

UNDERSTANDING THE ARTS ECOLOGY OF SASKATCHEWAN:  
PUTTING ARTISTS AT THE CENTRE OF CULTURAL RESEARCH

Mary Blackstone, Ian McWilliams and Sam Hage

Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research

University of Regina

Regina, SK S4S 0A2

In the Fall of 2012 Saskatchewan's four major arts organizations along with the University of Regina came together to form the Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research (SPAR). The catalyst for this development was the increasing frustration experienced by the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance with respect to its ability to represent and advocate for artists and an arts community about which it had so little current and reliable information. Global statistics relating to the arts community at a national or international level can be very useful, but there was a strong feeling that they needed to be supported, augmented, and contextualized with comparable figures derived provincially and specific to the particular experience of artists working in an arts environment quite distinct from that of artists working in Toronto, Inuvik, California, London or Adelaide.

The province's two major arts funding agencies at the time, the Saskatchewan Arts Board and SaskCulture, shared this concern, and all three organizations felt that recent developments affecting the provincial arts community were making it increasingly important to undertake research that would give them a better and current understanding of their particular community. Motivating developments included the province's strong economy, new wealth, and increasing population due to multi-cultural immigration and high aboriginal birth rates. Other factors included the elimination of Saskatchewan's film employment tax credit which led to the collapse of the commercial film industry and the creation by the provincial government of Creative Saskatchewan (a granting agency focused on increasing the contribution by the arts and cultural industries to the provincial GDP).

The three arts organizations also made several decisions about the type of research they wanted to undertake. Although it was hoped that information could be developed that would ultimately put them in a better position for arts advocacy and making the case for stronger support for the arts by government, there was a clear consensus that first and foremost the

research should serve the arts organizations and artists to help them all better understand answers to some pretty fundamental questions:

- 1) Who are the province's artists?
- 2) How many are there overall and in what disciplines are they working?
- 3) What do they need to realize their creative goals and to earn a living?
- 4) Do they have access to what they need for their creative work?
- 5) How connected are they with other artists, arts organizations, educational facilities and their communities?
- 6) What is their income?
- 7) How healthy and sustainable is the provincial arts ecology and what kind of indicators should we use to determine that?
- 8) How much and in what ways does the Saskatchewan public value and participate in the arts?

Especially given the rapidly changing economic, demographic and cultural dynamics of the province, the arts organizations also agreed that they were not looking at a one or two-year study, but rather an ongoing commitment to substantial research that would give them a current and increasingly detailed understanding of the extent to which a strong and sustainable arts ecology is being achieved. In applying the concept of an ecology to the arts community the intention was not so much to assume that the arts currently are functioning as a completely integrated and sustainable system, but rather to engage artists at the grass roots in helping to identify what is working and what gaps and needs should be addressed to make the arts function more effectively as a sustainable ecology. It was agreed that artists stood to gain the most from this kind of research, and they should therefore be at the heart of the research from the beginning.

With these goals in mind the partner organizations sought out artist researchers at the University of Regina. Following up on the recommendations of an earlier study undertaken by Marnie Badham for the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance on arts indicators, these artist researchers drew together a highly multi-disciplinary research team including as well specialists in areas such as sociology, statistics, geography, economics, human justice, health studies, indigenous studies, public policy and prairie studies. At the same time, SPAR set up an advisory group called the Community of Understanding consisting of artists, arts patrons, and arts researchers working in comparable areas outside of Saskatchewan, as well as representatives from various levels of government and the heritage community.

