



Beyond the First Year: Long-Term Earnings and Considerations for Visual and Performing Arts Graduates

Photo courtesy of University of Wyoming

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Abstract

Much of the existing literature on post-completion outcomes for graduates in the visual and performing arts relies on short-term, one-year earnings measures. This study extends that work by examining earnings outcomes for bachelor's-level Visual and Performing Arts graduates (Classification of Instructional Programs code 50) at one, five, and 10 years after graduation, using the U.S. Census Bureau's Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) dataset. Institution-level median earnings were aggregated using a graduate-count-weighted approach across more than 500 participating institutions and compared against all other bachelor's fields combined, with the analysis conducted both across all available graduation cohorts and within a single tracked cohort as a robustness check. Visual and Performing Arts graduates earned meaningfully less in absolute terms at every observed horizon, with the dollar gap widening from one to 10 years after graduation. However, percentage earnings growth over the same period was comparable to, and in some specifications exceeded, that of other bachelor's graduates – a pattern that held when a single graduating cohort was followed longitudinally, although the two approaches diverged specifically in the second half of the 10-year window. These results suggest that earnings outcomes for Visual and Performing Arts graduates are better characterized by a persistent absolute earnings gap alongside a comparable relative growth trajectory, rather than uniform disadvantage, with implications discussed for both institutional practitioners and policymakers.



Introduction

Imagine a scenario where you are commuting to work. As you travel, you sit in silence as there is no music to be played. You scan the road ahead and the scene is void of advertising, bulletin boards, or marketing of any kind. You arrive at your destination, and your elevator ride takes place quietly. The hallways of your building are barren and appear generic without any sign of creative expression or character. You turn on your computer and instead of seeing a company logo or brand on your screen it is just a series of characters and numbers. As your day progresses, you take a lunch break and order from a bullet list of menu choices with no visual clues of what the dish may look like. You eat once again in silence. You proceed back to your desk and as your afternoon meeting begins your co-workers share the results of the latest sales campaign. It is dry and infographics or cleverly arranged visuals are nowhere to be found in the presentation. You complete your day and look forward to meeting up with co-workers and friends in the evening. You arrive and the room is buzzing with chatter but truly nothing else. No musical entertainment, no radio songs, no karaoke, and certainly not any advertising artwork, brand images, or posters on the wall. You resign yourself to the evening and head home waiting for the next day to repeat itself as you contemplate your thoughts in a quiet vehicle ride.

While far-fetched and slightly dystopian in its characterization, this could be a society without the visual and performing arts. When we discuss the impact of higher education on our larger society these are the considerations that must be weighed. To what end does higher education exist and why should we care about the visual and performing arts? As we show below, this is a challenging time for these programs and care must be taken when considering how to evaluate the outcomes of these degree programs.

The question of economic value associated with degrees in the visual and performing arts has become increasingly salient within higher education policy and institutional decision-making. This heightened attention is occurring within a broader environment characterized by declining public confidence in higher education, increasing political scrutiny, and growing expectations that institutions demonstrate clear and measurable post-completion outcomes (Gallup, n.d.; Tight, 2024). In this context, earnings have emerged as a dominant metric through which the value of academic programs is assessed, often serving as a proxy for return on investment (ROI) in both public discourse and institutional accountability frameworks. While such measures offer an accessible and comparable benchmark, they present important limitations when applied to fields whose graduates engage in nontraditional labor market pathways like musicians, artists, or others in the creative fields.

These limitations are particularly pronounced in the case of visual and performing arts graduates. Prior research consistently demonstrates that individuals in these fields pursue career trajectories that differ meaningfully from those of graduates in more occupationally linear disciplines. Rather than progressing through a single, stable occupation, many arts and music graduates construct portfolio careers that involve multiple concurrent roles across artistic, educational, and non-arts domains (Teague & Smith, 2015; Latukefu & Pollard, 2022). These career structures often include combinations of freelance work,

self-employment, contract-based roles, and employment outside the primary field of study. As a result, earnings observed in administrative datasets may reflect only a portion of total economic activity, thereby complicating straightforward interpretations of long-term wage outcomes.

The literature further suggests that the value of arts education is not confined to occupational alignment or income alone. Studies of arts alumni indicate that graduates frequently apply discipline-specific skills across a wide range of professional contexts, including roles not formally classified as arts occupations (Brook & Fostaty Young, 2019; Miller et al., 2017). National survey data reinforce this pattern, showing that a substantial proportion of arts graduates continue to engage in arts-related work duties regardless of job title or sector (Novak-Leonard, 2024). These findings challenge conventional definitions of underemployment and highlight the importance of considering skill transfer, career satisfaction, and broader contributions to the workforce when evaluating program outcomes.

At the same time, earnings trajectories for arts graduates are shaped by a range of structural and contextual factors that extend beyond the field of study. Financial constraints, particularly student loan debt, have been shown to influence career decision-making, often redirecting graduates toward higher paying but less aligned employment (Paulsen, 2024). Access to employment benefits, including health insurance, also plays a significant role in determining whether individuals remain in arts-related careers (Paulsen & Dulal, 2024). In addition, macroeconomic conditions exert a measurable impact on labor market outcomes, with evidence indicating that graduates entering the workforce during economic downturns experience lower earnings and greater employment instability (Paulsen, 2022; Woronkowicz, 2015). These dynamics suggest that observed earnings patterns may reflect broader economic and policy environments as much as they reflect the intrinsic value of a degree.

Beyond individual outcomes, the literature points to broader societal implications associated with arts and humanities education. National indicators demonstrate that engagement in the humanities is linked to civic participation, life satisfaction, and workforce engagement, suggesting that the value of these fields extends beyond immediate economic returns (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021). Scholars have also emphasized the role of arts and humanities education in fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and the capacity to engage with complex societal challenges (Lee et al., 2023). In this sense, the potential contraction or elimination of arts programs carries implications not only for institutional portfolios but also for the broader social and economic ecosystem.

Importantly, arts graduates contribute to economic activity in ways that are not fully captured through traditional wage-based measures. Research indicates that individuals with arts degrees are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial and innovative work, often operating outside conventional employment structures (Paulsen et al., 2021). While these pathways may be associated with lower average earnings, they represent a distinct form of economic participation that supports cultural production, regional economies, and the creative industries. Evidence also suggests that these outcomes are influenced by educational experiences, including exposure to entrepreneurship and business training, which can mitigate earnings differentials and enhance long-term career sustainability (Makridis & Kuuskoski, 2024; Miller, 2023).

Taken together, this body of literature raises important questions about how the value of arts degrees should be conceptualized and measured. Reliance on short-term or single-dimensional earnings indicators risks understating both the individual and societal contributions of graduates in these fields. This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of datasets such as the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) dataset, which provide robust longitudinal earnings data but do not capture the full complexity of career pathways, multiple job holding, or non-wage forms of economic activity.



Literature Review

As noted above, the question of economic value associated with degrees in the visual and performing arts has become increasingly salient within higher education policy and institutional decision-making as calls for accountability and transparency become increasingly prevalent in the public discourse (EAB, n.d.; Frenette & Dowd, 2018). As higher education faces the realities of the projected enrollment declines due to fewer High School graduates (Grawe, 2018), Provosts and Presidents are increasingly being forced to scrutinize academic offerings. Much of the existing discourse has relied heavily on short-term earnings outcomes, often measured at one year post-completion, as a proxy for ROI. While such measures offer a readily accessible benchmark, they are insufficient for understanding the longer-term trajectories of graduates in fields characterized by non-traditional labor market participation. Emerging literature suggests that graduates in visual and performing arts (typically degree programs in the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code 50) follow career pathways that diverge meaningfully from those of graduates in more occupationally linear disciplines, requiring a broader conceptualization of value that extends beyond initial wage outcomes.

A central finding across the literature is that visual and performing arts graduates frequently engage in portfolio careers, defined by the simultaneous pursuit of multiple roles across artistic, educational, and non-arts domains. Teague and Smith (2015) describe these careers as inherently complex, requiring individuals to balance multiple identities and income streams over time. Similarly, Latukefu and Pollard (2022) emphasize that the majority of music graduates construct careers through a combination of freelance, contract, and part-time work, often spanning both arts-related and non-arts employment. These findings are reinforced by prior research from the Strategic National Alliance of Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), which indicates that arts graduates commonly sustain employment both within and outside their primary field of study (Lena et al., 2014). Collectively, this body of work suggests that earnings captured in administrative datasets may reflect only a portion of total economic activity, thereby complicating straightforward interpretations of long-term wage outcomes.

