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Effective Career Development Strategies for Young Artists with Disabilities

—*Heike Boeltzig, Rooshey Hasnain, and Jennifer S. Sulewski*

Suggested audience for this brief: arts educators, rehabilitation counselors, and others supporting young artists with disabilities

Introduction

While many people with disabilities are becoming and remaining employed, recent studies show that employment rates for people with disabilities continue to be substantially lower than rates for those without disabilities. In a subset of youth with disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study found that 40 percent of these younger individuals with disabilities, 15 to 19 years old, were employed at the time they were surveyed in 2003, compared to 63 percent of their peers without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2006).

One potential arena of employment for young people with disabilities is the arts. This brief reports on effective strategies that 47 young artists with disabilities used to gain access to arts-related experiences in order to further their educational and career pathways. Across program years 2002–2005, these young artists, all aged 16 to 25, were finalists in the VSA arts/ Volkswagen of America, Inc. Program, an arts competition that was intended to showcase their talents and accomplishments. As part of the overall evaluation, we were able to identify career development strategies based on a review of finalists' program applications. This brief is mainly targeted at visual artists, although the strategies may also apply to other groups of artists.

Background

Though little research has been conducted concerning careers in the arts for people with disabilities, these occupations are a viable and even desirable option for several reasons. First, the arts are a growing career field. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 218,000 artists were employed in 2006 (BLS, 2008–09), compared with 208,000 in 2004 (BLS, 2006–07). Second, arts careers offer flexible employment options, such as self-employment, that may fit well with the accommodation needs of individuals with disabilities. While about 7.5 percent of employed workers reported being self-employed in 2003 (Hipple, 2004), the rate of self-employment was far higher for those in the arts: notably, 62 percent of fine artists, 61 percent of multi-media artists and animators, and 56 percent of art directors in 2004 (Nichols, 2005). Third, involvement in the arts offers an opportunity for self-expression and the chance to participate in a vibrant (disability) arts community (c.f. Clipsham, 1998; Taylor, 2005).

Establishing oneself as an artist is a challenging endeavor even without a disability. While the self-employment rate among artists is high compared to that of other occupational groups (c.f. Nichols, 2005), evidence shows artists work multiple jobs more often than the average worker in other sectors: 12.8 percent versus 5.3 percent respectively in 2003 (Nichols, 2005). For artists with disabilities, their financial situation is exacerbated as their disability benefits may be affected by other sources of income; they may be discouraged to pursue an arts career because parents, teachers, and friends do not deem it a practical option (Clipsham, 1999; Gill, 1998). Therefore, it is important to learn from strategies that have worked for successful young artists like the VSA Arts/ Volkswagen Program finalists.

© 2004 Isaac Powell, *Questions of Symmetry*, acrylic, graphite and ink on panel (48" x 48" x 3.75")
2004 VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, Driving Force Exhibit, First Award

Effective Career Development Strategies

Postsecondary arts education

At the time of application, the majority of the young artists were attending or had completed college or university, almost all pursuing a degree in the arts (e.g., Bachelor of Fine Art, Bachelor of Science in art, Master of Fine Arts). Finalists were pursuing their studies in various fields, ranging from painting and drawing to

photography, graphic arts, and digital imaging. As part of their studies, two finalists had traveled abroad to study art in Austria and Australia. Several finalists had developed art portfolios so they could promote their artwork to the professional arts world and the public.

Finalists who were studying art academically appreciated the opportunity to explore art in new ways. One finalist wrote,

> *Right now is probably the time when the arts have had the most influence over the rest of my education. I love the environment of art school because all subjects are taught with art in mind. A critique in a painting class might spark a discussion on philosophy or literature that you are reading about in an academic class, and vice versa. There aren't strict limitations dividing subjects or restricting artistic mediums, allowing for more creative thought in all areas of education.*

Working in art studios or participating in arts-based programs

Several finalists gained experience in the arts through their work in art studios or their participation in arts-based programs. One finalist described himself as "self-taught" in his application; he did not attend college and was working as a studio artist. Another finalist stated, "The real shift in gears in my artwork, an increase and more availability to materials, has come with my becoming a studio artist. The consistent studio sessions and available tools have increased the time I spent on [making] art." Two finalists participated in arts-based programs that catered to people with disabilities. In addition to resources, finalists received formal and informal guidance from other resident artists or program staff and participants.

