges that are known to face creatives from these backgrounds.

Finally, it is important to point out that while the majority of interview participants said they would work full time in the arts if they could, a significant portion also stated they would not. This challenges assumptions that artists only pursue non-arts work out of necessity rather than by choice. We also found some qualitative differences in the pull and push factors cited by those interview participants: Those who said "yes" to working in the arts were more likely to cite access to benefits as a pull factor and those who said "no" were more likely to cite personal reasons such as care responsibilities and family as a push factors. Interestingly, they were also more likely to cite not feeling good enough as a push factor, and all of the participants who offered this push factor identified as women and were trained in the performing arts.

Major Takeaways

Given that more than half of our interview subjects were between 18 and 34 years of age, this study contributes to our understanding of the factors that shape young peoples' career choices. Informal research on the challenges of engaging young workers has shown that Generation Z and young millennials place a greater emphasis on mission alignment and are more likely to want to work for organizations that share their values (Harter, 2024; Perna, 2023). Meanwhile, academic research on vocational psychology and career preparation emphasizes the increasing importance of personal values in the occupational choices of young workers. (Arieli et al., 2020; Hicklenton et al., 2021; Lipshits-Braziler et al., 2024). Our study supports these findings, showing that more money and greater job stability are not the only considerations motivating artist career choices; many are also looking for a sense of purpose and new ways to apply their

creativity—something that workforce development systems do not fully account for. The present study, while focused on the push and pull factors motivating transitions to careers outside the arts, also supports the growing consensus on the role of arts training in greater integration in a variety of disciplines and fields (Bear et al., 2018).

This report has clear education, workforce, and policy implications. Firstly, if we want Illinois to remain a culturally vibrant city that attracts and retains creative workers, and if we do not want those workers to have to choose between being able to financially support themselves or their families and being able to fully pursue their creative talents, we need to provide them with greater access to financial support. One way could be through guaranteed income programs like the ones piloted in New York City, San Francisco, and Minnesota.[8] Preliminary findings from these programs show that in addition to helping artists with their financial and caregiving responsibilities, they provide them with greater control over the work they pursue and expand opportunities for paid artistic work (Creatives Rebuild New York, 2024; Frasz, 2024; and Treskon et al., 2024).
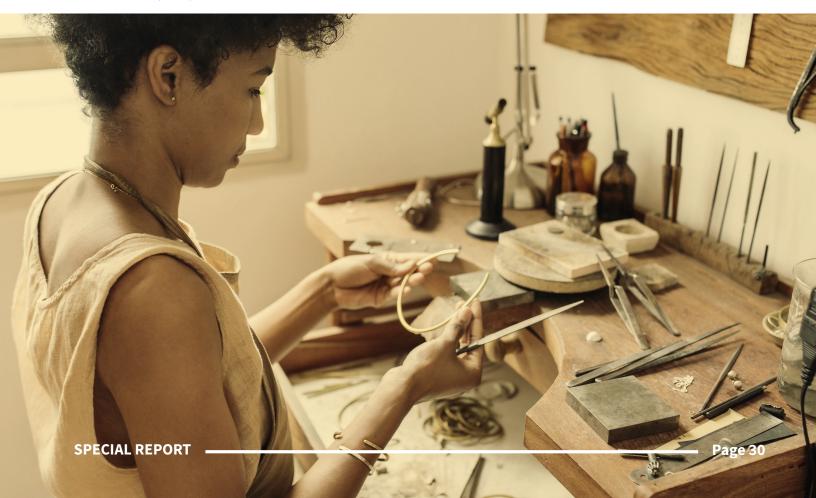
Second, we need to recognize the issues facing artists within the broader context of existing workforce structures and push for policies that address the needs of contract or gig workers. One way is to reclassify workers who are misclassified as contract or gig workers, something that states like California have been pursuing (Yang et al., 2021). Another is to provide artists and other gig workers with access to portable benefits, a measure that is behind the Portable Benefits for Independent Workers Pilot Program Act, a bill that was introduced to Congress in 2023 (Portable Benefits for Independent Workers Pilot Program Act, 2023). Illinois has also taken steps to protect the rights of non-W2 workers through the Freelance Worker Protection Act (FWPA), which came into effect in July 2024 (Freelance Worker Protection Act, 2024). The law requires employers to provide freelance workers with written contracts, provide full and timely payment, and entitles them to protection from retaliation for exercising their legal rights.

