

# What Artists Say:

## A Study of The McKnight Foundation Supported Artists

### Executive Report

Center for the Study of Art & Community

**M**innesota is known as a place of great natural beauty and hardy, resourceful people. Many also regard it as a creative hot spot. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the state is home to nearly 30,000 artists and over 1,600 arts organizations. Unlike Hollywood, San Francisco, or Miami, artists don't plant roots in Minnesota because of a benign climate and a glamorous civic persona. Like its entrepreneurial and civic accomplishments, Minnesota's robust cultural community is a product of hard work and intention. After World War II, community leaders like Jerome Hill, William and Maude McKnight, Archibald Bush, and Ken Dayton recognized that in a place known for "nine months of winter and three months of road construction," human creativity needed to be more than a source of entertainment and decoration. They understood that it was a natural resource, and that when combined with Minnesota's grit and persistence, it would make a real difference for the state. They also knew that growing a unique and indelible Minnesota culture would require significant and sustained investments in the state's arts community.

This Executive Report explores a central feature of those investments, namely Minnesota's artists. Its main source is a study conducted for The McKnight Foundation in 2012 by the Center for the Study of Art & Community (CSA&C) of the structure and dynamics of Minnesota's artist ecosystem. It is also informed by

two evaluations of the Foundation's Arts program<sup>1</sup> undertaken by the Center in 1995 and 2009 and other recent research on artists' lives and practice.

The artist-specific focus of the study is informed by two core tenets of the Foundation's Arts program. The first is that a vital and productive culture is fundamental to the health of Minnesota communities. The second is that the state's artists, as innovators, organizers, teachers, and trailblazers, are essential to both artistic and civic vibrancy. Given this, the Foundation knows that Minnesota benefits greatly when artists choose to live and work in the state; in a phrase, Minnesota thrives when its artists thrive.

**The Study:** From its inception, the McKnight Arts program has invested in the state's artists and the systems that support them. Foundation staff have also made a practice of listening to their constituents to find ways to improve. In 1999, the Foundation invited artists to respond to six open-ended questions focusing on how artists make a living. The resulting report, *The Cost of Culture*, provided impetus for the creation of the artist-supported website, MNartist.org. In a similar way, this new study was intended to provide the Foundation with a better understanding of the factors that impact artists' lives. In addition to economic issues, it also explores how artists work, their relationships with audiences, and what they feel they need to thrive.

The new survey posed six new questions:

1. *What are you most excited about in your work as an artist?*
2. *What conditions support your best work?*
3. *How do you earn a living? If not purely from art, does your other work help or hinder your art-making?*
4. *Many artists rely on a network of key professional and personal connections and relationships (collaborators, friends/family, vendors, venues, advisers, etc.). If this is true for you, describe your support system.*
5. *Who are your audiences, and how do you connect to them?*
6. *What advice would you give to an artist just starting out?*

The study was conducted in two phases. Our first invitation to participate went to 500 former McKnight fellowship recipients in the fall of 2011. The second was sent the following spring to 530 artists receiving McKnight funding through the state's 11 Regional Arts Councils (RACs). All told, 357 artists completed the surveys, averaging 330 words per respondent. For a narrative survey of this type, this is a very high level of participation.

During the study's first phase we also solicited résumés from 120 Fellows to learn more about how their professional histories unfolded over time. The Foundation, working with data visualization<sup>2</sup> consultants at [Pitch Interactive](#) created a beautiful and informative interactive website called [McKnight Artist Fellows: Visualizing Artists' Careers](#) that graphically explores these artists' work lives.

**The Artists:** The research cohort provides an interesting cross-section of Minnesota artists who have received McKnight support. Most Fellows (66%) live in the Twin Cities region (which is home to 60% of the state's residents), and 9% were from greater Minnesota. Fully, 25% of the Fellows no longer live in Minnesota. This is reflective of both an average transiency rate among the respondents. Given that 10 of the 11 RACs serve constituencies outside of the Twin Cities it is not surprising that 90.4% of our RAC respondents live in greater Minnesota. Of those sharing racial/ethnic data, 88% of the Fellows were

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<sup>1</sup> *Assessments of The McKnight Foundation Arts Program, 1990-1995 and 1996-2008*

<sup>2</sup> Data visualization or "dataviz" is a field that seeks to communicate information clearly and effectively through graphical means.

