

The Conservatory Syndrome

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Conservatory programs provide artists with everything they need to make art: space, supplies, and a community of peers who learn and grow together. The study of an art form requires this uniquely supportive environment to develop the craft and skills an artist needs to work professionally. But there are critical subjects artists need to learn that are sorely lacking from most conservatory programs.

As a young performer entering college, I believed that a conservatory would offer me superior training and provide me with the real world advice and professional guidance to succeed in the performing arts. After graduating from a renowned program in New York City, I found myself ready to make theater, but unprepared to conduct any business related to my work. My degree is a decade old, but I hear a similar story from countless Fractured Atlas members who are fresh out of college. Given the exorbitant cost of their training, many artists are feeling bitter about what they didn't learn in college.

This epidemic of artists who were never taught about business or financial matters is a result of "The Conservatory Syndrome." The stereotype of the clueless artist is upheld by training programs that lack a basic business curriculum. Worse, it manifests in the minds of students who assume that learning about those things isn't important because "they're artists." This has created a culture of exploitation for artists.

Artists complete their degree and enter a drastically different environment from their conservatories. They may be expertly trained and produce work of the highest quality, but they lack the basic business and production skills necessary to realize their visions. Finding studio space, raising money, gathering supplies, and managing staff are daunting challenges which many well-educated artists are not prepared to face.

If professional training programs do not provide the knowledge needed to successfully navigate the professional landscape, then we artists must seek it out. If our mentors cannot teach us what we need to survive, we have to educate ourselves.

Regardless of discipline, every artist should learn basic information about taxes, contract negotiations, personal finance, fundraising, marketing & promotion and networking. In my experience working closely with independent and emerging companies, I've seen that the artists who learn about business are the ones who succeed in achieving their goals.

In the hopes of curing the conservatory syndrome and to help develop your career or company, I offer three professional pledges for the artist to consider:

I will be responsible for my own career and I will conduct myself as a business professional.

Many artists are understandably intimidated by business; but if you avoid learning about it you only hurt yourself. Understanding it will protect your professional interests and give you tools for success. Be proactive and learn whatever is necessary to help you achieve your goals - seek out the existing resources available to you. You may not consider art to be fundamentally aligned with making money but the two are bedfellows here in the U.S.

I will seek the help of experts when I'm in unfamiliar territory.

This extends to contract negotiations, business etiquette, grant applications, tax returns and marketing campaigns. If you need professional advice, find it and be prepared to pay for it. Usually a small investment from a qualified professional can save you a lot of money down the road. If you don't like the advice you receive, ask around to peers and colleagues for their experience and referrals.

I will value my work in a monetary and a social sense.

Art possesses powerful influence and energy - don't discount this. The work of artists benefits U.S. citizens both socially and economically. Your work should do the same for you: it should generate revenue to pay for your services and make something creatively rewarding for your audience. A simple way to serve both masters is to think locally as much as possible. This can develop your audience, increase your revenue, improve your fundraising potential, and quite possibly change the world. Join advocacy efforts to promote the arts in your area, contact the politicians that represent you and make your concerns as a voter known. Imagine what artists could do if properly organized to engage the civic leadership and create social change.

Art continues to play a bigger role in the economic health of our county. Americans for the Arts just released its newest [*Arts & Economic Prosperity Study*](#) which reports that between 2000 and 2005, the arts and cultural industry grew by 24%, provided 5.7 million jobs, and generated \$166 billion in economic activity. Educating yourself about the basics of business is simply a requirement these days, and we artists are up to the challenge.

The Conservatory Syndrome exists because of a false stereotype that artists just don't "get it" and that understanding business isn't important. But artists have never been beholden to stereotypes. By learning some basic principles, we can take real ownership of our careers and our lives. It's our responsibility to do so.