Third, we need to mitigate structural barriers and inequities facing Black, Latino, and American Indian arts workers within the arts and culture ecosystem. We also need to recognize that the shortage of well paid, secure employment, unhealthy work practices or expectations, and the prospect of accruing large amounts of college debt make education and careers in the arts especially unattainable to those from historically minoritized or low-income communities, further deepening the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides within the arts.

Finally, the issues raised in this report by participants who came to the United States on student visas, and by those from low income families trying to enter artistic disciplines such as vocal performance, suggest that more research is needed to understand and address the challenges facing specific populations and disciplines within the arts, sometimes at a policy level and at other times at an institutional level. Our study also shows that we need to invest broadly in Illinois creative workers and the organizations that employ them while also providing targeted support to specific creative industries, bolstering efforts that are already underway such as the Chicago Filmmakers Illinois Film & TV Production Assistant Training Program.[9]

We hope the findings from this report support the work that advocacy organizations, institutions, and municipal and state government entities are already doing to improve the quality of life of arts workers and increase equity, diversity, and opportunity within the arts while also showing that more needs to be done to improve the lives of artists in Illinois. Future reports will explore how artists and arts graduates describe and apply their transferrable skills and the opportunities and barriers they have faced when transitioning to careers outside the arts.

Photo credit: (JLco) Julia Amaral /stock.adobe.com

Notes

1. This data comes from the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) Creative Economy State Profile for Illinois. See https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/. The source data for NASAAs creative economy profiles comes from the Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA), a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Office of Research & Analysis and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

2. The studies cited use the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data to show that most people with arts education have primary occupations outside the arts. Surveys conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) suggest a much larger percentage of arts graduates in the workforce have an arts or design-related job or arts and design-related duties (56% and 75% respectively). See Novak-Leonard (2024). Reasons for the discrepancy between ACS and SNAAP data may be attributable to the fact that the latter has a smaller sample size and is free of some of the ACS' restrictions regarding primary and secondary occupation and occupational delineation.

3. These describe workers who identify with multiple occupations, often at the same time. See Ashton (2015) and Hénaut et al. (2023).

4. Because the artistic discipline survey questions were check all that apply, these do not add up to 100%, and Table 1 shows the number of interview participants who selected that choice.

5. This information is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook. See https://www.bls.gov/ooh/. According to BLS data, the median annual wage for Art and Design occupations was $51,660 in May 2023 whereas for Business and Financial occupations it was $79,050; for Computer and Information Technology occupations it was $104,420 and for Healthcare Practitioners it was $80,820.

6. According to the BLS, the 10th percentile of actors earn $13 per hour and the 90th percentile earn almost 10 times more at $100.01. See https://www.bls.gov/ooh/.

7. Analysis of Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) survey data also reveals a negative association between high levels of college debt and the likelihood of arts graduates working in the arts. See Lindemann et al. (2012); Frenette and Dowd (2020); and Smith and Albana (2022).

8. See San Francisco's Guaranteed Income Pilot for Artists, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Minnesota's Guaranteed Income for Artists pilot, operated by Springboard for the Arts https://ybca.org/guaranteed-income-for-artists/#:~:text=The%20SF%20Guaranteed%20Income%20Pilot,the%20City%20of%20San%20Francisco and Minnesota's Guaranteed Income for Artists pilot, operated by Springboard for the Arts https://springboardforthearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Guaranteed-Income-Pilot-for-Artists-Expands-to-Five-Years-Press-Release.pdf

9. https://chicagofilmmakers.org/workforce-development#:~:text=Part%20of%20our%20Workforce

References

Arieli, S., Sagiv, L., & Roccas, S. (2020). Values at work: The impact of personal values in organisations. *Applied Psychology, 69* (2), 230–275. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12181

Ashton, D. (2015). Creative work careers: Pathways and portfolios for the creative economy. *Journal of Education and Work, 28,* 388–406.