Caucasian, as were 92.4% of the RAC artists (Minnesota's general population is 86.5% Caucasian). The median age at the time of participation for the full cohort was 54.3 years (the state's median age is 37.1 years).

The distribution of arts disciplines among the McKnight Artists Fellows and the RAC artists was quite different. This is due to the fact that the McKnight Artists Fellowships are awarded by discipline, and the RACs' artist grants are generally based on demand from the field. The RAC artists surveyed also had the option of indicating multiple disciplines. For this reason, these data are presented in two separate tables on page 3 of the full report.

**Review and Analysis:** After the surveys were collected, CSA&C assembled a team of six Minnesota artists and cultural leaders to help us identify the prominent themes that emerged. The full report that follows presents an analysis and interpretation of the data from each of the six questions in **Part II: Findings**. In this report we provide both analysis and commentary on both the artist study and the related research cited earlier in the following two sections:

**I. The Structure and Dynamics of Minnesota's Artist Ecosystem**

**II. The Strengths and Weaknesses of the state's Artist Ecosystem**

The depth of the written responses we received during the study provided a useful, and often nuanced glimpse into the complexity of artists' lives. Where possible, we used both quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches with the data. That said, it's important to point out that narrative research of this type tends to be more descriptive in nature. This, and the small and select nature of the two cohorts of artists naturally limit the scope of our findings.

Our analysis and interpretation of the data was guided by two key concepts that have helped to frame the Center's approach to community cultural development over the past two decades. The first is that the arts sector is a network of artists, arts organizations, audiences, funders, etc. that are fundamentally connected and mutually reliant. The second is that a great deal of the sector's creative impetus comes from the community of artists working within it whose interdependent mechanisms are best understood when considered together. This aspect of the arts community, increasingly referred to as the artist ecosystem, is not well understood largely because it has not been examined extensively. This is due to competing priorities in arts funding, and the obvious difficulty of studying such a complex and dispersed constituency.

# 1

## The Structure and Dynamics of Minnesota's Artist Ecosystem

### Ecosystem Structure

One of the participants, a painter living in St. Paul, described her working environment as both “stitched together” and “amazingly functional.” Allusions to “patchwork,” “collage,” and “serendipity” were common among the artists’ descriptions of their working environments. However, definite patterns and what we observe as a structure came to light from the data. Here is how we see this multifaceted web of resources and relationships functioning together.

The picture of the ecosystem that emerged from the artists narratives has four basic parts: the *artists* themselves, the artists’ human support system or *artists’ community*, the *creative infrastructure* of organizations and processes that support their work, and the *audiences* that interact with it. Our respondents described these elements as intensely interconnected and highly interdependent.

**Artists:** Of course, the artists making art are the generative heart of this system. Individually and collectively, artists use their talent, skills, ideas, and imaginations to produce the work that inspires and fuels the rest of the larger creative ecosystem. All that follows, from collaborators, institutions, funders, and audiences is reflective of, and responsive to, the ideas and artwork that artists produce and share.

**Artists’ Community:** What we are calling the artists’ community is the least obvious part of this ecosystem to outside observers. This complex network of relationships is an “organic” web of family members, friends, creative colleagues, collaborators, and mentors, as well as more formal associations with supporters, experts, and service providers (such as editors, collectors, and grantmakers).

According to our respondents, the most critical component of this human web is the material and moral support provided by core artistic partners and committed close relations (particularly parents and spouses/partners). For many creators, these intimate relationships are the most stable and resilient aspect of their ecosystem. It could be said that the encouragement and backing (often financial) they provide constitutes an artist’s safety net. For obvious reasons, teachers and mentors are also described as an essential part of this familial network. Access to learning was identified as essential to both early creative development and continuous improvement.