This complexity is further reflected in how graduates apply their training across occupational contexts. Brook and Fostaty Young (2019) demonstrate that music alumni frequently leverage discipline-specific skills in roles that are not formally classified as music occupations. Likewise, Miller, Dumford, and Johnson (2017) argue that traditional metrics of success, particularly income, fail to fully capture the value of arts education, which is more appropriately understood through a combination of skill utilization, career satisfaction, and broader contributions to the workforce and society. These findings align with more recent SNAAP evidence showing that a substantial majority of arts alumni continue to engage in arts-related work duties regardless of their formal job titles (Novak-Leonard, 2024). Together, this literature underscores the need to interpret earnings data within a broader framework that accounts for cross-sector skill transfer and hybrid employment patterns.

Beyond the structure of career pathways, the literature also highlights the role of structural constraints in shaping long-term outcomes. Paulsen (2024) provides compelling evidence that student loan debt significantly reduces the likelihood that arts graduates work in jobs aligned with their field of study, suggesting that financial pressures may redirect graduates toward higher paying but less aligned employment. This is especially salient for institutions with higher Pell eligible populations or first-generation enrollees. Similarly, Paulsen and Dulal (2024) demonstrate that access to health insurance increases the likelihood of remaining in arts-related work, indicating that employment benefits, not just wages, play a critical role in career decision-making. These findings suggest that observed earnings trajectories are not solely a function of the degree field but are also influenced by policy environments and financial constraints that shape the feasibility of pursuing arts-based careers.

Macroeconomic conditions further complicate the interpretation of long-term earnings outcomes, and this is not a new phenomenon. Paulsen (2022) finds that graduates entering the labor market during the Great Recession experienced lower earnings, higher rates of unemployment, and increased reliance on self-employment relative to other cohorts. Consistent with this, Woronkiewicz (2015) documents that artists were disproportionately affected by economic downturns, often transitioning into non-arts employment or contingent work arrangements. More recent evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic similarly demonstrates the vulnerability of arts labor markets to external shocks, with significant disruptions to employment and income among arts and design alumni (Skaggs et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of situating earnings trajectories within broader economic contexts, particularly when examining outcomes over extended time horizons.

At the same time, a growing body of research points to the economic contributions of arts graduates that are not readily captured through traditional wage measures. Paulsen, Alper, and Wassall (2021) find that individuals with arts degrees are significantly more likely to engage in entrepreneurial and innovative activities than their non-arts counterparts, suggesting that their economic impact extends beyond conventional employment structures. This is further supported by evidence that many arts graduates pursue self-employment or establish independent ventures as part of their career trajectories (Miller et al., 2016). However, the literature also indicates that such pathways are often accompanied by gaps in business and financial training, which may constrain earnings potential despite high levels of creative skill (Makridis & Kuuskoski, 2024). These findings reinforce the notion that lower observed earnings should not be interpreted as a lack of value, but rather as a reflection of distinct career structures and preparation pathways.

Educational experiences themselves also play a significant role in shaping long-term outcomes. Miller (2023) finds that exposure to creative coursework is positively associated with a range of career outcomes, including income, job relevance, and engagement, even after controlling for demographic and institutional factors. Similarly, Frenette and Dowd (2018) identify internships, professional networks, and curricular experiences as key predictors of whether graduates remain in arts-related careers over time. Bennett (2016) extends this line of inquiry by arguing that employability in the arts should be understood as the capacity to navigate complex and evolving career landscapes, rather than as a fixed outcome

measured at a single point in time. These perspectives suggest that long-term earnings trajectories are shaped not only by field of study, but also by the extent to which educational programs prepare students for the realities of creative labor markets.

Taken together, the literature points to a consistent conclusion that the economic value of Visual and Performing Arts degrees cannot be fully understood through short-term or single-dimensional earnings measures. Instead, long-term outcomes must be interpreted within a framework that accounts for portfolio careers, structural constraints, entrepreneurial activity, and the broader application of creative skills across sectors. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyses using datasets such as PSEO, which provide robust longitudinal earnings data but may not capture the full complexity of arts graduates' economic participation.

Accordingly, this study builds on prior research by examining 10-year earnings outcomes for graduates in visual and performing arts fields (CIP 50), while situating those outcomes within the broader context established by the literature. By extending the analytic window beyond early career measures, this work seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of long-term earnings trajectories and to contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of value for arts and music degrees.



Research Questions

This study addresses two primary research questions, both examined at one, five, and 10 years after graduation:

Research Question 1

How do median earnings of bachelor's degree recipients in Visual and Performing Arts (CIP 50) compare to those of bachelor's degree recipients in all other fields?

Research Question 2

How does the earnings growth trajectory of Visual and Performing Arts bachelor's graduates compare to that of other bachelor's graduates across this same window?

The three-point structure across one, five, and 10 years after graduation was selected to capture early-career instability, mid-career positioning, and longer-run outcomes, addressing the gap identified in the literature reviewed above: most existing research relies on one-year earnings as a proxy for program value, a window too narrow to characterize career trajectories that frequently depart from linear, single-employer paths.



Methods

Data Source

This analysis draws on the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) dataset, a product of the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). PSEO links university transcript data, provided by participating institutions and state higher education systems under data-sharing agreements, with state Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records to construct earnings outcomes by institution, degree level, field of study, and graduation cohort. Earnings are reported at one, five, and 10 years after graduation, in 2023 dollars.

Three files published by the Census Bureau were used in this analysis: the comprehensive Graduate Earnings file, covering every PSEO-participating institution and field combination; an institution lookup file providing institution names and states; and the official Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) label file, used to attach human-readable field names to CIP codes.

Population and Sample Definition

The analytic sample was restricted to institution-level records (excluding state-level rollups) for bachelor's degree completers, at the two-digit CIP family level. This granularity was selected because it isolates earnings by field of study without further subdividing into the narrower four-digit CIP categories, which would substantially increase data suppression. Visual and Performing Arts (CIP 50) graduates constituted the target group; all other two-digit CIP fields, pooled together, constituted the comparison group. The CIP "00" (All Instructional Programs) total was excluded automatically by this filtering, since that aggregate is tagged at a different CIP level than the two-digit fields used here.

It is important to note that PSEO reflects a non-random, opt-in sample of institutions and state systems that have entered into data-sharing agreements with the Census Bureau; coverage is not equivalent to a nationally representative sample of all U.S. postsecondary institutions, and the geographic distribution of institutions in this dataset reflects which states have joined PSEO rather than where Visual and Performing Arts programs are concentrated nationally.

Cohort Definition

Two parallel cohort definitions were analyzed. The primary analysis pools all available graduation cohorts together ("All Cohorts"), maximizing the number of institutions and minimizing data suppression at every time horizon. A second analysis was conducted using the 2010 to 2012 three-year graduation cohort ("2010 Cohort"), the most recent cohort with non-trivial data availability at the 10-year mark; more recent cohorts, including 2013, had no usable 10-year earnings data in this release, reflecting the time required for administrative wage records to accumulate.

The single-cohort analysis serves as a robustness check, since the All Cohorts approach necessarily blends differently aged graduating classes across the three time horizons: recent cohorts contribute to the one- and five-year figures but not the 10-year figure, while only sufficiently old cohorts contribute to the 10-year figure. The 2010 Cohort analysis avoids this by tracking a single, consistently defined group of graduates across all three horizons.

Data Cleaning and Preparation

Records were filtered to institution-level rows, bachelor's-degree completers, and two-digit CIP codes. Columns reflecting geography and industry of employment were dropped, as these fields were constant (national, all-industries) across every record in this release and carried no analytic information. Twenty-fifth and 75th percentile earnings columns were also dropped, since both research questions focus on median earnings; these remain available in the source file if earnings dispersion within a field becomes a focus of future work. The cohort-window-width field was retained for transparency, since it documents that bachelor's cohorts are tabulated as three-year windows, with one minor exception in the 2011 cohort tabulated as a five-year window.

Missing median earnings, resulting from Census Bureau suppression of small or unstable cells, were not used to drop institutions from the analysis wholesale. Instead, missingness was handled independently at each time horizon: an institution missing 10-year data could still contribute to the one- and five-year aggregates. Dropping any institution missing data at any single horizon would have shrunk the usable sample at every horizon and systematically excluded smaller or newer programs, introducing a different form of bias than the one being guarded against.

