



Focus Group Summary

2020



Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land we gather on, Moh'kinsstis, is the ancestral territory of the Siksikaitsitapi—the Blackfoot peoples—comprising the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani Nations, as well as Treaty 7 signatories, the Tsuut'ina Nation, and the Îyâxe Nakoda Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Wesley First Nations. Today this land is home to the Métis Nation of region 3 as well as many First Nations and Inuit peoples from across Turtle Island. We acknowledge that there has been art, music, dance, storytelling, and ceremony on this land since time immemorial, and it is in the spirit of this land and its people that we do our work.



Introduction

In the Summer/Fall of 2020, Calgary Arts Development conducted its Arts Professional Survey. This survey occurs every four years to monitor the health of the sector from the perspective of wages, professional development opportunities, and living and working conditions. Given that this survey was conducted in the midst of a pandemic, it was important to understand how COVID-19 affected the lives and livelihoods of those in the arts and culture sector. We realize that a survey can only say so much, so in Q1 and Q2 of 2021, under the facilitation of Tito Gomez, an Indigenous filmmaker and 2021 Trico Artist as Changemaker, we conducted two focus groups with a total of 15 participants to explore the following topics: savings and debt, CERB, and the impact of COVID-19. Since Calgary Arts Development is constantly learning, the questions were adjusted between the focus groups, but the general intent behind each question remained consistent. The arts professionals involved in each focus group gave their perspectives from a diverse set of disciplines. We thank all who participated in giving us deeper insights into the Calgary arts sector. Here is what we heard from community...

Question 1: Balancing Debt and Low Wages

Group One


QUESTION:

Lower pay, high turnover, and poor benefits have ensured that prior to COVID-19, wages in the Arts and Culture sector have stalled behind other sectors¹. In these conditions the debt load created from student loans would not be easily overcome by the wages produced in the arts sector. Based on this statement, what has been your experience in balancing debt and working in the arts?

Responses to this question described a mixture of pre-COVID or COVID-related experiences of wages in the arts. Amongst the diverse responses, two participants explicitly referenced student debt. Due to the necessity to pay back student loans, they opted for jobs outside the sector, and therefore, delayed entry into their preferred careers in the arts. One participant further explained that such a delayed entrance into the arts may have impacted their ability to access opportunities and resulted in gaps in their artistic development.

Freelancers in the group mentioned that their fees often fluctuated based on the budget of the project. One freelancer further described the snowball effects of losing bigger clients during the pandemic: having to downsize, lowering their fees, increased debt load, and working harder to find job opportunities. An additional contributor said that while they were busy before the pandemic, COVID has stopped all their potential activity. Along this line, another participant explained that gig work was how they invested into their practice, and with current restrictions they were unable to do so. While they produced an online show, the participant remarked that the overall experience was not the same.

1. *Low Pay in the Culture Sector Hurts Artists – and Audiences. Canadian Art 2018*



Finally, the last participant had just started their arts career prior to the pandemic, and therefore, COVID restrictions made it difficult to promote their work.

Group Two

QUESTION:

In looking at the Arts Professional Survey, we found many comments concerning the balancing act of low arts wages, with no or minimal benefits, and high debts (tuition costs, mortgages, credit cards etc.). What has been your experience in balancing debt and working in the arts?

In this group, responses were more focused on experiences of debt, although two individuals did discuss the prospect of saving. One participant recognized that given their mix of various debts, saving was not an option even before COVID, and COVID has heightened this fact. The other participant expressed trying to save each year, which served as a signifier of a good working year. They further added that discussions on savings, with individuals outside of the arts sector, can be difficult – possibly implying that comparing savings with those outside of the sector is difficult.

Regarding balancing finances by the end of the month, it is not exactly about “saving money” for this group as much as it is about making what you have stretch as far as possible given income variability. For one participant, credit was used as a strategy to compensate for inconsistency in either income or project financing. Credit card debt is never eliminated but paid down on when other financial needs are met. If there is any extra after all these expenses are paid, then the extra may be reinvested into their practice. This participant’s strategy does corroborate survey comments about the use of credit, and in the instance of having extra money, it being reinvested into their practice and equipment. Finally, the last person to answer this question said, “money is always a concern,” stating that money is continuously on their mind. Their financial strategy is to spend minimally and search for low-cost options rather than go into debt.