Of course, the skills, services, and advice derived from professional colleagues plays a crucial role as well. For each artistic discipline there is a critical mass of technical and creative expertise that defines scope and depth of the art form in a given place. Even writers, who are often considered solo practitioners, also need support from editors, researchers, agents, designers, publicists, publishers, lawyers, and accountants. For the performing arts, the supporting cast is obviously a lot larger. The Department of Labor’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*<sup>3</sup> lists 150 different occupations related to theater and 152 for music. The most significant advantage of city life cited by surveyed artists was their access to the quantity and depth of this collegial infrastructure.

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<sup>3</sup> See the US DOL’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* at [http://www.occupationalinfo.org/cat\\_div1\\_0.html](http://www.occupationalinfo.org/cat_div1_0.html)

**Creative Infrastructure:** Like the collegial networks described above, arts institutions, service organizations, funders, and their processes working interdependently within the cultural sector play multiple roles in artists' lives. First and foremost, arts institutions provide the resources artists depend on for producing and presenting their work. But they have many other functions as well, ranging from hiring and training artists and testing new creative ideas to raising funds and cultivating audiences.

Minnesota's discipline-specific arts service organizations constitute a unique and important subset of this infrastructure. A good number of artists said the presence of these organizations was a key reason for either relocating to, or remaining in, the state. They were, of course, noted for their financial and technical support, but also as an important hub in the creative social networks that artists depend on for feedback, advice, encouragement, and referrals. Some artists also mentioned their post-secondary alma maters as a continuing resource for this kind of networking and professional development.

Most importantly, though, presenting and producing venues were identified as artist incubators. Many artists spoke directly to their reliance on a diversity of venues that offer opportunities for their work at various stages of development. Performing artists also discussed how these creative spaces facilitate the transition of new artwork from originating artists (e.g., composers, playwrights, choreographers, etc.) to interpreting artists (e.g., musicians, actors, dancers, etc.). Likewise, there was an understanding that these creative spaces also serve as the bridge between creative products and local audiences looking for arts experiences.

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**Audiences:** One artist stated the obvious when she wrote, "In the business of art-making you need an audience to close the deal." That said, for most of our respondents, arts participation was much more about building relationships than it was "butts in seats." Many described the need for "dynamic," "respectful," even "collaborative" relationships with audiences. Some referred to the audience's role in the completion of the creative process or the fulfillment of the work. Others addressed their need for a core audience who developed an evolving relationship with their work. Artists also shared a deep appreciation for an informed and supportive audience of peers who attend their events and offer feedback and general encouragement.

## Ecosystem Dynamics

Most of what artists described as essential to their ability to create and present work comes from the interaction of the four parts described above. In practice they overlap and interconnect in countless ways that are specific to individual artists and their particular arts disciplines.

One way to think about how these pieces interact is to consider them within the stages of art-making. For the purposes of this report we describe this as a cycle with five continuously repeating elements: inspiration, preparation, creation, presentation, and reflection.<sup>4</sup> Artists described how different parts of the ecosystem figure more or less prominently at various stages of the cycle. For example, visual artists, writers, and composers tend to be more isolated in the beginning stages, (inspiration, creation) and much more dependent on colleagues and institutions when it comes to honing the work and sharing it with the public. Performing artists described partnerships, collaborative workspace, and sometimes even audience interaction as critical

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<sup>4</sup> The creative process has been described by neuroscientists, philosophers, educators, artists, etc., as comprising 4 or 5 steps like these with the exception of "presenting" which typically manifests when formal sharing, as with art-making, is involved.

from beginning to end. Again we would emphasize that, although these phases are described in sequence, they often manifest in patterns that are nonlinear and recursive.