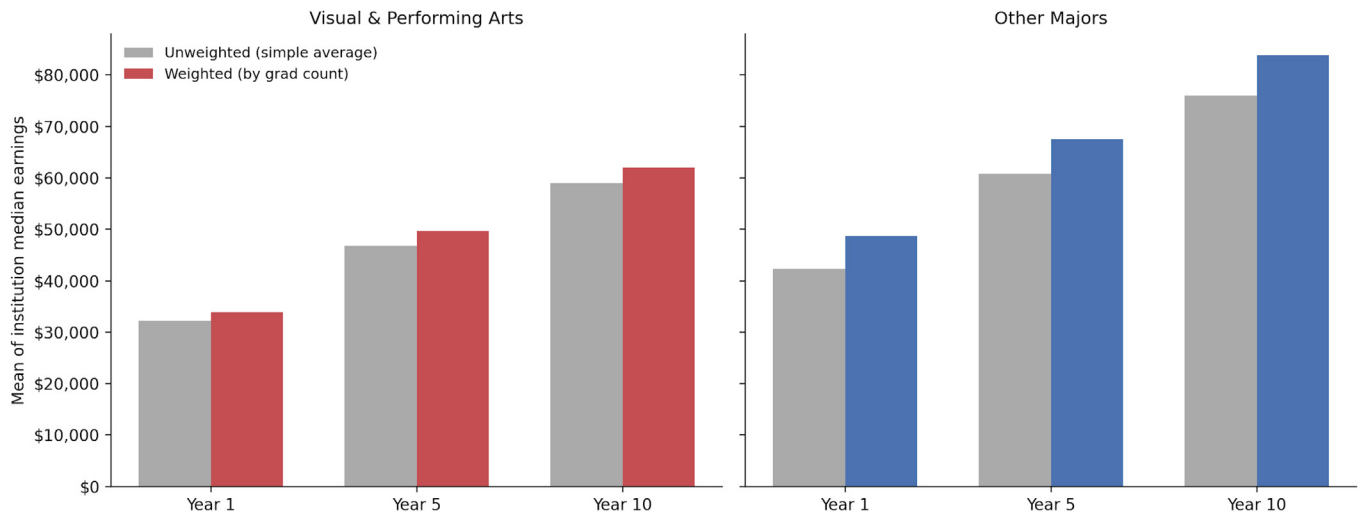
Aggregation and Weighting Methodology

Because PSEO publishes earnings at the institution level rather than as a pre-computed national total, institution-level medians were combined into a single figure for each group (Visual and Performing Arts versus all other majors) using a graduate-count-weighted mean, with each institution's median earnings weighted by that year's count of employed graduates underlying the estimate, rather than the broader count of all reported graduates, employed or not. This approach was selected over a simple, unweighted average of institution medians because program size varies substantially across institutions, particularly within the comparison group, and an unweighted average would give a small program the same influence as a large one.

The empirical impact of this decision is shown in Figure 1. Weighting shifted the comparison group's mean by approximately \$6,500 across the three horizons, but shifted the Visual and Performing Arts group's mean by only approximately \$1,800, consistent with the comparison group's substantially longer tail of large programs (the largest single comparison-group program-institution combination reported over 66,000 employed graduates in the Year 1 All Cohorts pooling, compared to a maximum of approximately 6,500 for Visual and Performing Arts). This confirms that the weighting choice was not an arbitrary methodological preference, but one with a measurable and asymmetric effect on the two groups being compared.

Figure 1

Effect of Graduate-Count Weighting on Mean Institution-Level Earnings (All Cohorts)



Note: Bars compare the simple (unweighted) average of institution-level median earnings against the graduate-count-weighted average used throughout this analysis, by group and year, under the All Cohorts pooling.

No formal significance testing accompanies this or any other comparison in this analysis; see Statistical Framing, below.

Growth Metrics

Three measures of earnings growth were computed between each pair of the three time horizons (one to five years, five to 10 years, and one to 10 years): dollar (absolute) change, percent change, and the difference in natural log earnings. Dollar change is the most literal measure but does not account for Visual and Performing Arts graduates' lower starting earnings; percent change is comparable across groups regardless of starting level, but can make small absolute gains appear large; log difference is the most defensible measure when comparing groups with different baselines, and was retained as a check against the other two. Dollar and percent change are reported together as the primary measures of growth throughout the Results section, since presenting them side by side surfaces tensions between absolute and relative interpretations that either measure alone would obscure.

Statistical Framing

All comparisons in this analysis are descriptive rather than inferential. The public-use PSEO earnings file does not publish standard errors or other measures of sampling variability alongside its percentile earnings estimates, so there is no statistically defensible basis for attaching a significance threshold to any of the differences reported here. Results are presented, and should be interpreted, as a description of the size and direction of observed gaps and trends, not as the output of a hypothesis test.

Limitations

Several limitations should inform interpretation of the results that follow. First, and most central given the literature reviewed above, PSEO earnings reflect only employment covered by state Unemployment Insurance wage records; independent contractors, the unincorporated self-employed, and several smaller categories of employment are not captured (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Because the literature on Visual and Performing Arts careers consistently describes portfolio careers involving freelance, contract, and self-employed work (Teague & Smith, 2015; Latukefu & Pollard, 2022; Paulsen et al., 2021), this is a particularly consequential limitation for this population specifically, and likely results in an undercount of total economic activity for Visual and Performing Arts graduates that is not symmetric with the comparison group.

Second, PSEO reflects a non-random sample of participating institutions, and “national” findings in this analysis should be read as national among PSEO participants, not a population estimate for all U.S. postsecondary institutions.

Third, data suppression increases at the 10-year horizon across both groups and is somewhat more pronounced for Visual and Performing Arts at that specific horizon, even though Visual and Performing Arts shows better overall data availability than the comparison group at every horizon, reported in the Results section below.

Fourth, the weighted mean of institution-level medians used throughout this analysis approximates, but is not mathematically identical to, the true pooled median that would be observed with individual-level data.

Fifth, the All Cohorts analysis necessarily pools graduating classes from different historical periods, addressed in part through the 2010 Cohort robustness check, though that check cannot fully eliminate this concern on its own.

Finally, both the Visual and Performing Arts group and the comparison group are internally heterogeneous. As shown in the Results section, Visual and Performing Arts spans 10 distinct sub-fields with meaningfully different earnings profiles, and the comparison group spans 45 distinct fields, of which the eight largest individually still leave nearly a third of the comparison group in an unnamed remainder.

Results

Sample Characteristics and Comparison Group Composition

Under the All Cohorts pooling, the analytic sample included 536 distinct institutions; 415 of these, or approximately 77%, offered a bachelor's-level Visual and Performing Arts program, a higher share than might be expected given that PSEO institutions tend to be larger four-year universities with broad program offerings. The comparison group spanned 45 additional two-digit CIP fields. Under the 2010 Cohort definition, 482 institutions were represented, of which 386 offered Visual and Performing Arts.

Table 1 and Figure 2 show the composition of the comparison group, ranked by total employed graduates at one year. Business, Management, Marketing & Related Support Services and Health Professions & Related Programs were the two largest individual fields, together accounting for approximately one-third of the comparison group's employed graduates. Even after naming the eight largest fields individually, the remaining 37 smaller fields, taken together, still constituted the single largest share of the comparison group at approximately 31%, underscoring that "other majors" is not a monolithic comparison.