Studying under a particular artist/ art professional

Studying under a particular artist or art professional was another avenue that several finalists explored in their effort to refine their skills, learn new skills, and make connections with artists in their area. One finalist had worked as a model and a studio assistant for a painter, thereby gaining invaluable experience: "I've been the model and studio assistant for a New York City based painter ... [this] has given me invaluable life and art experience and information. I met him at a lecture...he was never my formal professor—rather, a mentor, employer, and friend." It is worth noting that several finalists came from a rich familial environment of artists; family members (a parent, a grandparent, or a sibling) who were artists influenced these young people to pursue the arts and, at times, mentored them in the early stages of their arts development.

Interning with art galleries, art museums, and art centers

Gaining practical experiences in the arts through internships, college jobs, or part-time employment was an important step for these emerging young artists. A third of all finalists mentioned in their application that they had interned with art galleries, art museums, or art centers. A participant in the study, after completing his internship with an art museum, was hired part-time as an educator and artist; his development was fostered through his work at an art studio and his access to materials and expertise of more experienced artists.

Other finalists sought arts-related positions at their high schools, colleges, and universities. They mentioned a range of positions, including political cartoonist for the school newspaper, photography editor for the university newsletter, lab technical assistant at the college's photography lab, student researcher at the special collections department, and teaching assistant in the arts department. Joining professional associations (e.g., Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) was another avenue for making connections and meeting artists in their area.

Gaining public exposure as an artist

Listed below are personal accounts describing how public exposure—art exhibitions, competitions such as the VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, awards, and publications—helped finalists progress in their development as emerging artists. A two-time finalist in the VSA arts/ Volkswagen competition believed his first award boosted his self-esteem and gave him the confidence to apply to a graduate program in the arts. Another young artist expressed the following after his award-winning work was showcased at Capitol Hill: "That was the turning point in my art. I decided that it was what I would do for the rest of my life." A female participant, still in middle school, designed an advertisement that was displayed on billboards across her city. One young finalist wrote how her paintings, after being selected as the cover for a hospital day planner where she was temporarily hospitalized, was the first time she ever considered a career in the arts.

Case Study 1: Mimi

Teaching art at a university and establishing her own photography business have been steps that Xang Ngoc (Mimi) Ho took to pursue her career and dream of working as a photographer. Originally from Bangkok, Thailand, Mimi has always been passionate about the arts and photography in particular. Mimi taught courses in art to undergraduate students while studying for a Master of Fine Arts degree in photography. She enjoys teaching and hopes to pursue it as part of her arts career. To support herself and her studies, she created her own photography business, specializing in family portraits and wedding photography, with a college friend. "To make a living, and to be able to continue doing my art, I have to do other things. No one's going to come and buy your work right away; no one's going to pay you to do what you love. So you have to make a need for yourself. So I had this idea which I pursued, and, as a result I am both an artist and a business woman." Learning how to run a small company was not easy, she said, but there are many resources out there that help you gain the necessary skills. For example, at a community college, Mimi took classes on establishing a small business, contracting and business negotiations, and handling tax issues. She has also been pursuing opportunities through grant writing to help with business expenses.

© 2004 Xang Ngoc (Mimi) Ho, *Straw Men #1*, black/white photograph (24" x 24")
2005 VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, Shifting Gears Exhibit, First Award

Case Study 2: Angel

Working as a volunteer for AmeriCorps allowed Angelica (Angel) M. Busque to gain arts-related experience and to better channel her artistic talents into a professional career. After completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree specializing in experimental sound and video art, Angel joined AmeriCorps working mainly with pre-school and school age children, engaging them in arts-based activities and community projects. Angel expresses the fun and satisfaction she discovered in teaching children arts and in the creation of arts-based teaching materials in the following passage: "Teaching was new to me, and I don't have an early-education background. I realized I enjoyed creating with the children, getting messy with them, the act of being very patient and kind of nurturing them to grow." Being engaged in teaching art not only made her practice drawing and painting again, it also reawakened the desire to pursue her own talents. This experience was a very intense and exhausting period that made her seriously consider a career in arts education. Angel networked during her time as a volunteer, which resulted in a part-time position at a local theatre. She continues to promote and share her artwork online (www.geligirl.com; www.angelbusque.com).