**The artist economy in Minnesota:** Another way to consider the dynamics of the artist ecosystem is to examine the economy that helps sustain it. Working as an artist is essentially running a small business. As such, an artist's income not only helps to pay the bills but also buys the time, space, materials, and human resources they need to maintain their artistic practice. A number of our respondents correlated the amount and continuity of the time purchased with the quality of the work produced. "When times are good, you have a sense of stability and security that is comforting and allows for the work to proceed." Conversely, when money is tight, artists said that they had to take on more "outside jobs" and, thus, had less time for making art. The stress of not having money to cover the basics (shelter and health insurance were most often mentioned) also made it difficult to focus on creative work.

Despite Minnesota's reputation as a strong "arts community," a minority of the artists responding to the survey make their living primarily through their art. Not surprisingly, the McKnight Artist Fellows and RAC artists differ in this regard. While just over 77% of the Fellows reported that they do not earn their living primarily through their art, 92% of the RAC artists face a similar challenge.

So if many artists are not making a living wage from their work alone, how then, do they sustain themselves? From this research and other studies that deal more specifically with artists' livelihoods, we can see that most working artists function within a patchwork economy that may include multiple and overlapping elements of the following:

*Earned income:* Most of the artists in our survey derive some income from their art-making. As a rule, visual artists derive their art-related revenue from sales and commissions, while performers generally receive payment for the time they spend in working on a performance. Scriptwriters and craft artists appear to be best paid, and writers the least. We also know from other research that many artists who are paid also work numerous unpaid hours and often donate additional time.

*Jobs:* The most significant part of the artist economy are the full-time and part-time jobs that 68% of our respondents report taking to support their art-making and pay their bills. Within this group 82% worked in arts-related jobs and the other 18% did not. Among those in arts-related employment, 45% of the Fellows indicated that they earned a significant portion of their living through teaching, while 24% of the RAC artists did the same. About 10% of the respondents had jobs in arts administration.

*Public and private funding:* The lion's share of cultural funding goes to the state's arts organizations; the effect of these investments on artists is difficult to discern. Grants to organizations provide art-making jobs and advance artists' creative development. Both the State Arts Board and the Regional Arts Councils (with McKnight support) provide direct funding to artists. The availability of fellowships from private funders was mentioned by a number of artists as helping to "launch" them as full-time artists. Not surprisingly, a number of respondents identified McKnight's support as critical to the development of their careers. Some artists also reflected on the "unique" and "generous" nature of Minnesota's artist-support system.

*Retirement:* Nearly 12% of the responding Fellows and 17% of the RAC artists were 65 or older. Among this group, 58% were receiving retirement income with half living primarily on retirement income, and the other half continuing to work.

*Unstructured support:* A small but important source of support comes from the "creative family" within which there are people who not only share the artist's passion and commitment but also contribute financially. As we indicated above, these partners, spouses, parents, in-laws, collaborators, and even investors constitute a hidden aspect of the artist economy.

*Exchange:* Another small, and largely undocumented, source of support comes from sharing, bartering, and trading of equipment, materials, and services among artists. Artists describe the sharing of resources *and* ideas as both intrinsically interconnected and critical to their work.

**Success beyond profit:** Small or large, successful businesses are defined by their ability to attract capital, produce products, grow markets, and ultimately generate profits. Within this frame, money both fuels the work and defines a successful outcome. It is clear that the artist ecosystem is not particularly lucrative for its principal actors. Viewed through a purely economic lens, then, the motivation for art-making can be hard to understand.

Our study shows that though artists need money and the time it buys to do their work, their motivations are not principally driven or defined by these requirements or prospect of material accomplishment. As creators, their notions of success are much more diverse and multivalent. The health of an ecosystem depends on its ability to maintain its interdependent structures and functions over time in the face of external stress. Viewing the artist community as a human ecosystem allows us to consider how the complex web of generative forces that fuel their creative persistence work together. It also gives us a useful way to explore the system's strengths and weaknesses. Here are the key nonfinancial forces that artists say motivate and sustain them in their creative endeavors.