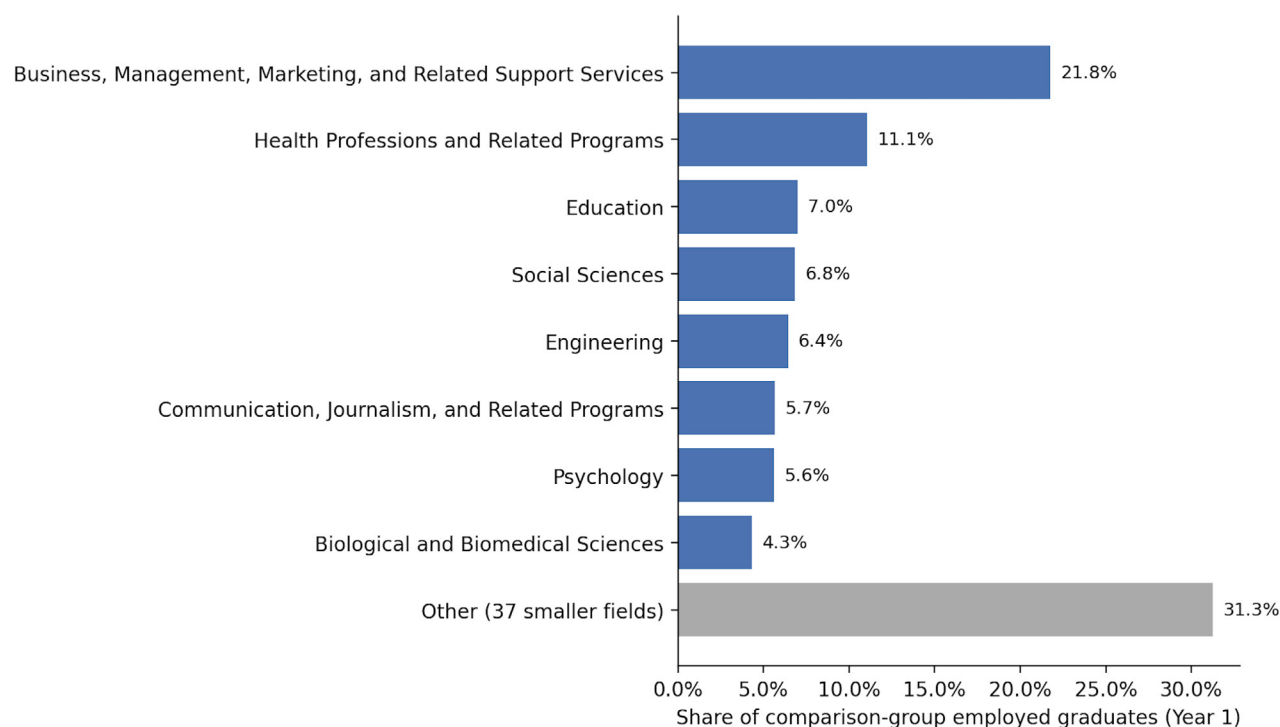
Table 1
Composition of the Comparison Group, Ranked by Employed Graduates (All Cohorts)

CIP Field	Institutions	Employed Graduates (Year 1)	Share of Group
Business, Management, Marketing & Related Support Services	472	1,886,592	21.8%
Health Professions & Related Programs	459	959,239	11.1%
Education	394	607,493	7.0%
Social Sciences	421	592,301	6.8%
Engineering	254	557,800	6.4%
Communication, Journalism & Related Programs	392	491,904	5.7%
Psychology	444	487,643	5.6%
Biological & Biomedical Sciences	445	376,081	4.3%
Other (37 smaller fields)	496	2,710,281	31.3%

Note: Ranked by total employed graduates underlying the Year 1 earnings estimate. CIP-2 field labels drawn from the official Census Bureau CIP label file.

Figure 2

Composition of the “Other Majors” Comparison Group

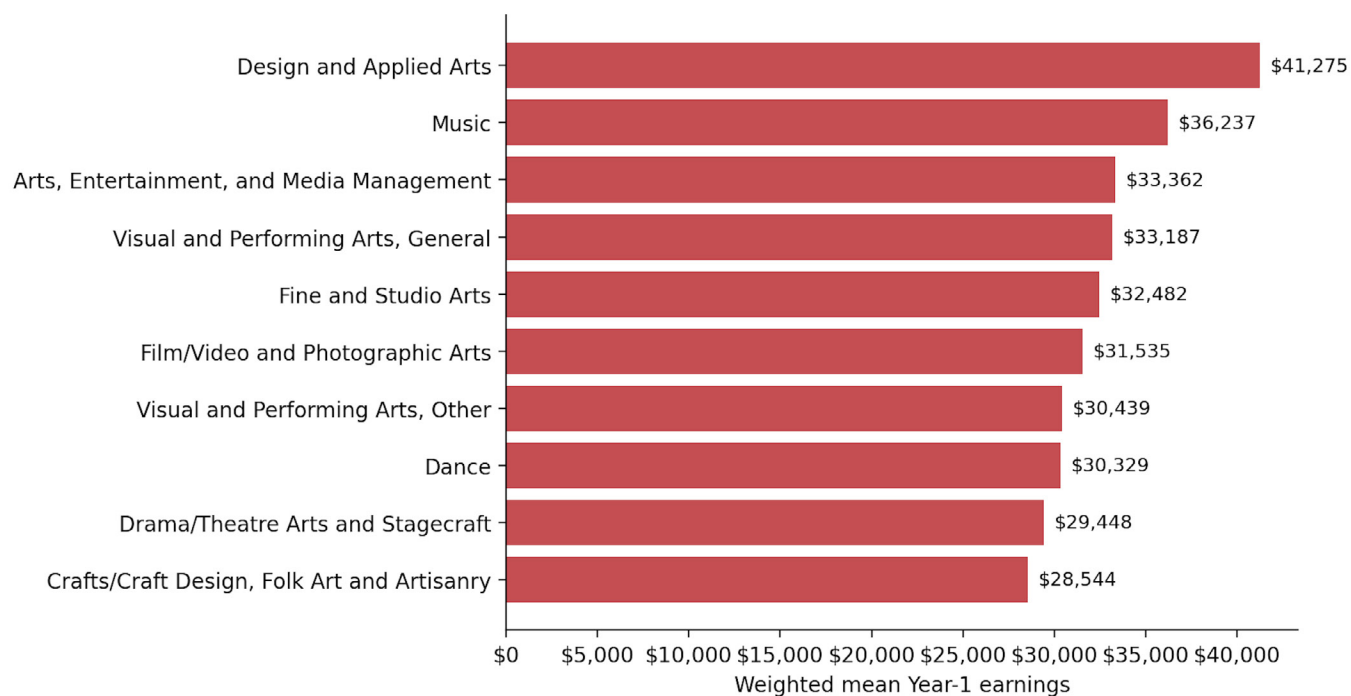


Note: Bars show each field's share of total comparison-group employed graduates (Year 1, All Cohorts).

Visual and Performing Arts itself is similarly heterogeneous. Figure 3 breaks down the field's 10 constituent four-digit sub-fields by weighted mean first-year earnings. Design and Applied Arts graduates earned the most among Visual and Performing Arts sub-fields (\$41,275), followed by Music (\$36,237); Crafts/Craft Design, Folk Art and Artisanry (\$28,544) and Drama/Theatre Arts and Stagecraft (\$29,448) earned the least. The gap between the highest- and lowest-earning sub-fields, roughly \$12,700, is a substantial share of the overall gap between Visual and Performing Arts and the comparison group and is addressed further in the Discussion.