Although the two groups had different responses, in part due to changes in the question itself, the responses still conveyed the tension that comes with financing, debt, and savings in the arts sector. Additionally, and not surprisingly, COVID-19 has impacted all these aspects. Responses to this question in **group one** were a mix of pre-COVID or COVID-related experiences with **making a wage**. Responses to this question in **group two** were around **experiences with debt** more generally – not COVID. Still, two participants did discuss the prospect of saving money. They remarked that it is not exactly about “saving money” per say, it is about making finances stretch as far as possible given inconsistency of their income sources.

Question 2: Self-Employment

Group One

QUESTION:

We have heard from some artists that they don't immediately consider or realize that they are self-employed or gig workers, even if they meet CRA or EI standards of self-employment. Is this true? Why is that?

Participants expressed that they do see themselves as self-employed; nonetheless it is a process they figured out along the way. According to group one, this process usually happened through interactions with fellow workers or internet searches. One participant commented on their use of the CRA website for advice on doing their taxes and pursuing help from a tax professional. The discussion then moved to the need for tax resources. We heard that for many artists doing their own taxes can be intimidating.

Follow-up questions were then asked: "Would it be helpful to have a workshop around taxes and employment? How would that be helpful?" The group agreed upon the necessity for a workshop specializing in artistic business. More specifically, the participants addressed the need for further knowledge on the following topics: (i) discerning the difference between the various categories of self-employment, (ii) learning about deductibles, and (iii) understanding limited liability companies.

When discussing how such knowledge might currently be obtained, one person explained that they have looked for courses online before. However, the courses they have found were primarily geared towards regular business.

Group Two

QUESTION:

In your arts practice, would you consider yourself self-employed? How did you figure out the ins and outs of self-employment? What are some of the things you know now that you wished you knew at the beginning of your career about self-employment?

What are the pros and cons of being self-employed?

The cons that came out of this conversation were:

- ◆ The inconsistency of work
- ◆ Lack of EI
- ◆ Lack of benefits

One interesting point related to the inconsistency of work. Self-employment (7 out of 8 participants were self-employed) is less of an option and more of a necessity because stable arts jobs are hard to come by in Calgary. Another point was raised regarding benefits by a participant who previously worked in a bigger organization and is now self-employed. The participant discussed the role of unions; they could be a better source of help and resources for the self-employed. They have noticed since the pandemic a big representational gap in this way.

A COVID related con, cited by one individual, was that their schedule had been full until summer of 2020. When the pandemic hit, all their contracts were cancelled overnight. Given that there is generally little provision for the self-employed, there was nowhere for them to turn for either mental or financial support in the beginning of the pandemic.² For those who were eligible, CERB had given a reprieve. The group's comments regarding CERB do match survey results, which mentioned that CERB had been the most stable income they had ever received. Thereby, CERB positively affected the ability of some arts professionals to manage money (expenses, reinvestment, and debt).

The pros that came out of the conversation were:

- ◆ The flexibility
- ◆ The ability to work with diverse groups

Now, if you could go back to the start of your career, what would you do differently?

Two people responded to this question. The first spoke of sticking to the rules and trodden path more in the beginning and listening to the advice of those who had gone before them. Instead of jumping into the deep end as they did, they wished they had a few more business skills. The second respondent said they may not have gone to art school. They expressed issues with the gaps in what is taught versus what is needed to survive as an artist, the structure of enrollment and the bias thereof (they referenced nepotism) that encouraged an environment where only a few could succeed, and finally the debt incurred afterward.

A follow up question was then asked based on this last response: "do you find that having skills outside of your artistic discipline help to ground your everyday artistic practice?"

There was agreement that school does not equip students for the realities of the sector itself and the arts as a profession. Given this fact, there is a general worry for artists coming out of school now. One person raised the point that your administrative skills must be on par with your artistic skills to survive the sector, and administrative skills are not really taught in school. Adding to these observations, another person said being unprepared in a city like Calgary, where there has not been a tradition of support for the arts, can affect your mental health and self-worth, which is further complicated while trying to look for work and manage finances.

2. It should be noted that the participant did later receive some funding from the Calgary Arts Development Emergency Grant and CERB and they expressed gratitude for these funds.