Bear, A. & Skorton, D. (2018). *The integration of the humanities and arts with sciences, engineering, and medicine in higher education: Branches from the same tree* (1st ed.). National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/24988

Bennett, D. (2009). Academy and the real world: Developing realistic notions of career in the performing arts. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 8* (3), 309-327. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022209339953

BFAMFAPhD. (2014). *Artists report back: A national study on the lives of arts graduates and working artists.* BFAMFAPhD. http://bfamfaphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/BFAMFAPhD_ArtistsReportBack2014-10.pdf

Borowiecki, K. (2019). The origins of creativity: The case of the arts in the United States since 1850. *Discussion Papers on Economics 3*. University of Southern Denmark, Department of Economics. http://files.culturaleconomics.org/papers/AWP-02-2019.pdf

Bridgstock, R. (2005). Australian artists, starving and well-nourished: What can we learn from the prototypical protean career? *Australian Journal of Career Development, 14,* 40–48.

Brook, S. & Comunian R. (2018). "Dropping out and working": The vocational narratives of creative graduates." In Martin, Lee., & Wilson, Nick. (Eds.). *The palgrave handbook of creativity at work* (pp. 125-141). Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan.

Carey, C. (2015). The careers of fine artists and the embedded creative. *Journal of Education and Work, 28* (4), 407–421.

Caust, J. (2021). Sustainability of artists in precarious times; How arts producers and individual artists have adapted during a pandemic. *Sustainability, 13 (*24),13561–61. https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/24/13561

Creatives Rebuild New York. (2024). *Guaranteed income for artists: Preliminary findings. Creatives Rebuild New York.* https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CRNY_GuaranteedIncom eForArtists_PreliminaryFindings.pdf

Conzelmann, J G., Hemelt, S. W., Hershbein, B., Martin S., Simon, A., & Stange, K.M. (2023). *New data show how far graduates move from their college, and why it matters.* Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Kalamazoo, MI. https://doi.org/10.17848/pb2023-64

Devol, T. M. & Sun, Q. (2024). Paying attention: Female ADHD students learning in graduate school. *Adult Education Quarterly, 74* (2), 112 131. https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136231217473

Dowd, T. J., Tai, Y., & Zaras, D. (2022). The sounds of silence: Concerts, musicians, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In Woodward, I., Haynes, J., Berkers, P., Dillane, A., & Golemo, K. (Eds). *Remaking culture and music spaces: Affects, infrastructures, futures* (pp. 102-120). Taylor & Francis Group.

Fine, G. A. (2017). A matter of degree: Negotiating Art and commerce in MFA education. *American Behavioral Scientist, 61,* 1463-1486.

Florida, R. & Seman, M. (2020). *Lost art: Measuring COVID-19's devastating impact on America's creative economy*. Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20200810_Brookingsmetro_Covi d19-and-creative-economy_Final.pdf

Frasz, A. (2024). *Creatives Rebuild New York artist guaranteed income for artists process evaluation*. Creatives Rebuild New York / Helicon Collaborative. https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CRNY-Evaluation-Report_ GI.pdf

Freelance Worker Protection Act, 820 ILCS 193/1, 103rd General Assembly. (2024). https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=4441&ChapterID=68

Frenette, A., Martin, N. D., & Tepper, S.J. (2018). Oscillate wildly: The under-acknowledged prevalence, predictors, and outcomes of multi-disciplinary arts practice. *Cultural Trends, 27*(5), 339-352.

Frenette, A. & Ocejo, R.E. (2019). Sustaining enchantment: How cultural workers manage precariousness and routine. *Research in the Sociology of Work, 32,* 35-60.

Frenette, A. & Dowd, T. J. (2020). *Careers in the arts: Who stays and who leaves?* Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP). https://snaaparts.org/findings/reports/careers-in-the-arts-who-stays-and-who-leaves.

Greenlee, A.J. (2023). *Housing affordability for Illinois artists and creative workers (2019–2021).* Arts Impact Initiative, Issue Brief. University of Illinois-Champaign, College of Fine and Applied Arts. https://web.faa.illinois.edu/app/uploads/sites/10/2023/04/DEAN_ArtsImpact_Issuebrief3_April23.pdf

Harter, J. (2024). *The New Challenge of Engaging Younger Workers.* Gallup Workplace. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/610856/new-challenge-engaging-younger-workers.aspx

Hearn, G., Bridgstock, R., & Goldsmith, B. (2014). *Creative work beyond the creative industries: innovation, employment and education.* Edward Elgar.

Hénaut, L., Lena, J. C., & Accominotti, F. (2023). Polyoccupationalism: Expertise stretch and status stretch in the postindustrial era. *American Sociological Review, 88* (5), 872-900. https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224231190942

Henley, D . (1998). Art therapy in a socialization program for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *American Journal of Art Therapy, 37* (1), 2–12.

