

S.P.A.R

Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research

**Understanding the Role of Cultural Networks within a Creative Ecosystem:
A Canadian Case-Study**
Mary Blackstone, Sam Hage, and Ian McWilliams

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Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research

www2.uregina.ca/spar

E-mail: spar@uregina.ca

Phone: 306.337.3165

Fax: 306.585.5530

c/o: Department of Theatre

RC 271

Riddell Centre

University of Regina

Regina, Saskatchewan S4S 0A2

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For more information visit SPAR's homepage: www2.uregina.ca/spar or contact: spar@uregina.ca

*I come from a land that is harsh and unforgiving
Winter snows can kill you
And the summer burn you dry
When a change in the weather
Makes a difference to your living
You keep one eye on the banker
And another on the sky*

Connie Kaldor, *Harsh and Unforgiving* © Connie Kaldor and Word of Mouth publishing

Image: Terry Fenton, *Up Front*, Near Dundurn, Saskatchewan, 2014, Oil on panel, 24 x 39 in.

Introduction

In this song singer-song-writer Connie Kaldor conjures up the “harsh and unforgiving” environment of her native Saskatchewan which is the image that many people have of this western Canadian province. Yet historically if you are an artist this province has provided one of the warmest and most welcoming climates in North America. Since 1948 it has been home to the Saskatchewan Arts Board – the first publicly funded, arms-length arts agency in North America, which later served as a model for the Canada Council (at the national level). As a measure of the importance the public placed on the arts, even in very difficult economic times, the Arts Board assumed responsibility for developing training and funding opportunities for amateur and professional artists as well as fostering arts organisations in a wide range of disciplines in the arts and crafts.

North America’s First arms-length arts agency

The Saskatchewan Arts Board provides support to the arts in Saskatchewan: to artists, arts organizations and communities on behalf of the people of the province.



Since those days the province has added two more funding agencies to specifically address the creative industries and an even wider scope of cultural experience reflecting the province's heritage and multiculturalism. Until very recently, this support was made possible because of Saskatchewan's booming economy fuelled by an abundance of oil, gas and potash along with its agricultural strength. The boom also contributed to population increases which are ongoing in rural as well as urban centres and these plus a rapidly increasing indigenous population pushed the provincial population to over one million-- resulting in increased housing costs as well as a younger, more diverse population.

In the context of this shifting demographic and economic climate, the province's three major arts organizations--the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance, the Saskatchewan Arts Board and SaskCulture came together with the University of Regina in 2012 to form the Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research. While the partners had much information and data relating to arts organisations, their audiences and the spaces and programs they controlled, they lacked a good understanding of the position of artists within their communities and how those artists were connected with not only the other components of the arts ecology but also more complex cultural, social and economic dimensions of the broader ecosystem. With the immediate research objective of better understanding the role of artists in cultural networking and addressing the dearth of detailed data on how artists in the province work and develop networks in the process, SPAR launched its first research project, Understanding the Arts Ecology of Saskatchewan, in 2013 thanks to funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

SPAR – Partners

Formed in 2012 for research to support evidence-based programming and policy-making for the arts.

First Research Project:

Understanding the Arts Ecology of Saskatchewan

- funded by the SPAR partners and the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)*.



Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research



Anticipating John Holden's call for such detailed, place-based ecological studies by several years, SPAR developed survey instruments targeted at both artists and the public to begin addressing three basic questions: What is the nature of professional connections and networks forged by artists among themselves and with their community (broadly defined) and are these

connections contributing to a healthy and sustainable arts ecosystem as well as the cultural, social and economic dimensions of the provincial ecosystem?

Creative Ecologies: Basic Questions

- What is the nature of professional connections and networks forged by artists among themselves and with their community (or communities)?
- Are these connections contributing to
 1. a healthy and sustainable arts ecosystem?
 2. the cultural, social and economic dimensions of the provincial ecosystem?