The slight changes in how this question was addressed have garnered some differing responses between the two groups. The first group was asked about whether or not they considered themselves self-employed. This question was asked because we have heard that some do not consider themselves as self-employed since their work is a service to the community. In the second iteration, based upon the conversations in focus group one, participants clearly knew they were self-employed, and the question was altered slightly. All in all, the **first group's** primary focus was on the **struggle to find accurate tax information** related to their lines of work. More specifically, the struggle to find self-employment information tailored to the arts. The **second group** delved further into **the realities of being self-employed and the lessons learned**.

Question 3: Government Resources and Self-Employment

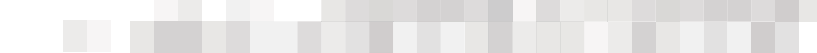
Group One

QUESTION:

The government's lack of understanding of self-employment in the gig economy has meant that arts workers who could have benefited from either CERB or CRB did not. Given that some artists did not receive CERB, what should the government know more about self-employment or contract work in the gig economy?

While only one participant discussed this, it is an important point: all levels of government need to support the roots of the system more, not just the bigger organizations and projects as smaller projects are a crucial part of placemaking. They spoke about the need to understand how these smaller roles (freelancers, sole proprietors, etc.) affect the system. This person also spoke about the importance of communicating to Canadians that they are already great lovers of art; so, it is worth electing officials that support arts directly.

The theme of Universal Basic Income (UBI) was potent among all responses. Related to the need for UBI, the group expressed that all levels of government need an understanding of the unpaid/ underpaid work that takes place in the gig economy. Far more unaccounted for work is involved in creating and producing a project, as opposed to a job with set hours; henceforth, producing more work for less pay. A suggestion was made to create a certification to recognize this unpaid/ underpaid work. Another participant believed in the need for UBI because it would allow for more flexibility in other aspects of their arts work. Furthermore, UBI could also alleviate people's stress due to the flexibility it fosters. Their suggestion was to incentivize sole proprietorship by having a tax credit. Moreover, one participant contributed that they have not had health care for years, and even a small UBI would help them make health care more accessible. This same participant also commented that a UBI would also mean that artists would not have to leave the city to grow; they could stay and feed into their communities.



Thereby, potentially growing the arts sector in Calgary. These insights support comments made in the Arts Professional Survey about the impact that CERB has had on arts workers. Its allowance for flexibility, therefore, provided more time for arts practice, paying debt, reinvesting in arts activity, and having less stress.

Group Two

QUESTION:

The government's minimal understanding of self-employment in the gig economy has meant that arts workers who could have benefited from either CERB or CRB did not. What should the government know more about self-employment or contract work in the gig economy?

CERB was the focus of discussion in this group. One person stressed that the CERB application did not account for the reality that when opportunities arise you must take them; so, the periods of inactivity necessary and the timelines for employment for CERB eligibility were unreasonable. Another participant brought up that the government needed to encourage diversity in the arts, so diverse cultures see themselves and want to take part. If the government encourages art, then the Canadians will as well (circling back to a point stated previously in group one). With all these perspectives in mind, the last individual said that artists need protections in the form of social benefits, daycare accommodations, and insurance. Traditionally, the government has not addressed these needs. There also needs to be a recognition of the diversity of forms in the arts, so as not to repeat the hierarchy of "value (with regard to the public arts with more "value" tend to have more access to protections)" that is already present in the sector. Like the previous group there was agreement on the need for UBI, and the importance that it would only encourage more artistic activity not less. UBI-like programs such as CERB, in this group, has given people relief from financial inconsistency.

The **first group had suggestions for interventions** like a tax credit for the sole proprietorship. Whereas the **second group discussed what government at all levels needed to understand about how self-employment works in the arts**. Further, both groups wanted government to know citizens only care in as much as the government decides to invest in the arts. Between the groups, there was a lot of agreement on the positive impact CERB has had, and the possibilities of a future Universal Basic Income (UBI). There was understanding between the groups that UBI would be reinvested into the sector by having more art created. However, one person from the **second group** did mention an issue with CERB application eligibility.