Flashing forward to the spring of 2013 SPAR received a three-year, \$200,000 Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, an amount that was matched by a further \$214,000 in cash and in-kind commitments from the partners to launch SPAR's first research project: Understanding the Arts Ecology of Saskatchewan. The team began by trying to determine how many artists live in Saskatchewan, who they are and what arts disciplines they are involved with. The 2006 census had identified 3045 artists in Saskatchewan who spent more time at their art than at any other occupation, but the 2011 Household Survey reported just 2,625 artists.<sup>1</sup> That data provided a kind of baseline to work from, but we wanted to avoid the limitations of census reporting which does not identify individuals as artists if they find it necessary to work a majority of hours in another occupation like teaching. Our first step then involved setting up an electronic site where all Saskatchewan artists could register. A page on the website of the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance, which is an organization already known to most provincial artists, is home to the registry. For over a year all of the partner organizations actively promoted artist registration while also facilitating the preparation of lists of known provincial artists in order to double check and augment the list emerging from the registry. By May of 2014 we had a list of just over 3100 artists. Although we expected more provincial artists would continue to emerge, we then moved on to further stages of the research—a survey of provincial artists and a survey of the general public in the province. Initially a sample of 1343 artists received invitations to participate. A further 89 artists contacted SPAR wishing to register and participate during the survey period, and they were included in a second survey invitation. Participation in the online survey of the general public on the other hand was not by invitation, but rather generally promoted in the media and by the partner organizations for all Saskatchewan residents to participate.

Statistically, both surveys received a good response rate with 348 artists and 131 members of the general public participating, and even before analysis of the survey data we learned a lot about the value of situating the artist at the centre of our research. To begin with, some of the artist members of our Community of Understanding who were asked to provide input on the make-up and drafts of the surveys proved to be a pleasant surprise. The fact that

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Kelly Hill, *Methodological details regarding the National Household Survey and the Labour Force Survey* (May 2014), p. 10; [www.hillstrategies.com](http://www.hillstrategies.com); accessed October 4, 2014.

some artists simultaneously pursue other careers and interests became a research asset when it was discovered that some of our COU members had specific background or experience in statistics and social sciences research that was invaluable. Even artists without that kind of background were especially valuable in testing and responding to the surveys. Social scientists with experience in the construction of surveys were concerned that more than 40 questions and several hundred variables in the artist survey would make it so long and complex that our response rate would be statistically too low. But artists involved in the project pointed out that no survey of this kind had ever been conducted in the province--and that such a survey might not be done again for a long time. They had no serious difficulties completing the survey within 20 minutes and felt other artists would be willing to make that kind of investment as well.

The statistically strong response rate proved them correct, and the email response of one participant to her invitation summed up an attitude that came across loud and clear in the survey process: "After more than 60 years [presumably a reference to the founding of the Saskatchewan Arts Board] its about time they asked for artists' feedback." While this isn't an entirely fair assessment of the extent to which artist input has been historically solicited by provincial arts organizations, the comment is indicative of the eagerness of artists to provide input through a substantial and scientifically administered questionnaire. They understood that we were not simply looking for data to confirm advocacy arguments to external funders but rather looking for fundamental information that could lead to improved programs, policies and practices within the arts sector itself. Artists not only responded in good numbers, but they also had a high completion rate for each of the questions and many were very generous in providing lengthy and detailed responses to the open questions such that it will take some time for us to fully analyze and assimilate those contributions. In short, artists had a lot to tell us and provided abundant material for more qualitative follow-up in the focus groups and case studies which are the next stage of our research.

There is such a wealth of data resulting from our two surveys that we have only just begun to analyze it. For instance, we have a much clearer picture of the disciplinary break down of provincial artists as well as the high degree of cross over and collaboration that is occurring between them, but we've also learned that 44% of artists lack adequate opportunities for such collaboration or networking with other artists and over 60% lack opportunities for collaborating or networking with individuals, organizations or businesses outside the arts. We have some very

interesting information about the extent to which artists self-identify as professional, emerging or avocational artists which does not necessarily correspond with official criteria for professional status such as educational background, hours worked in creative practice or income from their practice. We have substantial information about the general public's level of participation in, support for, spending on and interest in various arts disciplines and the type of contact they have with artists. We also know that respondents with children reported a very high percentage who had participated in some art form with music and theatre being the two most popular. This brings me back to a focus on the last three of SPAR's fundamental research questions that I mentioned earlier.