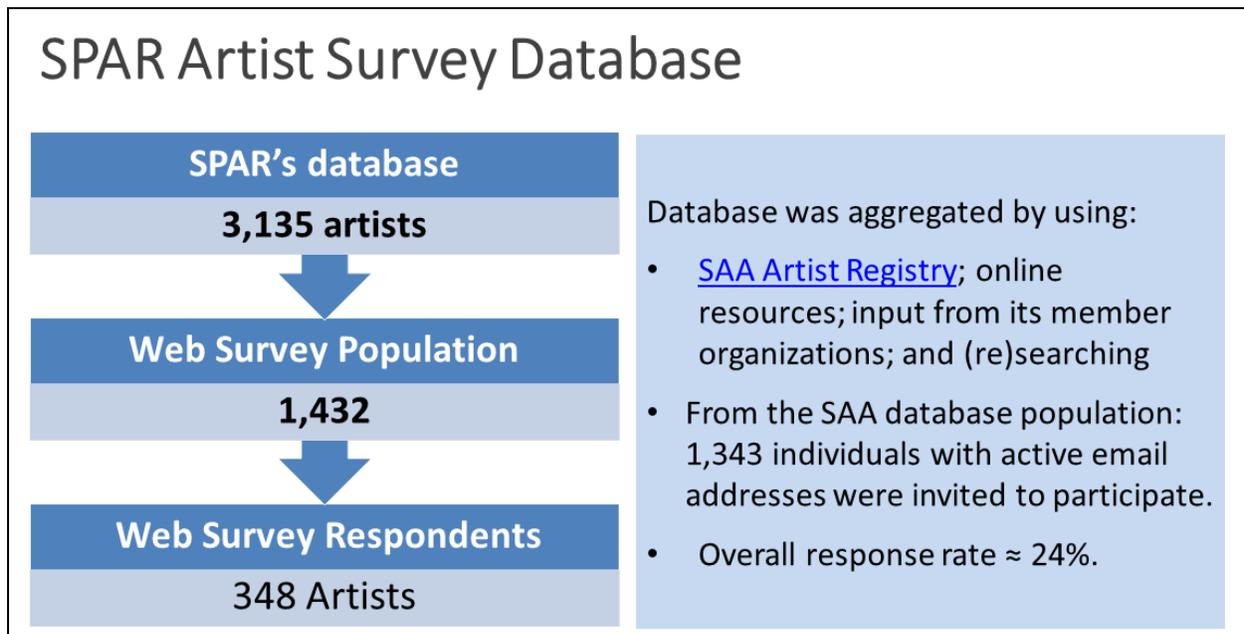


Creativity in the Community/Artists at Work
Photo: Courtesy of Michell Brownridge

Perhaps especially because we were undertaking the first ever comprehensive survey of provincial artists, the responses were many and substantial. The findings presented here and in the much longer paper published in the conference proceedings draw primarily from the artist surveys and follow up interviews and consultations. They are presented as an example of the type of information and analysis that can be valuable for policy makers and arts administrators as well as for theorists and scholars more generally concerned with creative economies, cultural ecosystems and related networks. The assumption that artists are interconnected within complex networks that also include other cultural workers and a broad range of individuals outside the arts sector in the artists' immediate and extended or virtual communities is central to a host of current theories and studies related to the arts and culture. However, surprisingly few scholars have undertaken artist-centred, primary studies that contextualize and test these theories against the practical realities of how such networks are formed, how they actually function, who composes them--or even if artists have access to such networks within a cultural ecosystem in a specific place and time.

Importance of Informal and Formal Networking

Drawing on an artist database of 3200 artists which was the first attempt to identify all provincial artists--SPAR invited a sample of just over 1300 to respond and nearly a quarter (348) of those artists did respond in great detail.



They ranked the relative importance of informal or formal networking to both their evolution as an artist and their ability to create or interpret work highly.

How Are Artists Positioned in the Creative Ecology?

Artists ranked networking/ informal connections as important to:

- 78% = overall evolution as an artist
- 62% = ability to create/interpret work



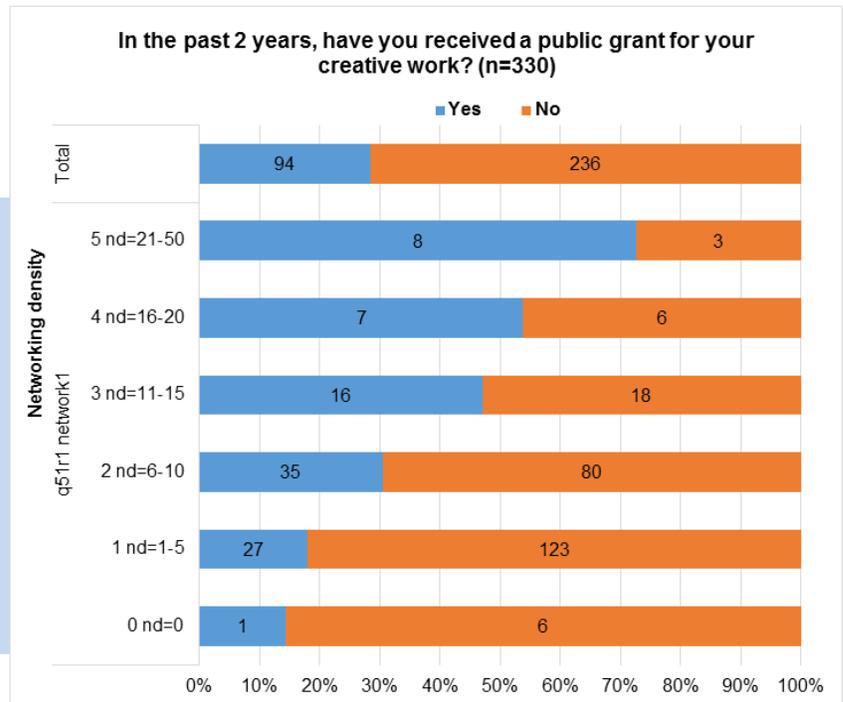
Creativity in the Community/Artists at Work
Photo: Courtesy of Matt Ramage

The survey also asked artists to provide specific information about the individuals, organisations, spaces, events, means of communication, etc. that helped to facilitate those connections. SPAR then analysed these responses to determine the artist's relative *network density*, within and beyond the arts. The survey also asked for details relating to income, grants, public and peer recognition, types of employment inside and outside the arts, etc. which enabled more complex analysis of the relative correlation between the degree of networking density and other variables. For instance, there was a nearly perfect correlation between high networking density and the receipt of a publicly funded grant in the past two years.

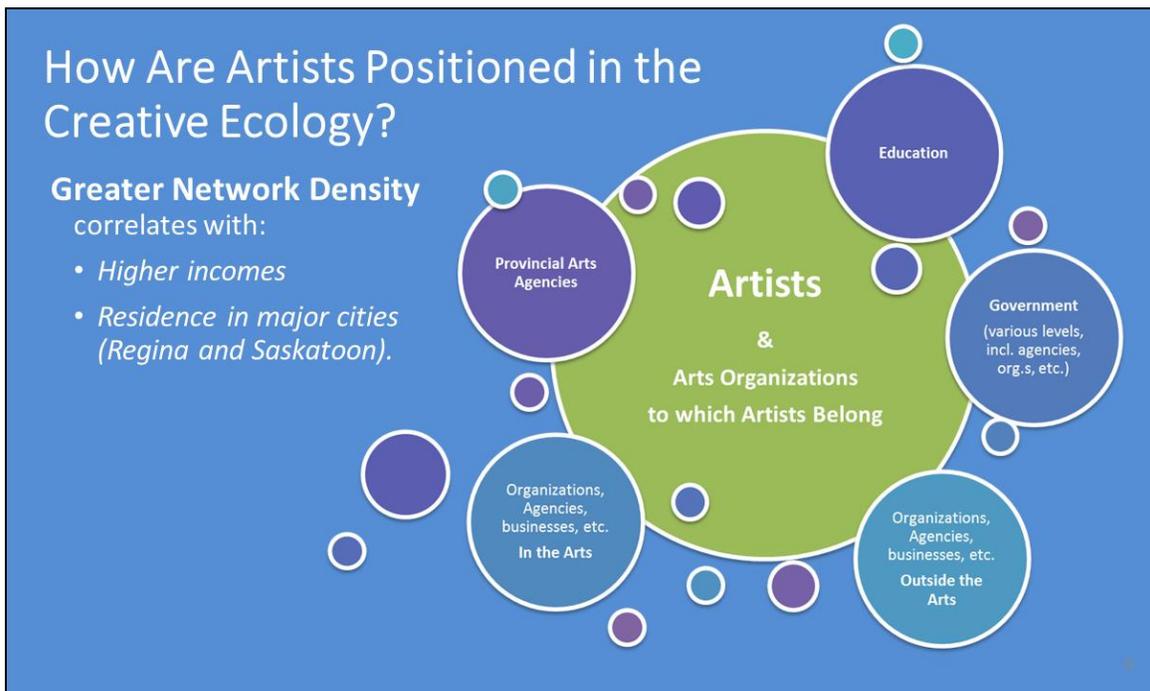
How Are Artists Positioned in the Creative Ecology?

Greater Network Density correlates with a higher *likelihood of having received a grant.*

28.5% of artist respondents recently received a **public grant for creative work.**



Similarly, both higher incomes and residence in one of the two urban centres were associated with stronger networking density.