Figure 3

Year-1 Earnings by Visual and Performing Arts Sub-Field

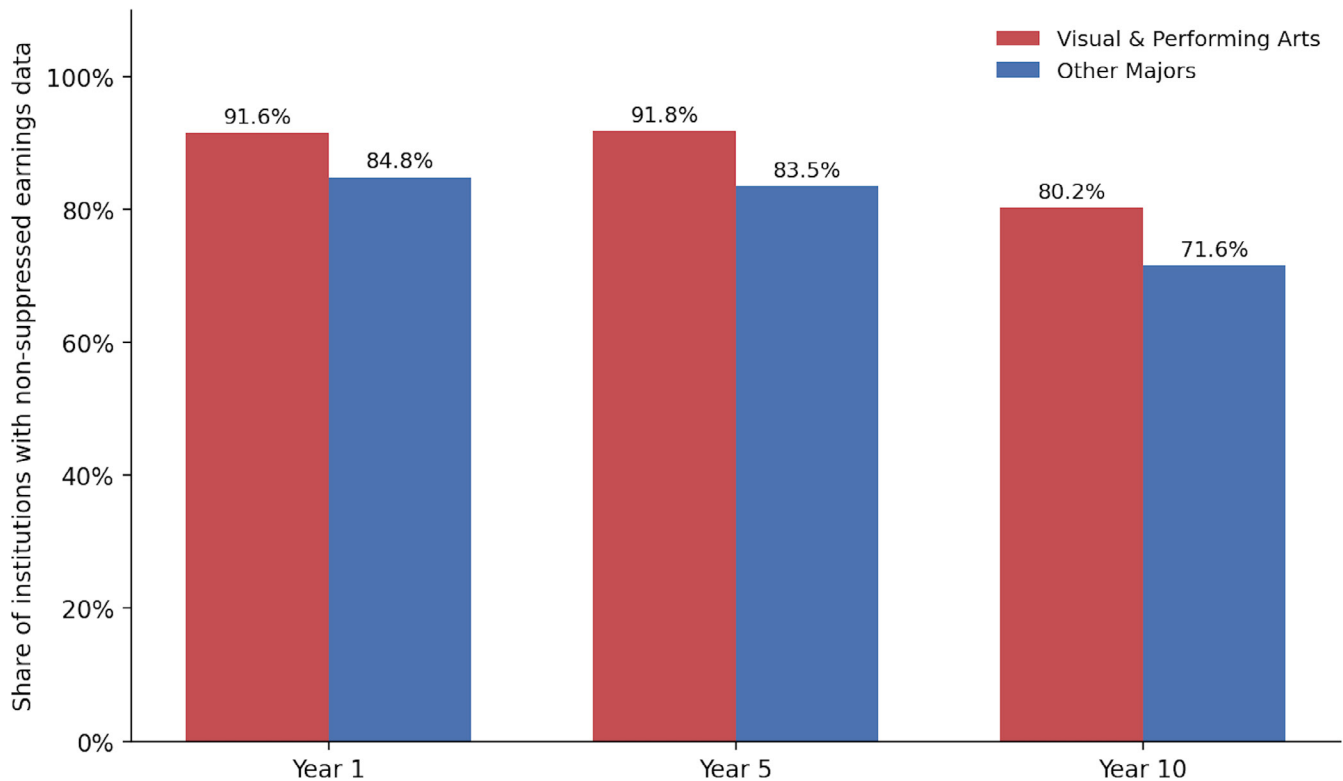


Note: Graduate-count-weighted mean Year 1 earnings, by four-digit CIP sub-field within Visual and Performing Arts (All Cohorts).

Data Quality and Distributional Checks

Before turning to the research questions, two checks were conducted to assess the reliability of the underlying data. First, data availability (the share of institutions with non-suppressed median earnings) was compared between groups at each horizon. Counter to an intuitive expectation that a smaller field would have sparser data, Visual and Performing Arts showed better availability than the comparison group at every horizon under All Cohorts: 91.6% versus 84.8% at one year, 91.8% versus 83.5% at five years, and 80.2% versus 71.6% at 10 years (Figure 4). This pattern likely reflects the comparison group's inclusion of a long tail of small, niche fields that suppress more frequently than Visual and Performing Arts does at most institutions.

Figure 4
Data Availability by Year and Group (All Cohorts)

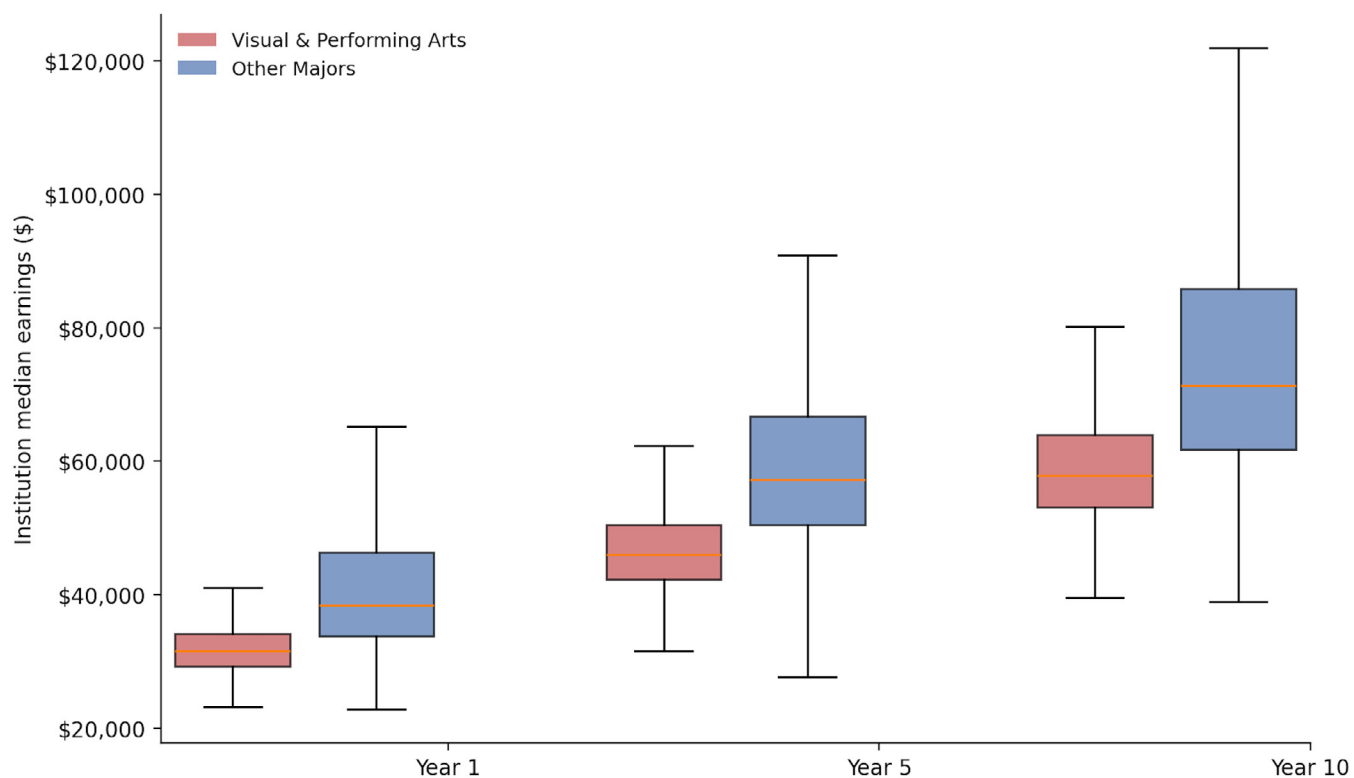


Note: Share of institutions with non-suppressed median earnings, by year and group.

Second, institution-level distributions of median earnings were examined directly, rather than relying solely on the summary weighted mean. Figure 5 shows that Visual and Performing Arts institutions form a visibly tighter distribution than the comparison group at every horizon, consistent with a standard deviation of approximately \$4,400 for Visual and Performing Arts compared to approximately \$12,500 for the comparison group at one year. Among institutions with complete one-, five-, and 10-year data, earnings rose monotonically across all three horizons at 99.4% of Visual and Performing Arts institutions and 98.6% of comparison-group institutions, supporting confidence in the underlying data before turning to the formal growth comparison.

Figure 5

Institution-Level Spread in Median Earnings (All Cohorts)



Note: Box plots of institution-level median earnings by group, at each year (outliers not shown).