Perhaps the most troubling statistic to emerge out of the surveys arises from the disconnect between the importance placed on artists and the arts by the general public and the level of income from creative work reported by artists. Over 90% of respondents from the general public ranked the work of artists and the arts as important or very important to all levels of education as well as cultural diversity. Over 80% ranked the arts as important or very important to knowledge and understanding of human behaviour; the formation of personal identity, values and beliefs; the exploration of social, economic and/or political issues; social cohesiveness and a community's shared sense of place, health, well-being and sustainability. Over 70% saw artists and the arts as important or very important to the economy and development of the creative and innovative capacity of business or other professionals. These statistics suggest that Saskatchewan residents are broadly in-line with the findings of a 2012 survey sponsored by the Department of Canadian Heritage which cited over 90% agreement with most statements ascribing similar importance to the arts and culture across the country.<sup>2</sup>

Although the extent to which they reported personally contributing as artists in these areas did not always equate with the ideal, Saskatchewan artists also reported similar or higher rankings of the general importance of artists and the arts. However, they told another story when reporting income from their creative practice. The relative importance of the artist's contribution to society is not reflected in the income they receive for that contribution. This general perception is of course widely held inside and outside the arts and often cited by parents or

---

<sup>2</sup> Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. for the Department of Canadian Heritage, *Arts and Heritage in Canada: Access and Availability Survey 2012* (2012); [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/poref/canadian\\_heritage/2012/0](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/poref/canadian_heritage/2012/0); summary accessed at [www.hillstrategies.com/content/arts-and-heritage-canada-access-and-availability-survey-2012](http://www.hillstrategies.com/content/arts-and-heritage-canada-access-and-availability-survey-2012); accessed October 4, 2014.

young people themselves as a reason for not pursuing a career in the arts, but the contrast created by the specific and current data attained through the surveys is striking within a study of the sustainability of the arts ecology of this particular province. 96.8% of artist respondents reported receiving income from their creative work, but 42.5% of artists reported an average income from their art practice of under \$5000 over the past 2 years, just over 34% earned between \$5000 and \$20,000 in the same period, only 14.4% earned between \$20,000 and \$40,000 and just over 9% earned \$40,000 or more. As calculated by our economist, Rose Olfert, this translates into an average artist income from their creative work of only \$15,380--a figure which corresponds almost exactly with the 2006 census figure for artist incomes in Saskatchewan.<sup>3</sup> When artist income from all sources as reported in the surveys is taken into account a Saskatchewan artist's average income rises to \$44,335. That's just about \$4000 less than the Canadian average of \$48,100 in 2010 and \$11,500 above the 2010 average wage for Canadian artists derived from Statistics Canada data. Rather than revealing Saskatchewan to be a mecca for artists hoping to raise their income, the differential between the average income for Saskatchewan and Canadian artists overall probably tells us more about the statistically depressing effect of not counting artists who pursue primary careers such as teaching. It also suggests the importance of artists and arts organizations who understand the dynamics of arts employment undertaking primary research at the local level to qualify and contextualize such oft cited and potentially misleading nationally derived statistics.

At a time when wages in Saskatchewan led the country by rising over 5% and average provincial income climbed above the national average to \$50,745, artist income lagged behind by nearly \$6500 and the average hourly wages of provincial workers in art, culture, recreation and sport dropped by 2.6%--the only occupational category not to experience an increase.<sup>4</sup> While there may be an economic boom in Saskatchewan, the evidence suggests that artists are not necessarily benefitting from the increased wealth.

Such disparities are also reflected in other provincial, national and North American studies, but additional factors further accentuate this disparity. Artist respondents reported devoting an average of 24.5 hours/week to their creative practice, an average of 8 hours/week to