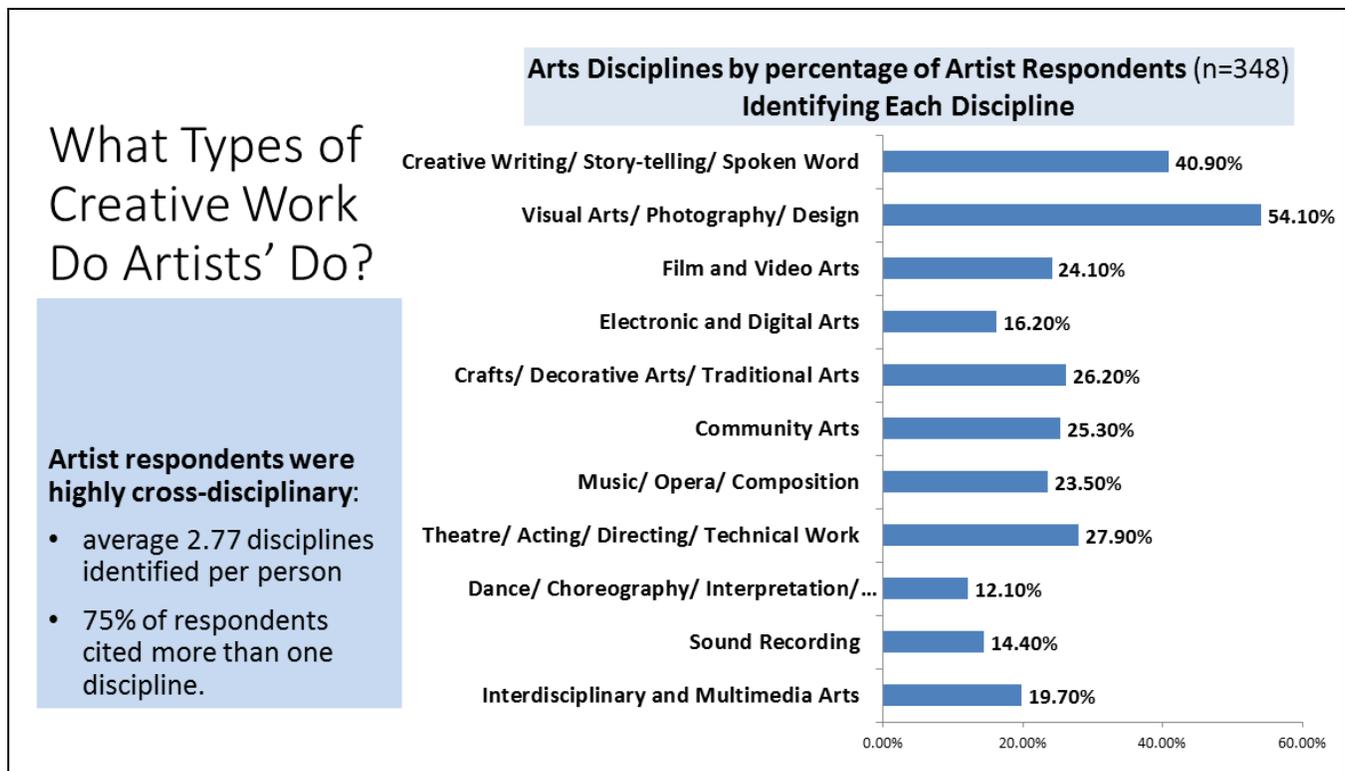


While a cause and effect relationship between networking and grant success, income or an urban environment cannot be assumed, there clearly is a correlation which suggests that the importance of networking overtly registered by survey respondents may be further supported by their responses to other questions.

The Nature and Facilitation of Artist Networks

Disciplinary and Cross-Disciplinary Connections

One of the most striking discoveries to come out of artist survey data was the overwhelmingly cross-disciplinary character of creative practice. Nearly 75% of respondents engaged in two or more out of nine general areas of creative work (Blackstone et. al., 2015a, p.11).