*The creative process is the driving force of artists' work:* Almost all of our respondents described their involvement with the creative process as their primary motivation for art-making. While definitions of "creative process" varied widely, most contained aspects of four main elements, which we have summarized below:

1. *Exploration:* discovery through experimentation and invention
2. *Innovation:* developing something new from existing materials or patterns
3. *Synthesis:* putting unique ideas/concepts/sounds together
4. *Translation:* crafting creative ideas into something meaningful to others

*Audience as creative stimulus:* Not surprisingly, audiences were identified as an important creative spark, especially in terms of relationship building (i.e., "engaging," "making connection with," or "transforming"). It is noteworthy that very few cited audience approval or acclaim as motivational. Many performers identified audiences as a part of their creative process. Among many RAC artists, the audience was described as both patron *and* neighbor, reflecting what we see as the greater integration of rural artists into the fabric of their communities.

*Discovering new ideas and solutions:* A number of artists cited the thrill of studying and learning about new areas of knowledge such as history, or science, or community issues. Others wrote about art-making as a way to engage transcendent questions (such as death, life, God, what it means to be human, etc.). Tangentially, freedom was also mentioned as a treasured state of mind associated with unfettered learning and the creative process. Several RAC artists mentioned the natural world, both as a source of personal inspiration, and as a medium for communicating creative ideas. Some artists particularly valued the travel opportunities their work provided.

*Working with and teaching others:* Approximately 10% of the artists mentioned their work with colleagues as a driving force in their work. Interdisciplinary work was also cited as an exciting facet of their careers, particularly among writers and visual artists. A small number of artists (5%) described teaching and mentoring as an important part of their creative development. One musician with a medical condition that prevented her from playing for long time periods described her teaching as a vital extension of her creative process.

# 2 The Strengths and Ongoing Challenges of Minnesota's Artist Ecosystem

The study's survey gave artists an opportunity to share their thoughts about what they need to thrive. Their responses not only revealed their perceptions of the ideal (which was very modest) but also told us a great deal about what they value most about their current circumstances, as well as everyday challenges.

The following overview of strengths and weaknesses is informed by both these artist's insights and findings from our two McKnight Arts program evaluations.

## Strengths and Assets

- **The state's artist community is the vital heart of Minnesota's cultural ecosystem:** On their websites, the Minnesota State Arts Board and Minnesota Citizens for the Arts both state that there are more than 30,000 artists in the state.<sup>5</sup> As evidenced by the high quality of fellowship artists and the exemplary work being produced by the state's arts organizations, Minnesota's artist community has more than size going for it. As has been noted earlier, artists need other artists to thrive. For the artists who live in (and often move to) Minnesota, there is clearly a self-replicating creative synergy that feeds and sustains the state's artist ecosystem. This is important because much of Minnesota's cultural production comes from artists who live in the state. The résumé data collected in conjunction with this study also shows how the recognition and influence of Minnesota creators extends across the country and around the world. The project [The McKnight Artist Fellows: Visualizing Artists' Careers](#) provides a beautiful and informative graphic interpretation of this data.<sup>6</sup>
- **Significant investments in the arts benefit artists:** Historically, both Minnesota's public and private sectors have been robust partners in the development of the state's cultural resources. Minnesota has more than 135 foundations supporting the arts and a corporate community that has been very generous with their cultural investments. The recent passage of the Legacy amendment has established the state as second in the nation (behind New York) in state arts funding (\$30,820,000)<sup>7</sup>. There is no doubt that this abundance of resources benefits artists.
- **Minnesota's unique regional arts network provides needed support to artists:** Minnesota is one of only two states with an established regional arts-support system. In rural areas these organizations are a particularly critical connector for arts organizations, local artists, and audiences. With McKnight and state support, this network now provides direct support to artists in every corner of the state.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Minnesota State Arts Board (Note: In 2006 the NEA enumerated 39,000 artists in the state. Suffice it to say that getting an accurate count of the number of artists in any jurisdiction is a significant challenge.)