<sup>3</sup> \$15,400 as cited by Kelly Hill, *Saskatchewan Arts & Culture Statistics and Data Gaps*, presentation at the University of Regina, March 2, 2013; accessed at [www.hillstrategies.com](http://www.hillstrategies.com); accessed October 4, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, *Average Hourly wages of employees by selected characteristics and occupation, unadjusted data, by province (monthly) (Saskatchewan)* [August 2013-August 2014]; [www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/labr69i-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/labr69i-eng.htm); accessed October 4, 2014

teaching or mentorship in a creative discipline and an average of 16 hours/week working outside the arts. Although artists made it clear there was considerable variation in the allocation of their work time from week to week, this adds up to an average work week of 48.5 hours in comparison with the average Saskatchewan work week of 38.8 hours drawn from 2012 Labour Force Survey estimates.<sup>5</sup> Further cause for pause derives from the exceptionally high levels of education attained by artists with over 33% reporting a graduate degree, over 38% reporting an undergraduate degree and 15% reporting other types of postsecondary credentials. In 2013 just over 18% of the Saskatchewan population as a whole held any university degree while just under 30% held a postsecondary certificate or diploma.<sup>6</sup>

Put simply, artists, who are exceptionally well educated and valued so highly as contributors to the social, economic and cultural well-being of the province, are working nearly 10 hours more/week for 87% of the average provincial income. Only 28.5% of respondents reported any kind of grant as part of their income in the past 2 years.

While most people involved in the arts in Saskatchewan were generally aware of the low levels of income for artists, the need for many of them to work at so-called “real jobs” outside the arts to make ends meet and the small number of grants available relative to the demand, the specific dimensions of the provincial challenge within the context of the more general national problem casts a shadow over the sustainability of Saskatchewan’s arts ecology and suggest the need for multiple approaches to addressing the problem within a comprehensive strategy. Creative Saskatchewan, the new agency funding marketing projects in the arts and cultural industries, may make a difference in artist income, but through upcoming focus groups and case studies we will be exploring a more robust array of sustainability indicators and other potential initiatives for strengthening our sustainability such as more encouragement and support for artists to apply for grants to Canada Council, which expends less on a per capita basis in Saskatchewan than any other province; more programs targeted at enhancing networking and collaborative opportunities with other artists and with businesses and individuals outside the arts to increase both the amount of creative work and artist income; and education and professional

---

<sup>5</sup> Rose Olfert; Artists’ Comparisons with some Provincial Benchmarks, and Artists’ contribution to the economy, report prepared by Rose Olfert for SPAR, 2014; Statistics Canada. *Table 282-0015 - Labour force survey estimates (LFS), by usual hours worked, main or all jobs, sex and age group, unadjusted for seasonality, monthly (persons unless otherwise noted)*, CANSIM (database). (accessed: 2014-11-06).

<sup>6</sup> Plan for 2014-2015, Ministry of Advanced Education, Government of Saskatchewan; [www.finance.gov.sk.ca/PlanningAndReporting/2014-15/AEPlan1415.pdf](http://www.finance.gov.sk.ca/PlanningAndReporting/2014-15/AEPlan1415.pdf); accessed October 3, 2015

development to address the 40% of artist respondents who indicated that neither they nor an agent regularly promote their creative work and skills. With nearly 47% of artist respondents 55 and over and only 18% below 35, addressing the earning and working conditions of provincial artists will be a critical factor in retaining and renewing the core of the arts ecology, but given the recent declines in enrolments and the resourcing of some post-secondary provincial programs in the Fine Arts this area will require attention as well. Perhaps not surprisingly given the high levels of education attained by artists, the province's postsecondary institutions and universities in general were frequently cited in open questions asking artists to identify organizations and institutions which had made major contributions to their development as an artist and/or the facilitation of their creative work.

A key discovery in SPAR's artist survey suggests that Saskatchewan's artists regard the university as a creative nexus, and practicing artists are both prepared and eager to engage in--even lead--cultural research that will help them understand and strengthen the sustainability of an arts ecology which also encompasses members of the general public who regard the arts as vital to both their personal well-being and the social and cultural fabric of their communities. Other data from our work so far has confirmed that especially in the current globalizing context of electronic exchanges and forums, no provincial arts ecology functions as a closed system. It must be seen as one of many nodes in a still more complex and interconnected network. Consequently, in a year's time SPAR intends to lead another application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, this time for a full Partnership Grant for \$2.5 million over seven years. We are actively looking for potential partners--artists, cultural researchers and arts organizations wanting to undertake comparable research--and I would welcome expressions of interest from individuals wishing to forge such a creative nexus.