Question 4: Non-Arts Employment

Group One

QUESTION:

Given the uncertainty of the times (which at the time of the focus groups included the second wave, vaccine issues, and uncertainty over reopening) and the industry, arts professionals may have to start to look outside the industry for work; with some even considering leaving the arts entirely. Is anyone looking for work either in the arts or elsewhere? What are some of the challenges in looking for work right now?

Even before the pandemic one person voiced that they have considered leaving the sector multiple times to do something “more reliable.” They shared that their discipline provides transferable skills to both corporate and artistic settings. Furthermore, they mentioned that it was hard to balance their desire for artistic work, in comparison to the accessibility of corporate opportunities. Another individual spoke of already having a non-arts part-time job and liked the variety it gave. Their job was casual enough to give them the ability to create. On the other hand, others expressed concern about discerning the best option: to either wait out the pandemic, to try to create and hustle, or to work a less appealing job to make ends meet. Still, further tensions were voiced. The first was around the possibility of changing direction and leaving the arts sector entirely, and the second was that working a day-job would take away from creation time. Outside of these pressures another conversation arose on applying for non-arts jobs. Frustrations were articulated over the lack of means (e.g., certifications or ‘piece of paper’) to validate skills obtained in the arts sector, which may be valuable to other sectors. Thus, it can be difficult to demonstrate competency for these non-arts jobs. Conversely, some also expressed concern over the incompatibility of their skill-sets and resumé experience with current job offerings. For those who obtained it, CERB aided during this transitional time as many arts professionals considered next career steps.

A follow up question was then asked, “what are the challenges in looking for work?”

There were worries about getting sick as a result of working, or the challenges of working on smaller projects (if they had the opportunity between lockdowns) where protocol adherence was not as strict. The pandemic made it hard to work because, in many cases, it became a choice between being paid and compromising personal safety or not being paid but potentially more protected from COVID.

Lacking required experience for non-arts jobs being posted was another challenge in looking for work. This is in part because some have been in the arts sector for so long that they feel ill-equipped for work in other sectors.³ In this discussion, the ‘piece of paper’ theme was highlighted the most. Hence, ‘pieces

3. Interestingly, this is the opposite side of the coin to those who mentioned in question one, that delayed entry into the arts was a deficit.

of paper' created an intimidation factor in looking for a job when everyone else (i.e., people with more related qualifications) was looking for a job. The theme that working in the arts sector for so long could potentially make people less qualified for other sectors was also reflected in the survey comments.

Another follow up question was asked, "do you think that you have to think in two ways now: get something that puts food on the table and something that builds to something else – do you see that there is more a need for that now (due to the pandemic)?"

One participant explained that there has always been a need to think like this even before the pandemic. Less meaningful work paid the bills, and meaningful work usually paid poorly. Conversely, someone else described how hard it was to even think of seeking employment in this way (ie., seeking work just to meet basic needs); that is, they expressed concern over the potential for self-censorship as a result of not being one's own boss and working with people who do not share your values. For them, the strategy of working in this way was inconceivable.

A final follow up question was asked to clarify the extant threshold for participants before seeking out non-arts employment, comparing a pre COVID threshold vs pandemic driven threshold: "before COVID to now, do you think you are closer to that threshold?"

Answers to this question range from: the threshold remained the same, anxious in taking work, and yes close to it. For some, the challenge during the pandemic was to be innovative. For others, there is a level of risk involved in working, because working on certain projects could increase their exposure to COVID.⁴

Group Two

QUESTION:

Is anyone looking for work either in the arts or somewhere else? In some of the comments we received in our survey, some are even considering leaving the arts entirely. What are some of the challenges in looking for work right now?

Responses varied from observations that customer service jobs, like Tim Hortons, are always on the backburner to the potential of taking on smaller adjacently aligned jobs related to their practice.

A related follow up question was then asked about tension between working in the arts and the reality of trying to find a job outside the arts, which they may not be prepared for. This question was asked based on insights from group one's discussion.

4. It is important to note that the threshold, in seeking non-arts work or less meaningful arts work, is also dependent on other factors like eligibility for CERB, and the duration in how long it has been since someone last worked.

For one person, the tension is between two issues. First, looking for work outside the sector and the need for recertification (they were trying to go back into school at the time of the focus group). And, second, the reality of this being a necessity due to the inconsistency in obtaining sustainable arts work in Calgary, and furthermore, the financial prospects of the city itself. These factors made it daunting to know where to start in looking for non-arts work, especially in trying to write a resumé. Even so, this participant did mention that in their discipline, there can be bias in looking for work outside the arts; an observation that implies that non-arts work can affect credibility as an artist, making the pursuit even more difficult.