<sup>6</sup> <http://diagrams.stateoftheartist.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Citizens for the Arts, [Arts Facts 2013](#)



- **The artist ecosystem is an active learning community:** Despite the obvious challenges they face, most of the artists in our cohort have succeeded in maintaining artistic careers over multiple decades. A majority of our respondents identified the collegial network we have dubbed the *artist's community* as essential to sustaining their careers. Artists say they call upon this learning community for the continuing education they need to develop and hone their creative practice. Many of our respondents also indicated that they reciprocate this practice by actively sharing what they have learned with others as an ongoing aspect of their practice.
- **The artist community is intensely interactive:** Minnesota's artists are not isolated and disconnected from each other or the world around them. By definition, performers are, of course, engaged in a collaborative enterprise. But, according to our respondents, so are writers, craft and visual artists, and composers who depend on a broad spectrum of relationships to advance their creative lives. Over 60% of the respondents across all disciplines referenced the importance of building and nurturing collaborative, creative relationships as an important survival strategy. This finding is reinforced by other research<sup>8</sup> that has found that these relationships not only support artists' work but also generate a critical mass of social capital that demonstrably benefits their communities.
- **Presenting/producing venues are crucial creative partners and incubators:** Our respondents described a healthy cultural ecology as one with a continuum of artists at various stages of development, and a diversity of venues that can support that development. Minnesota has a rich mix of the kind of small and mid-sized producing and presenting venues that artists need to develop and share their work. The state also has a sustained record of support for this essential creative infrastructure.
- **Artist service organizations are a key element of the state's artist ecosystem:** Due in no small part to the investments of The McKnight Foundation, the state has a strong community of discipline specific artist service organizations. In addition to fellowship funds, these organizations are highly valued for providing job referrals, links to collaborators, technical support, critical feedback, administrative assistance, facilities, and most important, moral support and encouragement.
- **Arts education provides employment for many artists:** Teaching is an important source of support for artists in Minnesota. Fully 45% of the Fellows and 25% of the regional artists teach in K–12, university, and community settings. While some teaching artists noted that class work takes a lot of time and energy, most described their teaching as reasonably compatible with their creative efforts. Benefits cited included student interaction, good facilities, a steady income, and affordable health care. Understandably, the market for teaching artists is more robust in urban settings.
- **Some artists are self-organizing:** About 9% of the responding Fellows indicated that they were part of a group of artists who met regularly to share ideas, offer critiques, and provide general encouragement. For many of these artists, these gatherings were described as critical to their ability to grow as artists. Some shared that their particular group had helped them through particularly rough patches during their careers. Writers, likely because of the solitary nature of their work, mentioned these groups most often.
- **The commercial sector provides good work for some disciplines:** Some artists earn all or a portion of their living working within the commercial sector with higher compensation rates based on industry standards and union contracts. Recent NEA research projected that demand for architects, designers, writers, animators, and actors would increase moderately over the next five years.<sup>9</sup> The study also found

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<sup>8</sup> Seifert and Stern, *Cultivating "Natural" Cultural Districts*, 2007, and *From Creative Economy to Creative Society*, 2008, Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>9</sup> *Artist Employment Projections through 2018*, National Endowment for the Arts, 2012.

that competition for all arts-related jobs would remain extremely high during this period. Given their location, many of these opportunities are less available to artists living and working in greater Minnesota.

- **Area universities play multiple roles in artist-support systems:** Minnesota has a rich and diverse post-secondary education environment. Artists who are employed at colleges and universities described their place of employment as an important part of their support network. First and foremost in this regard was interaction with other arts faculty and students. Other benefits mentioned included access to production and presenting facilities, marketing and technical support for their work, and the opportunity for sabbatical time devoted to art making.
- **Rural artists surveyed are deeply integrated into community life:** Based on their responses, rural artists are more likely than Twin Cities-based artists to identify their local geographically-defined community as their principal audience. As such, “audience development” looks more like being an active community member than it does marketing. Many RAC artists described the use of in-person, personal connections, and “word of mouth” as primary strategies for building audiences. These artists often mentioned using nontraditional venues for performances and exhibitions (e.g., cafés, gift shops, casinos).