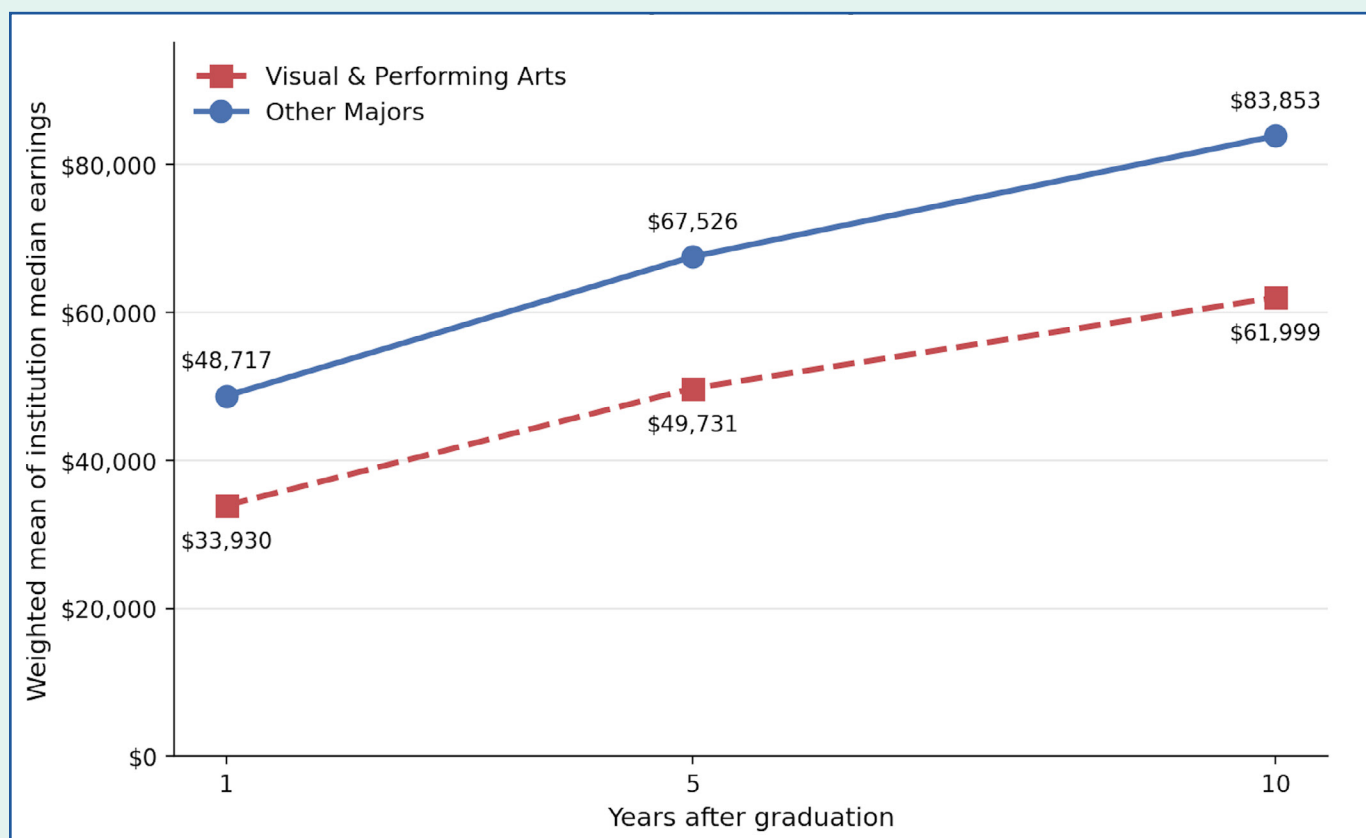
Research Question 1

Earnings Level Comparison

Under All Cohorts, Visual and Performing Arts graduates earned \$33,930 at one year, compared to \$48,717 for the comparison group; \$49,731 compared to \$67,526 at five years; and \$61,999 compared to \$83,853 at 10 years. The dollar gap between the two groups widened at each successive horizon, from approximately \$14,800 at one year to approximately \$21,900 at 10 years. The 2010 Cohort check showed the same qualitative pattern at broadly similar magnitudes (\$32,700 versus \$45,821 at one year; \$63,677 versus \$87,188 at 10 years), indicating that the level comparison is not an artifact of the All Cohorts pooling approach.

Figure 6

Median Earnings Trajectory: Visual & Performing Arts vs. Other Majors (All Cohorts)



Note: Graduate-count-weighted mean of institution-level median earnings at one, five, and 10 years after graduation.

Table 2**Weighted Mean Institution-Level Median Earnings by Group, Year, and Cohort Definition**

Cohort Definition	Group	Year 1	Year 5	Year 10
All Cohorts	Visual & Performing Arts	\$33,930	\$49,731	\$61,999
All Cohorts	Other Majors	\$48,717	\$67,526	\$83,853
2010 Cohort	Visual & Performing Arts	\$32,700	\$49,997	\$63,677
2010 Cohort	Other Majors	\$45,821	\$66,755	\$87,188

Note: Earnings reported in 2023 dollars.

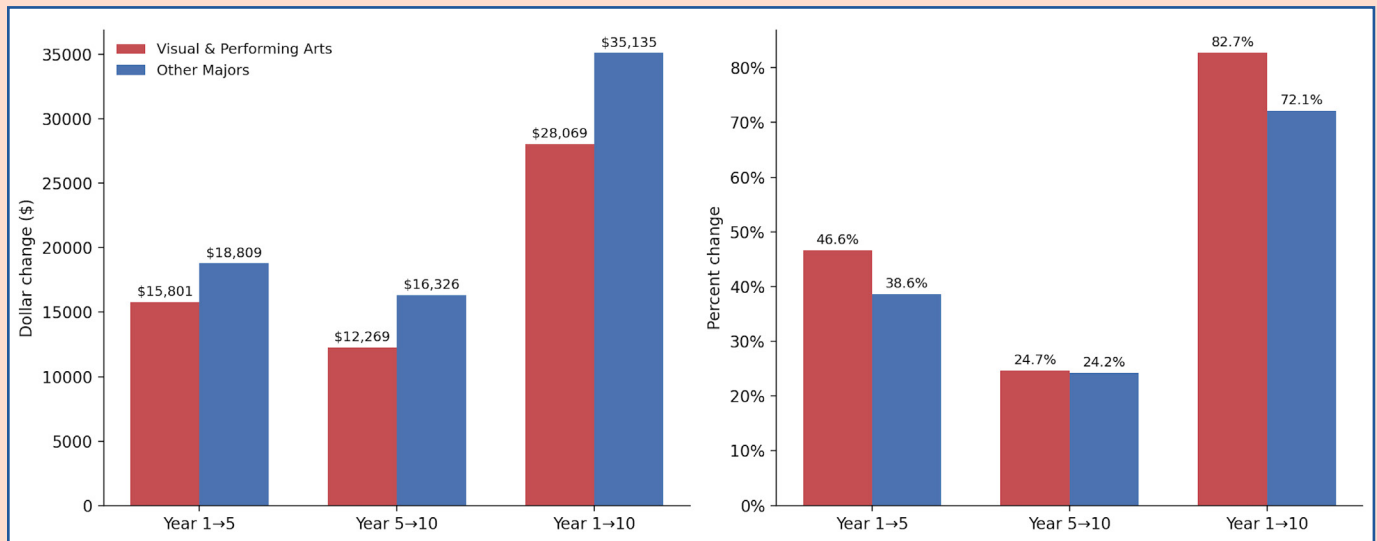
Research Question 2

Growth Trajectory Comparison

Under All Cohorts, dollar growth was smaller for Visual and Performing Arts than for the comparison group at every horizon pair (for example, \$28,069 versus \$35,135 from year one to year 10). Percent growth, however, was comparable to or higher for Visual and Performing Arts across the same comparisons (82.7% versus 72.1% from year one to year 10). These two measures describe the same underlying data but support different conclusions: in absolute terms, the earnings gap between the two groups widens; in relative terms, Visual and Performing Arts graduates' earnings grow at a pace that does not lag the comparison group, and over the full 10-year window, modestly exceeds it.

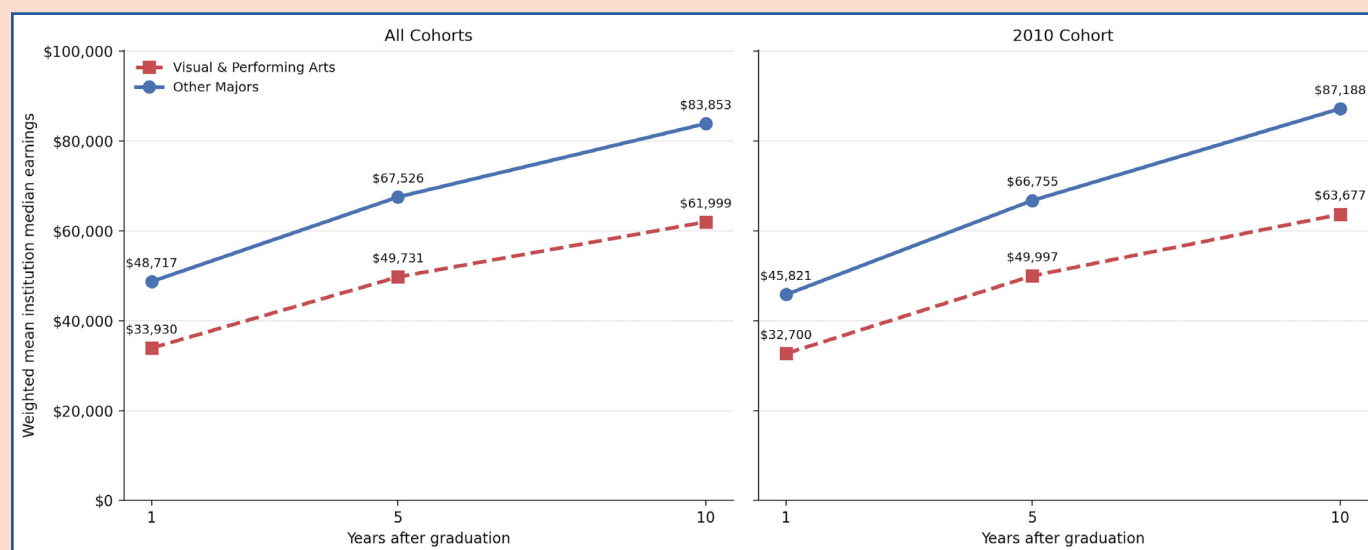
Figure 7

Growth in Median Earnings, Dollar and Percent Change (All Cohorts)



Note: Dollar change (left) and percent change (right) in weighted mean earnings, across the three horizon pairs.

