ASU Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts Blog

So your son or daughter wants to be an ART major?! 
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by Adriene Jenik, director, ASU School of Art

As another academic year fast approaches, I am assisting faculty and staff with final preparations and composing my remarks to welcome new ART students to campus. I can picture their excited faces, and just as clearly, their parents’ worried expressions. With the excitement of college also come concerns about its cost. Majors and degrees that don’t seem to directly track into high paying jobs are perceived as less desirable. Since it is now almost impossible to complete a degree without incurring some student loan debt, the ability to pay off that debt is a factor in choosing a college major.

Given this, I’m not surprised that I am increasingly asked “What’s the value of an ART degree?” The question is popping up with more and more frequency, and this seems a good time to put my answer in writing.

It is important to know that pretty much everything we wear, sit on, look at, hear and touch was created with input from a creative professional, a field to which artists belong. The design on your t-shirt, the icons on your smartphone, the label on your peanut butter, the experience of your favorite amusement park ride, and even the effective TV advertisement encouraging you to study one of the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines, engaged artists’ hearts, minds and hands in their making. With the growth of computer based social networks and applications as a throughput for all kinds of human exchange – including education, medicine, shopping and friendship – the computer interface mediates our lives. Artists and designers, in this way, will be framing our core life activity for decades to come.

Sure, you might allow that “digital arts” (which happens to be my own field), have some use. But not painting and drawing, or sculpture – not to mention, ceramics or printmaking.

Although these may not translate into more traditional looking “jobs” for graduates, in fact, they prepare students exceptionally well for life in the 21st Century. Below are a few of the key proficiencies acquired by all ART students during the course of pursuing their degree - each of which is critical to success in navigating our future job market.

**ART students learn to TAP INTO CREATIVE FLOW**

The sketchbook-toting ART student may be a cliché, but that sketchbook (and the contemporary digital equivalent) is really a capture source for an outpouring of creative flow. Ideas for projects are sketched or rotated, collaged and outlined – invariably each assignment yields more ideas than can be carried through at that moment – a surplus of visual and thought concepts exist that can be returned to again and again. Most importantly, having been required to brainstorm project ideas on a regular basis, students understand the conditions they need to maximize their creative energy and can readily activate this important 21st century skill.

**ART students learn to SYNTHESIZE**

Unlike many undergraduate degrees which require students to analyze, interpret, deduce and breakdown a subject into smaller parts for closer examination - undergraduate artists are regularly asked to bring together complex and often contradictory ideas into a larger whole. The successful
artwork is a balance between form and content, so artists bring in ideas and learning from other fields of knowledge and regularly transform them into something new, paying close attention to the historical, cultural and symbolic context of their chosen medium.

ART students do RESEARCH

A ceramics student, in order to create a contemporary figurative warrior sculpture takes time to study historical images and objects from indigenous cultures, reads historical and contemporary accounts of warriors and perhaps even composes written reflections on the meanings of a warrior, war, and resistance in her life. She considers appropriate materials, glazes, and firing methods that emerge from this conceptual process to emphasize her idea. In many educational fields, this type of original research is not expected of students until upper division undergraduate or even graduate classes. In an undergraduate ART degree, students are expected from the first day of their freshman year to develop original research projects – their artwork.

ART students learn DISCIPLINE and FOCUS

Once classes commence, I walk through the ART buildings every few weeks and look in on the classroom activity. The level of focus of the students as they work on their projects, especially as the end of the term nears, is intense. Students learn not just by looking or reading, but by experimenting, trying and trying again and then again to get better and better at their chosen medium or expressive process. They see progress occur in increments over time, as they accumulate techniques and iterate versions of an idea or object. For example, a printmaker might make multiple "proofs" of each layer of a multi-layer print – trying out different ink viscosities, pressures, and colors; different papers (colors, transparencies, textures) before the final finished product is ready to be editioned. By the time they are ready to exhibit their culminating artwork, they have not yet "mastered" their chosen medium (this can take a lifetime), but they have a visceral understanding of the time, tenacity and ongoing disciplined practice it takes to get really good at something.

ART students learn to GIVE AND TAKE CRITICISM

The primary pedagogical contribution of the ART classroom is known as the critique. Here, students and faculty critically discuss and analyze student work. This process can be both brutally soul-crushing and powerfully nurturing, depending on the philosophy and sensitivities of the faculty steering the discussion and the particular dynamic of the individual class. Regardless, students become familiar with exposing themselves to criticism, discerning what critical feedback is of value to them in their practice, and learning how to interpret and respond to the work of others. They also become comfortable with disagreement and debate and are capable of advocating for their ideas in a group. One can see how this would be of value in any work setting that involves team work.

ART students learn RESOURCEFULNESS

Many students become more resourceful during their college years - eating ramen noodles to sustain themselves on a limited budget – but ART students are guaranteed to learn this important life skill. Materials and class fees are expensive (considerably more than textbooks for an ambitious student), and time in a specialized studio must be planned in advance and then utilized to the fullest. A valuable shared resource like a laser cutter or large format photographic printer will be in high demand at the end of the term, and materials may be charged by the inch. Artists learn how to make the absolute most of what they have at hand, inventing new uses for common, cheap and even discarded materials, and learn how to maintain their tools and take care of equipment to last for years.
ART students learn how to SCOPE and SCALE

By the time they graduate, students understand the need to scope and scale their ideas to fit their time and budget and even a client. They learn these skills through the ongoing practice of transforming their ideas into realized projects. During their first years, ideas regularly strain the confines of the short assignment period, or can fall short of what is expected for a more ambitious end of term project. But by the time they receive their degree, students understand that most projects can be scaled way up or down (in response to a windfall commission opportunity or an unexpected added expense), and ideas need to be scoped with the audience and display context in mind. A display of work in a pedestrian traffic corridor allows for a different level of attention than an exhibition mounted in a more traditional exhibition space that supports contemplation. All ART students produce, as a requirement of their degree, a culminating exhibition of their work and learn the details involved in preparing, designing, mounting and publicizing a professional show. This involves attending to all details, including securing of specialized facilities, equipment, and permissions.

ART students learn in INTIMATE SETTINGS

ART students have SMALL CLASSES. Studio courses are regularly capped at less than 20 students due to equipment access and/or safety issues. Most upper division courses are taught by full-time faculty, caring active artists in their field. For the student who enjoys close interaction with and mentoring by talented professionals who are seasoned teachers – you can't beat an ART major. As one ART student who recently graduated enthused, “I can walk down the hall and four professors know me by name and can talk to me about the work I just exhibited...who would have expected that in a big University?”

In writing this, I’m not trying to convince you that if your child is interested in engineering or business or medicine they should study ART instead. But I hope that if you or your child are genuinely interested in ART you will not be discouraged from pursuing this path out of concern you won’t be able to support yourself or that your child will end up in your basement for years afterward. Studying ART is serious preparation for the creative, critical, and resource demands of the 21st century environment and workplace.

If you can step back, take a deep breath and imagine what lies beyond the horizon of the current job market, I hope you might consider one final point. According to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP)[ii], ARTs alumni have reported overwhelmingly that they are gainfully employed and content with their lives as contributors to the public good.[iii] If you ever said to your child that all you want is for them is to live a happy and fulfilled life, then I’m pleased to tell you that supporting their choice of an ART major will help them achieve this ultimate goal.

[i] In New York City alone there is SoHo, the East Village, Chelsea, D.U.M.B.O and countless other now sought after neighborhoods that were made special by artists moving in and getting busy.

[ii] http://snaap.indiana.edu/
87% - a much larger percentage of contentedness than in most other alumni groups reporting