Hennekam, S. & Bennett, D. (2017). Creative industries work across multiple con- texts: Common themes and challenges. *Personnel Review, 46*, 68–85.

Hernandez, M. (2024). *Part One: Understanding neurodiverse accessibility in art museums.* *Arts Management & Technology Laboratory.* https://amt-lab.org/blog/2024/9/understanding-neurodiverse-accessibility-in-art-museums

Hicklenton, C. L., Hine, D. W., Driver, A. B., & Loi, N. M. (2021). How personal values shape job seeker preference: A policy capturing study. *PloS One, 16* (7), e0254646-. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254646

Kim, J. Y., Campbell, T. H., Shepherd, S., & Kay, A. C. (2020). Understanding contemporary forms of exploitation: Attributions of passion serve to legitimize the poor treatment of workers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 118* (1), 121-148. doi:https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000190

Lena, J. C. & Lindemann, D.J. Who is an artist? New data for an old question. *Poetics, 43,* 70–85. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2014.01.001.

Lindemann, D. J., Tepper, S. J., Gaskill, S., Jones, S. D., Kuh, G. D., Lambert, A. D., Lena, J., Miller, A. L., Park, K., Rudolph, E. B., & Vanderwerp, L. (2012). *Painting with broader strokes: Reassessing the value of an arts education.* Indiana University and Vanderbilt University, Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP).

Lindemann, D. J., Tepper, S. J., & Talley, H. L. (2017). "I don't take my tuba to work at Microsoft": Arts graduates and the portability of creative identity. *American Behavioral Scientist, 61* (12), 1555-1578.

Lipshits-Braziler, Y., Arieli, S., & Daniel, E. (2024). Personal values and career-related preferences among young adults. *Journal of Personality, 93* (2), 378-393 https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12935

Martin, N. D. & Alexandre, F. (2017). Lost in transition: College resources and the unequal early-career trajectories of arts alumni. *American Behavioral Scientist, 61*, 1487-1509.

Morgan, G., Wood, J., & Nelligan, P. (2013). Beyond the vocational fragments: Creative work, precarious labour and the idea of "Flexploitation". *The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 24,* 397–415.

Motlani, A. (2024a). *Where do artists work? Exploring the careers of arts graduates in Illinois and the U.S.* Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), Discovery Partners Institute (DPI), University of Illinois, Chicago, IL. https://omsdpiprod.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FINAL-COPY_ISSUE-BRIEF-1.pdf

Motlani, A. (2024b). *Who works in the arts: The demographic characteristics of Illinois arts graduates in arts jobs.* Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), Discovery Partners Institute (DPI), University of Illinois, Chicago, IL. https://omsdpiprod.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Motlani_Who-Works-in-the-Arts.pdf

National Art Statistics and Evidence-based Reporting Center (2022). M*easuring the arts. Domain A: Artists and other cultural workers.* National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/a8-report-202409.pdf

National Endowment for the Arts. (2019). *Artists and other cultural workers: A statistical portrait.* National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/artists-and-other-cultural-workers-statistical-portrait

National Endowment for the Arts. (2022a). *Artists in the workforce: selected demographic characteristics prior to COVID-19.* National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) Office of Research & Analysis. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists-in-the-Workforce-Selected-Demographic-Characteristics-Prior-to-COVID%E2%80%9019.pdf

National Endowment for the Arts. (2022b). *New data show economic impact of COVID-19 on arts & culture sector.* National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). https://www.arts.gov/news/press-releases/2022/new-data-show-economic-impact-covid-19-arts-culture-sector

Novoa, M. & Guske, E. (2023). *The pandemic's impact on artists and creative workers in Illinois: Exploring Lived experiences in the Urbana Champaign area.* Arts Impact Initiative. University of Illinois-Champaign, College of Fine and Applied Arts. https://web.faa.illinois.edu/app/uploads/sites/10/2023/11/RSCH_ArtsImpact_Issuebrief4_Nov23.pdf

Novak-Leonard, J. & Banerjee A. (2022). *The artist labor force: a statistical look at Illinois in context of the U.S.* Arts Impact Initiative, College of Fine Arts, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. https://web.faa.illinois.edu/app/uploads/sites/10/2022/08/Issue-Brief-2-Revised-July.pdf