The 2010 Cohort robustness check (Figure 8) confirmed this pattern for the one-to-five-year and one-to-10-year comparisons (94.7% versus 90.3% percent growth from year one to year 10), but diverged from the All Cohorts pattern specifically in the five-to-ten-year window: under the 2010 Cohort, the comparison group grew faster than Visual and Performing Arts during that window (30.6% versus 27.4%), the opposite of the narrower All Cohorts pattern for the same window (24.2% versus 24.7%). This divergence is located specifically in the second half of the trajectory and would not have been visible from the one-to-ten-year figure alone; it is addressed further in the Discussion.

Figure 8**Robustness Check: All Cohorts vs. 2010 Cohort Earnings Trajectory**

Note: Median earnings trajectory under the two cohort definitions, shown on a shared y-axis for direct comparison.

Table 3**Earnings Growth by Horizon Pair, Group, and Cohort Definition**

Cohort	Group	Yr 1–5 (\$)	Yr 1–5 (%)	Yr 5–10 (\$)	Yr 5–10 (%)	Yr 1–10 (\$)	Yr 1–10 (%)
All Cohorts	VPA	\$15,801	46.6%	\$12,269	24.7%	\$28,069	82.7%
All Cohorts	Other	\$18,809	38.6%	\$16,326	24.2%	\$35,135	72.1%
2010 Cohort	VPA	\$17,296	52.9%	\$13,680	27.4%	\$30,977	94.7%
2010 Cohort	Other	\$20,934	45.7%	\$20,433	30.6%	\$41,367	90.3%

Note: VPA = Visual & Performing Arts. Other = Other Majors (comparison group). Dollar and percent change shown; log difference, the third growth measure described in Methods, is omitted from this table for space but follows the same qualitative pattern as percent change in all cases.



Discussion

This study set out to answer two related questions about long-term earnings for graduates of Visual and Performing Arts programs, using an administrative data source, the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) dataset, that few institutional researchers have applied to this population over a multi-year horizon. Two results anchor the discussion below: Visual and Performing Arts graduates earn less than their non-arts peers in absolute dollar terms across the 10-year window examined here, and their earnings grow at a rate comparable to, and in several specifications favorable relative to, non-arts graduates over that same period. Neither finding is more accurate than the other; both describe the same underlying trajectories from different vantage points. Reconciling them, along with the measurement and cohort issues that complicate them, is what this section sets out to do. Two goals motivated this study from the outset, and we return to both throughout what follows: showing that the value of a Visual and Performing Arts degree is not adequately captured by a single earnings figure, and showing what a more disciplined use of PSEO data, one that reports robustness checks, disaggregates by sub-field, and is explicit about what the data cannot see, can offer institutional researchers evaluating any degree program, not only those in the arts.

Reconciling the Dollar and Percent Growth Patterns

The central empirical tension in these results is that Visual and Performing Arts graduates experience both a widening absolute earnings gap and a comparable, sometimes favorable, relative growth rate. Read in isolation, either measure would support a different narrative: a focus on dollar figures alone would suggest that Visual and Performing Arts graduates fall further behind over time, while a focus on percent growth alone would suggest the field is closing the gap. Both statements are accurate descriptions of the same underlying data, and neither is the whole story. This pattern is consistent with the literature's broader caution against single-dimensional earnings measures (Miller et al., 2017), and it points toward a straightforward reporting standard: institutional accountability frameworks and internal program reviews should present absolute and relative earnings measures side by side, as this study attempts to do, instead of defaulting to one or the other.

Cohort Timing and Macroeconomic Context

The divergence between the All Cohorts and 2010 Cohort analyses in the five-to-ten-year growth window is, we believe, one of the more substantive findings of this study, and the literature offers a plausible explanation for it. The 2010 graduation cohort entered the labor market during and immediately following the Great Recession. Prior research finds that arts graduates specifically, not simply graduates in general, were disproportionately affected by that downturn, experiencing transitions into non-arts employment and contingent work arrangements at elevated rates (Woronkiewicz, 2015), and that recession-era cohorts broadly experienced lower earnings and greater reliance on self-employment (Paulsen, 2022). More recent evidence documents a similar pattern of disruption to arts alumni

employment and income following the COVID-19 pandemic (Skaggs et al., 2024). If Visual and Performing Arts graduates are more sensitive to macroeconomic conditions at the point of labor market entry than graduates in other fields, a cohort that began its career during a downturn could show a different multi-year trajectory than the pooled, multi-era All Cohorts estimate, which blends graduating classes from comparatively stronger and weaker economic periods. This study cannot test that mechanism directly, since PSEO does not provide the kind of individual-level employment-history detail that would be needed to observe transitions into and out of arts-related work, but the timing matches the literature's findings and, as we discuss below, merits investigation through a multi-cohort research design.

Earnings Data and the Portfolio Career

This study's central limitation, that PSEO earnings reflect only employment covered by state Unemployment Insurance wage records, is also a direct point of contact with the literature reviewed above. That literature describes Visual and Performing Arts and music graduates as frequently constructing portfolio careers that combine freelance work, self-employment, contract-based roles, and employment outside the field of study (Teague & Smith, 2015; Latukefu & Pollard, 2022), and finds that graduates apply their training in roles not formally classified as arts occupations at high rates (Brook & Fostaty Young, 2019; Novak-Leonard, 2024). None of this activity, when it falls outside UI-covered employment, appears in the earnings figures reported here. The absolute earnings gap documented in this study, while real within the bounds of what PSEO measures, should therefore not be read as a complete accounting of Visual and Performing Arts graduates' total economic activity. Nor is it obvious that this measurement gap is symmetric across the two groups being compared: to the extent that portfolio careers and self-employment are more prevalent among Visual and Performing Arts graduates than among graduates of other bachelor's fields, the comparison group's earnings are likely more fully captured by this data source than Visual and Performing Arts graduates' earnings are. That asymmetry implies that the true gap, however it might eventually be measured, is probably smaller than the gap reported here, not larger.

Heterogeneity Within Visual and Performing Arts

The substantial earnings gap observed between Design and Applied Arts and the more performance- and studio-oriented sub-fields within Visual and Performing Arts (a difference of roughly \$12,700 in weighted mean first-year earnings) raises a question this study cannot fully resolve but is worth raising directly. One plausible explanation is that design-oriented careers map more readily onto conventional, salaried employment, such as graphic, industrial, or user-experience design roles, that would be captured by UI wage records, while performance- and studio-oriented careers may lean more heavily on the freelance and contract structures discussed above, in which case part of the observed sub-field gap could reflect which sub-fields' income is more fully measured rather than a true difference in economic value generated. A second, complementary explanation draws on evidence that business and entrepreneurial training narrows earnings gaps for arts graduates (Makridis & Kuuskoski, 2024) and that

creative coursework combined with practical preparation predicts stronger outcomes generally (Miller, 2023); design curricula may simply incorporate more of this kind of applied, market-facing preparation than studio or performance curricula typically do. We present this as a hypothesis for future research rather than a finding this analysis can adjudicate, since distinguishing a measurement explanation from a genuine value differential would require data on graduates' employment status and self-employment activity that PSEO does not provide.

Bringing the Findings Together

Considered together instead of one at a time, these four patterns form a more coherent story than any single one tells alone. The apparent contradiction between a widening dollar gap and a comparable growth rate is itself an interpretation problem of exactly the kind that recurs throughout this section. The 2010 cohort's distinct trajectory looks like a cohort-timing effect more than a stable feature of the field. The size of the overall earnings gap may be inflated by a measurement gap specific to how portfolio careers are captured in UI wage records. And the sub-field spread within Visual and Performing Arts is likely driven by that same measurement gap more than by any real difference in underlying value. None of these three qualifications makes the earnings gap disappear, and none of them suggests the gap is illusory. Even so, they argue against reading the topline comparison at face value, and toward the position that a defensible account of program value requires exactly the kind of disaggregation, robustness-checking, and context described next.

Implications and Next Steps for Institutional Research

Beyond its substantive findings, this analysis was undertaken in part to demonstrate practices that we think should be more standard when administrative wage data are used to evaluate degree program outcomes. Three are worth naming explicitly. First, every aggregate reported here was checked against an alternative specification, whether a different cohort definition, a different weighting scheme, or a breakdown into constituent sub-fields, and the results of those checks are reported alongside the headline figures rather than only when they happen to confirm the primary analysis. Second, data suppression and availability were reported directly rather than left implicit; a reader of this study knows specifically how much of the underlying institutional landscape each estimate reflects. Third, neither the target group nor the comparison group was treated as internally uniform before its composition was examined; in both directions, doing so surfaced findings that would have been invisible from the headline comparison alone, including the size of the unnamed remainder of "other majors" and the sub-field spread within Visual and Performing Arts.