Another commented on the challenges faced in commercializing one's work and the increased intellectual property theft since the start of the pandemic. This has affected people's mental health and self-worth, and subsequently encouraged artists to look elsewhere for work for the time being. When asked if any would consider leaving the arts, answers ranged from a flat out 'no' to 'it's complicated.' Interestingly, one participant shared that their partner did leave the arts for a more stable occupation.

A final follow up question was asked, "what are some of the challenges in looking for work these days?"

The problematic nature of online performance and changes in restrictions were the main takeaways from the conversation. Online performances were found to be undesirable for those who had tried it. Many came away from the experience fatigued and noticed that the quality was not the same. With regard to the restrictions, if a window of opportunity for performance was found, it was often postponed or cancelled. One person remarked that there had been more opportunities for funding because of such cancellations. Yet, with restriction changes, these projects were often canceled anyway. Another individual in the group remarked that they were almost able to have a gig, but it was shut down hours before the performance. Finally, there was one reference to the problematic nature of grant writing for projects during the pandemic. That is, writing grants in an unstable environment due to changing restrictions made it difficult to set plans, and in turn, the process of grant writing was much harder.

It has always been difficult to find work in the arts, but the pandemic has intensified pressure around working and looking for work. Anxiety arose when considering the possibility of looking for work outside the arts. On one side, it is about the impracticality/ practicality of matching their specialized skill sets. On the other, it is about leaving a sector they have worked hard to be in. Yet, in both groups there is a desire to stay in the arts with only one in either group really considering finding work in other sectors. The **first group's** discussion focused on **the challenges of working**; and in the **second group**, there was more mention of **the changing health restrictions** and how that has **impacted their ability to work**.

Question 5: Impacts on Arts Practice

The final question remained unchanged between the two groups:

How has 2020 affected your personal art practice?

In group one, there were both positive and negative observations shared, and words like “rest, more time, slowed down” occurred through multiple responses. On the positive side, time and CERB had given some the ability to reflect on what they want to do with their practice (these responses implied that prior to pandemic there was more filler work for some, which was paid but not fulfilling work). Time had also given some more space to work more on their respective projects. The equity issues driven home in the pandemic furthermore provided some the creative drive to deepen community investment by giving back. On the negative side, the pandemic produced stress. People were not able to meet or network under normal conditions, which simultaneously affected their work prospects and their mental wellbeing. The cancellation of in-person shows and performances also resulted in a similar phenomenon. One participant in this group brought up not being social media savvy, so when everything went online it was harder to promote their work. At the same time, CERB had also given them the ability to focus on their next project. Loss was also mentioned in group one. There is a real possibility that trusted venues may not survive this, and the size of the community would be smaller. These issues were consistent across both groups.

In group two, there was ample discussion of cancellation and work complication. Performances and shows had been cancelled, and people have had to move home. When there was opportunity to work it was either: (i) an online offering which, for some, was exhausting and disconnected and often meant less successful collaborative efforts online or (ii) cancelled hours before the show. One instance of a successful performance was mentioned. An individual was able to work because the project was not able to access the touring performers it planned on, which made them feel like a last resort. Still, the individual took the opportunity because they needed the money. Intriguingly, another participant mentioned that the circumstances of the pandemic had given some artists the potential to be paid more. They explained that a grant covers a variety of expenses, which were not able to proceed during the restrictions and so, the extra financing went to the artists instead.

As in group one, there was a small discussion of creativity and time. People found that there was an initial drive for personal creativity for creativity’s sake. One contributor, however, noticed the impact of the loss of in-person, live performance. Without a set performance, it was challenging to have the drive to keep practicing, and that caused even more self-reflection for this participant (possibly implying that without a defined end they needed to rethink the purpose of the activity itself). For another participant, they noted an ironic twist in the pandemic; because they were working less, they were able to put their full effort into creative projects.