Novak-Leonard, J. L. (2024). *Arts & design alumni perspectives on employment & career outcomes.* Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP). Austin, TX. https://snaaparts.org/findings/reports/arts-and-design-alumni-employment-and-perspectives-on-their-work-and-careers

Paulsen, R. J. (23) Student loan debt and the career choices of college graduates with majors in the arts. *Journal of Cultural Economics, 48*, 95–115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-023-09474-x

Perna, M.C. (2023). *Why more young people are exploring jobs that connect to a greater purpose.* Forbes Careers. https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2023/03/28/why-more-young-people-are-exploring-jobs-that-connect-to-a-greater-purpose/

Portable Benefits for Independent Workers Pilot Program Act, H.R.3482, 118th Congress (2023-2024). https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/3482#:~:text=Portable%20Benefits%20for%20Independent%20Workers%20Pilot%20Program%20Act,-This%20bill%20requires&text=Portable%20benefits%20are%20work%2Drelated,the%20benefits%20upon%20changing%20jobs.

Skaggs, R., Burke, M. J., Guo, K., Hoppe, E. J., & Cooksey, E. C. (2025). Arts entrepreneurial work in changing contexts: Sustaining creative life and work after COVID-19. *Artivate, 13,* 1-21. https://artivate.org/index.php/artivate/article/view/185/191

Smith, K. N. & Albana, H. F. (2023). When debt deters: Student loans as a predictor of education-job match among arts bachelor's graduates. *Journal of Career Development, 50* (3), 563–579. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453221118030

SMU DataArts (2024a). State of the arts 2024: *Arts vibrancy rankings for all 50 states.* SMU DataArts. https://culturaldata.org/state-of-the-arts-2024/overview/

SMU DataArts (2024b). *The Top 40 Most Arts-Vibrant Communities of 2024.* SMU DataArts. https://culturaldata.org/arts-vibrancy-2024/the-top-40-list/

Throsby, D. & Zednik, A. (2011). Multiple job-holding and artistic careers: some empirical evidence. *Cultural Trends, 20* (1), 9–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2011.540809

Treskon, M., Biu, O., Sawo, M., Sirois, M., Prinvil, C., & Kraft, C. (2024). *Empowering artists through employment: Impacts of the Creatives Rebuild New York Artist Employment Program.* Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Empowering-Artists-through-Employment.pdf

Voss, Z., Roscoe, R., Fonner, D., & Benoit-Bryan, J. (2023). *Navigating recovery: Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends in Chicago.* SMU DataArts. https://www.culturaldata.org/media/2830/financial-and-operating-trends-in-chicago-report-smu-dataarts.pdf

Wassal, G. & Alper, N. (2018). T*he importance of a college major in the arts to artistic success.* National Endowment for the Arts Working Paper. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Research-Art-Works-Northeastern-rev.pdf.

Weir, F. & Perminiene, M. (2020). Under exposed: Qualitative exploration of the inequality, ill treatment, and powerlessness of actresses. *Psychology of Women and Equalities Section Review, 5* (1), 45-54. DOI:10.53841/bpspowe.2022.5.1.45 June 2022

White, J.C. (2016). Arts students in debt: Concerns, consequences, and interventions. *Arts Education Policy Review, 117* (1), 55–64. doi: 10.1080/10632913.2014.954088.

Woronkowicz, J. & Noonan, D. S. (2019). Who goes freelance? The determinants of self-employment for artists. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 43* (4), 651-672. https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258717728067

Yang, J. R., Briggs, A. , Shakespere, J., Spievack, N, Spaulding, S., & Brown, S. (2021). *Arts workers in California: Creating a more inclusive social contract to meet arts workers' and other independent contractors' needs.* Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103496/arts-workers-in-california_0_0.

Acknowledgements

About the Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership

Guided by the vital role of art and artists to the health of our state, the Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership seeks to advance our understanding of the realities and needs of arts workers and the larger cultural ecosystem to which they belong. A collaboration between Discovery Partners Institute, Arts Alliance Illinois, the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago, it funds research at the intersection of artistic labor, education, workforce development, government policy, and the social and economic impacts of the arts. The partnership's goal is to identify nation-leading and transformative improvements in how the state trains, educates, supports, and employs its creative workforce.

Photo credit: rh2010/stock.adobe.com