## Ongoing Challenges

When artists described the conditions that best supported their work, many also shared their thoughts about what they felt could be improved. Some provided thoughtful insights into the systemic issues that affect artists’ lives. As with the previous “strengths” section the following observations draw upon both survey input and data from our previous McKnight studies.

- **Art-making alone does not sustain most artists:** Based on artists’ descriptions of “what they need to do their best work” it is clear that many of the artists participating in this study work under conditions that fall short of their own minimum standards. Not surprisingly, the deficiencies most often mentioned were shortages of time and money. By their own admission, many of the artists in this study make art in between, or after, full- or part-time jobs using, what one painter called, “borrowed time.” They have also made it clear that these time and money deficits are intrinsically linked. As such, the quality of their work, the growth and sustainability of their practice, and in some cases, their physical health all correlate directly with their earning power.
- **The patchwork nature of the artist economy:** The large majority of the respondents indicated that they derive income from multiple sources — art-making, teaching, other employment, family support, etc. The majority of artists (approx. 75%) stitch together patches of arts-related work (i.e., art-making, teaching, and arts administration). This diversity of income sources also highlights two core themes that emerged in the survey. The first is that artists are an extremely resourceful group. The second is that the “stitched-together” nature of their livelihoods makes both their art-making and their everyday lives fairly unpredictable. Understandably, this condition has been exacerbated further by the economic downturn.
- **The “temporal” nature of artist employment:** Like many in the workforce, artists with outside employment are increasingly concerned about the uncertain nature of the U.S. economy. Given the fact that part-time employment is an essential artist survival strategy, growing competitiveness in the part-time job market increases stress on the already unstable nature of the artists’ economy. Some new internet-based creative match makers have helped artists connect their creative skill sets with short-term,

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highly paid jobs that help them buy the time they need to do their personal work. For example, the websites [DreamUp](#), and [99designs](#) give talent seeking employers a place to connect with designers, illustrators, and photographers to work on everything from story boards for a film to custom tattoo designs. Given the identified need<sup>10</sup> for these kinds of creative problem-solving skills, Minnesota's artists are a largely untapped creative-thinking resource for the state.

- **The artist ecosystem is not well understood:** Among arts leaders, there is a growing awareness of the interdependent web of artists, arts organizations, funders, alternative economies, audiences, informal networks, and non-arts entities that comprise the cultural sector.<sup>11</sup> There is less understanding of how this ecology works and which aspects or strategies are more, or less, necessary for the advancement of cultural vitality. From our perspective, closing this knowledge gap, particularly among policy makers, would significantly improve strategic cultural development efforts within the state. As evidenced by this study and the Minnesota Citizens for the Arts' *MN Arts Count* research, there is increased interest in the workings of the cultural ecosystem and artists' roles in it. These efforts are a good first step, but to truly understand and work with this complex system, the data collection, analysis, and reporting must be both ongoing and coordinated.
- **Some of the respondents are behind the technology curve:** Most of our respondents rely on in-person contact as their primary means of connection with audiences. This direct and intimate interaction is a profoundly important aspect of the creative process for both artists and audiences. The irony, of course, is that attracting live audiences is becoming increasingly dependent on successful digital communication. The stark fact is that functioning as an artist in the 21st century will require an understanding and use of technology. Beyond financial considerations, all artists, regardless of age, will need this knowledge to protect their work from being digitally appropriated, misrepresented, or abused.
- **The skills and strategies that artists need to thrive are not taught in art school:** It's a given that artists need to devote a portion of their time to managing their careers. Unfortunately, few post secondary arts degree programs offer the small-business training that 21st-century artists need to thrive. Although artists said they had "picked up the business part" after graduation, in response to question 6 (*What advice would you give...*) a good number said they felt they needed better skills in this area and advised young artists to get it early on. Given this, there is a need for increased access to the introductory career-development curricula offered by some of the Minnesota artist service organizations. There is an even greater need for the type of advanced career development training offered by [Creative Capital](#) and [United States Artists](#).
- **There is an opportunity for artists to be community leaders, but they need more training:** In small urban neighborhoods and rural communities, it's not uncommon to find an actor on the local planning committee, a photographer documenting a neighborhood streetscape, or a local composer leading the community choir. This happens because the boundaries between sectors in these communities are more permeable. A number of artists in our survey said they wanted to explore new ways to apply their creative capacities as community leaders. This impulse is emerging at a time when investments in "creative placemaking" are on the rise. Despite these new opportunities, some artists indicated that they were unprepared for this kind of cross-community engagement. Given this, there is a need for continuing education to prepare artists to take advantage of these new opportunities.