In group one, there were both positives and negatives highlighted for this question. **On the positive side**, time and CERB had given some the ability to reflect on what they actually want to do with their practice. **On the negative side** the pandemic has produced stress. **In group two** there was discussion of **cancellation, and work complication**. Performances and shows had been cancelled, and people have had to move home. When there was some opportunity to work it was either online or distanced and in-person. An online performance, for the focus group members, was exhausting and disconnected. One participant did do an online collaboration but said that the end product would have been better if it were in-person. For another participant they had an in-person opportunity, but it was cancelled hours before the show.

Question 6: Bartering for Income

This question also remained unchanged between the focus groups.

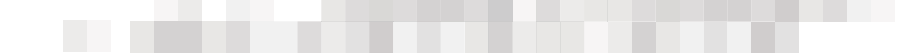
QUESTION:

In your work, have you been offered goods for your work besides money? Without naming names, please explain.

The more general response from group one is that sometimes exposure work is necessary for the possibility of paid work for newer artists. Artists do barter or trade goods and services, but there is a stipulation - within community along horizontal lines of relationship (there is some indication that what is bartered changes based on the industry). Bartering or trade does help in the production of community. Possibly, this is in relation to transactions being based on equivalent exchange. Negotiation happens with clients based on contracts and the budgets of said clients. If the client has budget constraints, then one starts to see things like partial payment and a service top-up to create full payment; however, this is based in the participant's relationship with the client. It was also highlighted that it is frustrating when clients want to barter rather than pay, not understanding the worth of the service being provided.

A follow up question was asked on bartering and community development, "do you find bartering within community creates community? Have you had to barter with clients?"

Most participants agreed that bartering does strengthen community through shared knowledge, skill transfer, equipment, and the strengthening of bonds. This strengthening typically occurs when standards of the community ensure a balance of favours given and favours repaid. Participants expressed that the relationship typically differs with clients; there is a negotiation of contract. Generally, participants agreed that if someone who could pay asks for free work, the answer should be no.



A final question was asked on whether bartering is perceived as an insult, “do you find it (bartering) sometimes insulting at times how people barter for goods and services?”

One answer given was: yes, it is insulting. More needs to be done to understand the value of the work put into the service given. For someone else, lowering rates is dependent on their personal interest in the project and the budget of the client. Yet, for another participant payment in exposure work is helpful and necessary because of the stage they are at in their career, saying no is not an option.

This question was responded to primarily by **focus group one**. In **group two**, there was very little conversation around this question. However, there was mention of being low-balled and that the experience was worse than being bartered with. This sentiment seems to be in line with the group one response to the last follow up question.



Reflections

In comparing the questions asked, both sets had their merit, however, the second set were clearer. The original questions were created based on the various comments made in the Arts Professional Survey. They were internally reviewed but needed to be further refined after the initial focus group. This was to ensure that the questions were more conversational in nature, but the focus remained the same. From a data perspective, we do realize that changes in questions do change the responses.

Nevertheless, the information gathered from both sets of questions does help give some insight into the impact an intervention like CERB has had. Yet, it is important to state that although CERB has been the most stable income some have received (this was a literal comment in the survey and reiterated by some of the respondents), not everyone was eligible to receive it. This has been reaffirmed in our conversations, the survey itself, and it is known more broadly to be true in the community. The responses also shed some light on the local effects of a worldwide pandemic. Rolling shutdowns and limitations on gathering have had an impact on the ability to present work, or even have a presentation plan due to continuous uncertainty. Because of the pandemic and the resulting restrictions, we do not know what will be left in terms of venues, community spaces, and most importantly, people.

The conversations also provided insights into not only the working lives of the participants, but also the difficulty of working in Calgary. They spoke to the difficulty in establishing savings because of transiency in income opportunities. Moreover, being self-employed and having to figure out one's own taxes is not easy - especially when the government's understanding of the nature of employment and work is antiquated. On top of this, many face the extant struggle of having to find, what some survey comments mention, as "a day-job."

For our next focus group, we intend to have a greater mix of arts occupations outside of professional artists. This time our focus groups were made up of a diverse set of artists, which means our findings are primarily from an artist-based perspective. We acknowledge that the arts ecosystem includes roles other than artist, and so, it would be beneficial to broaden our focus groups on two related levels: (i) to expand our personal knowledge base as a learning organization, and (ii) to see the impact of different factors (i.e. pandemic or CERB) from various parts within the system.



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