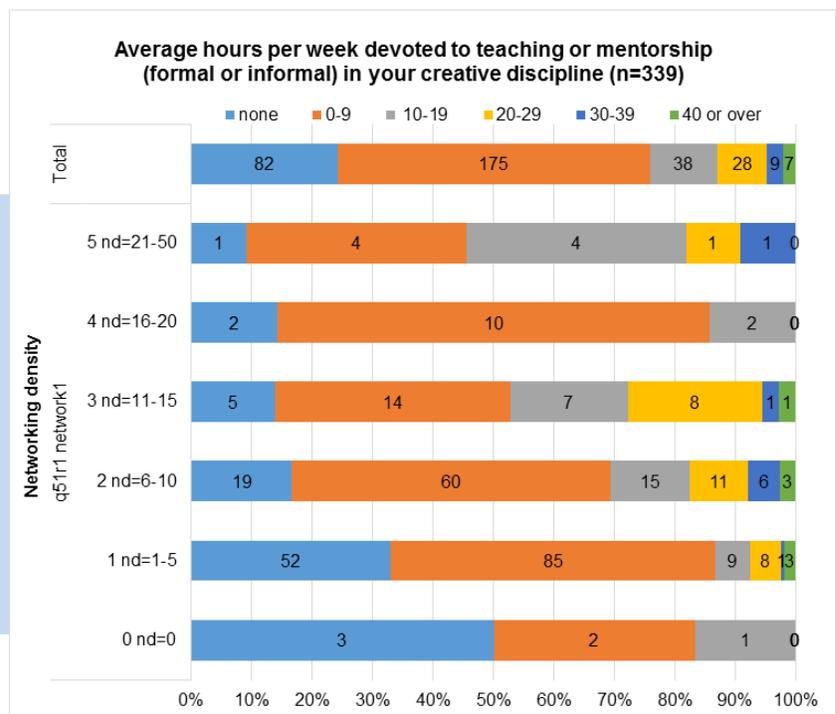
The range of organisations, agencies, institutions and/or businesses that had contributed to their evolution as an artist or the realization of their creative work further reinforced the disciplinary breadth of artist networks. In three open questions respondents could identify as many relationships as they wished ranging from formal, membership-based organisations in the arts; to other arts or cultural organisations; to any kind of entity outside the arts. Artists gave more than 1300 specific names which provided some small indication of the broader complexity of the networks composing the provincial arts ecosystem (Blackstone et. al., 2015a, p.19).

Educational Institutions and Facilities

A more unexpected discovery was the prominence that universities assumed in open responses. They were by far the most frequently cited organisations (Blackstone et. al., 2015a, p. 18-19)--even beyond the Arts Board, the primary funder for professional artists. Their importance should not be that surprising, though, given that over 70% of the respondents reported having at least one university degree. Although not necessarily related to a university or institutional context -- greater network density correlated with a higher number of hours devoted to teaching and mentoring.

How Are Artists Positioned in the Creative Ecology?

Greater Network Density correlates with a *higher number of hours devoted to teaching and mentoring.*



Conclusion

Although our findings remain in a formative stage, the benefits of such research to not only the immediate arts ecosystem but also arts administrators, policy makers, theorists and scholars further afield should be apparent. First, simply undertaking primary research that is informed by familiarity with a particular arts community and the questions that most need to be addressed there has revealed serious drawbacks to relying on secondary research data from sources like Statistics Canada which often uses unhelpful criteria that mitigate against the very knowledge and understanding being sought. Second, consulting directly with artists and the public to get a perspective on the arts community from the two most essential components of the creative process may be challenging and messy from a statistical standpoint, but artists and members of the public are eager to share critically important insights on the extent to which the cultural environment may be “harsh and unforgiving.” Third, using ecological approaches to examine arts and culture as ecosystems in a given place and time and, in particular, the networking that is taken as a given by scholars who talk about the creative economy as well as the creative or cultural ecology can further inform and interrogate such theories while also giving us new ways of seeing arts ecosystems, assessing their health and sustainability and developing an action plan to foster adaptive resilience that will ensure the ecosystem’s long term vitality. As we move forward to broaden this work into the entire Prairie region of Canada over the next 8 years, I invite colleagues interested in similar ecological studies to partner with us in comparing data and developing further methodology for what promises to be a productive field of research.

Benefits of Primary, Grassroots Research on Cultural Ecosystems

1. Place-based, arts-specific data and information.
2. Direct input and engagement of artists and the public.
3. Insights from comparisons of public and practitioner experience with current theory.

Image: Terry Fenton, *Up Front*, Near Dundurn, Saskatchewan, 2014, Oil on panel, 24 x 39 in.

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Contact Us:

Website: www2.uregina.ca/spar/

Email: spar@uregina.ca

Telephone: (306) 337-3165

Fax: 306-585-5530

Mailing Address:

c/o Department of Theatre
University of Regina
Regina, SK S4S 0A2

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