For institutional researchers weighing whether to adopt a similar approach, three starting points stand out. One is to treat the sub-field or program level, not the CIP-2 or college level, as the primary unit of analysis, and to report the CIP-4 breakdown even when a single headline number is what a dean or board ultimately asks for. A second is to build the dollar-and-percent comparison described above into any standing template for earnings reporting, instead of treating it as a one-time analytical choice. A

third is to document data suppression and cohort coverage in the same table as the earnings estimates themselves, so a reader does not have to hunt for the caveats that qualify a number. None of these steps requires additional data collection; each is a change in how existing PSEO extracts, or comparable state and federal wage-record data, are analyzed and reported. Programs evaluated using a single earnings figure, without this kind of decomposition, risk both overstating and understating the conclusions a more complete look at the same data would support. Consistent with the literature reviewed above, we also caution institutional leaders against treating any single earnings comparison as a complete measure of program value, and we encourage pairing analyses of this kind with the qualitative and survey-based evidence on skill transfer, career satisfaction, and non-wage economic contribution that this literature has also established (Miller et al., 2017; Novak-Leonard, 2024).

Implications and Next Steps for Institutional Leaders, Boards, and Policymakers

Given the findings above, we understand the tendency within institutions to evaluate program success against a single criterion. Our findings, together with the literature reviewed above on portfolio careers, skill transfer, and the broader societal contributions associated with arts and humanities education (Miller et al., 2017; American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021; Lee et al., 2023), point to the need for a more deliberate, multi-dimensional approach to evaluating academic program “value.” We urge academic leadership within schools and colleges that offer degree programs under CIP code 50 to examine one-, five-, and 10-year outcomes at the four-digit CIP level, given the sub-field earnings spread documented above, instead of relying on a single aggregate figure for the discipline as a whole. In our view, institutions may reasonably choose to sustain lower-earning programs because of the non-economic contributions they make to graduates, to the institution, and to the surrounding community; that is a decision for institutional leadership to make deliberately and transparently, and not one this analysis can settle on its own. Institutional prestige, regional cultural infrastructure, and enrollment considerations are, in our judgment, legitimate factors in that decision alongside earnings data.

This same logic extends to the growing role of Boards and Trustees in overseeing academic program portfolios, particularly as enrollment pressures make these reviews more frequent. We recommend that board education and training on academic program review explicitly cover the limitations of single-measure earnings comparisons described in this study, so that trustees evaluating a list of programs and associated earnings figures know to ask for the sub-field breakdown, the growth-trajectory comparison, and the non-wage evidence base alongside the headline number. A concrete next step for institutions is to pair any earnings dashboard presented to a Board with a short methodological note of the kind provided in this study’s Methods and Limitations sections, instead of presenting the dashboard alone. Where an institution’s arts programs are embedded in a regional cultural economy, we further recommend that institutional leadership document that regional value, for example in partnership with local chambers of commerce or tourism boards, as a companion data point to earnings, since it captures a form of value that wage records by design cannot.

Implications for Students and Families

Our findings also carry direct relevance for students and families weighing whether to pursue a degree in this field. This study confirms that, on average, Visual and Performing Arts graduates earn less than graduates in other bachelor's fields across the 10-year window examined here, consistent with patterns documented elsewhere in the literature (Woronkiewicz, 2024). Prior research also finds that non-wage factors, including career satisfaction, skill relevance, and identification with one's work, feature prominently in how arts graduates themselves describe career success (Miller et al., 2017). We think institutions bear a responsibility to share earnings data of this kind transparently with prospective students and families, as a routine part of advising and the matriculation process instead of only on request; that is a tangible step institutions can take now, independent of any further research. Pairing that data with information on entrepreneurship and business-skill coursework, which the literature associates with narrower earnings gaps for arts graduates (Makridis & Kuuskoski, 2024), would let families weigh not just the risk this study documents but also the curricular choices available to offset it.

Directions for Future Research

This study's limitations point toward specific next steps for future research rather than a general call for "more study." Three stand out. To begin, the divergence between the pooled All Cohorts estimate and the single 2010 Cohort estimate discussed above is directly testable: a multi-cohort design comparing several individual graduating classes that span recession and non-recession labor-market entry, for example cohorts entering in 2007, 2010, 2015, and 2019, would show whether Visual and Performing Arts graduates' growth trajectories are especially sensitive to entry-point macroeconomic conditions, instead of relying on a single cohort as this study does. A second angle is to investigate the portfolio-career measurement gap described above directly, by linking PSEO or comparable wage-record data to complementary sources that capture self-employment and freelance income, such as tax-based self-employment records where accessible, or survey-based sources like SNAAP, for the same graduate population. Finally, the sub-field heterogeneity finding could be disentangled from its two candidate explanations, measurement gaps versus curricular differences in entrepreneurial preparation, by comparing sub-fields with similar exposure to business and entrepreneurship coursework but different reliance on freelance work, or by replicating this design in other CIP codes with similarly high rates of nontraditional employment, such as journalism or architecture. Each of these designs is achievable with data infrastructure that already exists in most states that produce PSEO extracts, and none requires new primary data collection, a point worth emphasizing for other institutional researchers considering similar work: PSEO's value is not limited to the specific comparison reported in this study.



Conclusion

Two findings anchor this study, and both need to be stated together, not separately, to represent what the data show. Visual and Performing Arts graduates earn less than their non-arts peers across the 10-year period examined here, and their earnings, over that same period, grow at a rate comparable to, and by some measures favorable relative to, non-arts graduates. Reading either finding without the other risks a distorted picture. Reconciling them, together with the measurement issues, cohort-timing effects, and sub-field differences that complicate a simple headline number, has been the central work of the Discussion above.

We share the view, well established in the literature reviewed above, that societal engagement with the arts and humanities is linked to civic participation, cultural vitality, and quality of life that extends beyond what wage records can measure (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021; Lee et al., 2023). We do not present this as a finding of this study, since PSEO data cannot speak to it directly, but it is the premise that motivated us to examine these outcomes carefully instead of dismissing them, and we think institutional leaders evaluating these programs should weigh it explicitly alongside the earnings evidence reported here.

Beyond its substantive findings about Visual and Performing Arts earnings in particular, this study was designed to demonstrate what a more disciplined use of PSEO, and of administrative wage-record data more broadly, can offer institutional research. Reporting robustness checks alongside headline figures, being explicit about data suppression and cohort coverage, and disaggregating both the target population and the comparison group before treating either as uniform surfaced findings in this analysis that a single topline comparison would have missed entirely, including the size of the unnamed “other majors” remainder and the sub-field earnings spread within Visual and Performing Arts. In our reading, this approach generalizes well beyond CIP code 50: any program evaluated on a single earnings figure risks a conclusion that a more complete look at the same underlying data would not support.

Next Steps

For institutional researchers, the next step is methodological replication: apply the disaggregation and robustness-checking practices described above to other degree programs under review and pursue the multi-cohort and linked-data designs outlined above to test the cohort-timing and portfolio-career mechanisms this study can only describe indirectly.

For deans, provosts, and program administrators, the next step is procedural: build sub-field-level, multi-horizon earnings review into standing program review and accreditation cycles, instead of treating a single aggregate figure as sufficient grounds for decisions about a program’s future.

Boards, Trustees, and policymakers face a different kind of next step, changing what gets requested in the first place: ask for the growth-trajectory comparison and the sub-field breakdown alongside any

earnings dashboard, and treat non-wage evidence on skill transfer and community contribution as a required companion to wage data, not a substitute for it.

For students and families, the next step is transparency at the point of decision: institutions should share outcomes data of the kind reported here as a routine part of advising, paired with information on the entrepreneurship and business-skill coursework that the literature associates with a narrower earnings gap (Makridis & Kuuskoski, 2024).

Altogether, this study makes two contributions. The substantive one is that Visual and Performing Arts graduates' long-term earnings trajectories are more complex, and more favorable on some dimensions, than a single early-career figure suggests. The methodological one is that PSEO and comparable administrative wage data can support exactly this kind of nuanced, multi-year, sub-field-aware analysis, provided institutional researchers are willing to report the complications alongside the headline numbers. Both contributions point in the same direction, toward the more deliberate treatment of academic program value that this paper has argued for throughout.



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