© 2004 Angelica (Angel) M. Busque, *Morning Star*, graphic novel (pen and ink)
2005 VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, Shifting Gears Exhibit, Second Award

Case Study 3: Bill

Joining a professional art association and interning with small art businesses is one avenue that William (Bill) Ferguson has explored to build a career in children's book illustration. Bill has always been fascinated by cartoons ever since he was a child and Disney was the primary influence in his decision to become an illustrator and painter. While working full-time to support himself, he became a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. This has helped him meet other artists and furnish opportunities in his field. One such break has led to employment with a small Houston-based animation company doing clean-up art—drawing on top of another artist's character animation. It has been much easier to get opportunities with small local companies rather than with larger firms like Disney. Small companies seem to be more willing to take the time and patience to train young emerging artists; sometimes they even have the money to pay them for their work. William continues to attend conferences and conventions to promote his art portfolio with the goal of finding arts-related employment.

© 2002 William Ferguson, *My Life*, colored markers (60" x 60")
2003 VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, Road Trip: A Journey of Discovery Exhibit, Award of Excellence

Recommendations for Arts Educators, Rehabilitation Counselors, and Others Supporting Young Artists with Disabilities

Enhance and increase access to the arts in a variety of settings

Arts educators and other arts professionals should learn how to design programs to meet the different learning abilities and capacities of artists with disabilities. For example, art educators should be aware of assistive technology resources or other accommodations that respond to the artist's strengths and unique art-producing needs.

Enhance and increase access to arts education and training for professional careers

It is important for young artists to explore the postsecondary opportunities that best match their career goals and requirements. Art schools offer programs tailored to the needs and interests of a variety of artists. If educators and vocational rehabilitation providers educate themselves of these options, they can share this information with young artists with disabilities who are transitioning out of high schools and considering careers in the arts.

Build awareness of the wide array of careers in the visual arts

Young artists can pursue a variety of careers and occupations besides being a painter or sculptor. Among the many other options are animation, art history, graphic design, computer graphics for websites or video games, and a multitude of positions at museums and art galleries. Other professions that may make use of artists' skills and talents include architecture, landscape design, interior design, and clothing design (Clipsham, 1998). Teaching art and art therapy techniques can also be options. Both young artists with disabilities and those who support them should research all these options.

Integrate opportunities for professional networking and mentoring in the arts and disability communities

Young artists with disabilities particularly need professional networking opportunities as they may not be well connected with stakeholders in the arts community, such as museum and gallery curators, professional artists, or employers hiring artists. Young artists can be connected with more established arts professionals through mentorships and internships (Raynor, 2003). Young artists and those supporting them can also pursue opportunities to display the artist's work, not just at galleries or museums, but at local coffee shops, businesses, schools, or community centers, thus gaining opportunities for both exposure and networking.

Exposure to grant opportunities for individual artists

Young artists need funding for supplies, supports, and resources, all of which can be costly (Raynor, 2004; Clipsham, 1998). Thus, it is important that artists with disabilities are aware of funding opportunities and grants that can support their art-making efforts. Many community colleges and non-profit organizations offer grant-writing workshops for free or a small fee that artists with disabilities may want to seek out when pursuing grant opportunities.

Exposure to opportunities to learn about the business aspects of the art world

Artists with disabilities may need to learn about the policies and processes involved in running a small business, including entrepreneur opportunities, grant writing, starting a business and learning to promote one's art. Artists with disabilities and those who support them also need to be aware of how to pursue non-traditional career paths such as part-time work or self-employment and how such options intersect with any disability benefits they may be receiving. For example, Social Security work incentives can be valuable tools to help artists pursue art-making opportunities.

© 2002 Jonathan Wos, *Self Introspection*, watercolor (22.5" x 30") 2002 VSA arts/Volkswagen Program, Road Trip: A Journey of Discovery, Grand Prize

Additional Resources

VSA arts:
The VSA arts website includes opportunities for artists, such as funding sources and calls for art.
www.vsarts.org/

VSA arts (2000). Putting Creativity to Work: Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities.
A guide to arts careers and strategies for people with disabilities pursing careers in the arts
www.vsarts.org/x630.xml

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) website
The website provides useful information about various arts occupations, including earnings as well as trends in the labor market for artists and related workers.
www.bls.gov/oco/ocos092.htm

The National Arts and Disability Center (NACD)
The NACD websites provides information on a wide array of subjects ranging from arts competitions, arts careers, and funding resources to designing an accessible website.
http://nadc.ucla.edu/

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