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<sup>10</sup> A case in point: a recent *Forbes* article asks "Why Is Creativity More Important Than Capitalism?" In it, innovation guru [Haydn Shaughnessy](#) points out that in the Google Ngram Viewer database, which contains the text of roughly 4% of all books ever published, the rising reference to "creative" dwarfs terms such as "capitalism," "technological progress," and "scientific progress."

<sup>11</sup> Writing and research exploring the concept of cultural ecosystems have proliferated over the past decade. [An Ecosystem-based Approach to Arts Research](#) by Ian David Moss provides a good description of this discourse.

- **Artists need more affordable spaces:** Overall, 19% of the artists surveyed mentioned space affordability as a concern. Interdisciplinary, visual, and ceramic artists raised the issue of studio affordability most often. These artists saw studio space as critical to their ability to produce, market, and sell their work. While many expressed hope that they would be able to move into their own studios, they also indicated that affordable space in safe and accessible locations was at a premium. Those who do have their own studios prize the space as a precious asset for connecting with audiences and peers.
- **These artists want more opportunities to connect with each other:** There is strong interest, both within the disciplines and across the artist community, for more opportunities for exchange and learning. Many felt a public or an arts service agency should assume responsibility for regular convenings. This sentiment was also reflected in our statewide survey conducted as a part of our 2009 evaluation of McKnight's Arts Program.
- **Health care is a major factor for this cohort:** Given that the median age of our respondents was over 50 years, it is not surprising that health issues were mentioned numerous times by the Fellows. Quite surprisingly, few of the regional artists mentioned this issue. A number of Fellows said that access to health insurance was a major impetus for securing and remaining in outside jobs. This suggests that finding ways to increase access to health care (and other public benefits) continues to be an important issue for artists. Other research indicates that a majority of working artists cannot afford to pay for their own health insurance and depend on spouses or outside jobs for coverage.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, Artist Trust.

## A Final Comment

The McKnight Foundation has dedicated itself to improving “the quality of life for present and future generations” by applying its resources “to attend, unite, and empower” its constituents. Given its priorities, it is clear that the Foundation also recognizes that there is more to a community than geography — that each community has a character, a spirit that rises up and helps to determine the quality of its life.

At the Center we maintain that this defining character does not just emerge from the structure of laws, or codes, or buildings. We believe that each community needs creative pioneers, adept at risk-taking who will spark innovation and the power of human creativity.

The Foundation’s long-term commitment to the state’s artists has made a lasting, positive impact on Minnesota’s communities. Through its research and advocacy and its expansion of artist support, McKnight has made a powerful statement about the importance of the artist ecosystem — not just for the arts community, but, for the state as a whole. As a result, no other states have what Minnesota has in terms of artist-supporting infrastructure. Earlier, we asserted that this essential system needs to deepen and diversify its own support network — that a broader public/private partnership is required to sustain the ecosystem and address its challenges. As this next chapter unfolds, we believe McKnight leadership and authority in this arena will be as important as its financial investments.