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The Business of Art, The Art of Business

Harvard artists find a third way between consulting and creativity



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By [RICHARD S. BECK](#) and [ALEXANDER B. FABRY](#)

Crimson Staff Writers

“Selling out” is a complicated process. For some artists, merely succeeding is equivalent to betraying your roots. For others, it’s what you do with your success that counts.

“I’m blowin’ up like you thought I would,” the Notorious B.I.G. rapped on the classic track, “Juicy.” “Call the crib, same number, same hood / It’s all good.” Biggie knew that he would only be seen as a sell-out if he didn’t give back to the community he came from.

You may think comparing Harvard students to hard-knock cases from Brooklyn is like comparing apples and oranges, but many members of Harvard’s artistic elite face the same choice as the late Biggie Smalls.


Facing the prospect of scraping by on an artist’s salary, non-profit or arts-related consulting can be an attractive—if unconventional—middle ground.

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THE HAPPY MEDIUM

So far this year, 42 percent of all job applicants going through the Office of Career Services (OCS) at Harvard have applied to consulting firms, while financial services and investment banking each make up 27 percent, according to William Wright-Swadel, the director of the OCS.

That consulting is a popular career choice is not news to anyone. But the positions aren't always what you'd expect.

When Raja G. Haddad '05 left Harvard, he was an important member of the university's artistic community. He was president of the Signet Society, a published poet, and co-founder of the Cinematic, Harvard's student-run film journal.

But when he returned to Harvard Square's Brattle Theater two weeks ago, it wasn't as a visiting director or journalist. He came as an employee of Katzenbach Partners LLP, a New York-based consulting firm.

Haddad coordinated a brainstorming session at which Harvard students discussed ways to keep the doors open at the financially troubled theatre.

He says his ties to the Brattle are strong. "I wanted to see if the Brattle had anything they wanted help with," he says. "Then this opportunity came about, and we just went with it."

Katharine P. Eldridge '07 participated in the Brattle's brainstorming session. She is looking to go into non-profit consulting when she graduates in the spring.

"While you can donate or volunteer, those hours can sometimes be better spent making an organization more efficient overall," Eldridge says.

Money is pouring into non-profit organizations, and Eldridge says consultants can give vital advice on managing it.

"Organizations like the [Bill and Melinda] Gates Foundation are moving non-profits towards a more corporate model," Eldridge says. Museums and other cultural institutions having been adopting ideas from the business world for decades.

Eldridge says she has trouble getting excited about for-profit consulting projects, but she finds the non-profit niche very appealing.

"I think it's a happy medium," she says. "I feel like I'm making a difference. That's such an awful phrase, but I feel like I'm going to better the world instead of just increasing revenue."

CAUTIOUS ACCEPTANCE

Students like Eldridge are finding that opportunities to "better the world" through consulting are increasing.

Non-profits and cultural institutions are increasingly turning to outside consultants for advice on everything from museum membership and advertising to multi-million dollar expansions, according to David Resnicow, president and founder of New York-based consulting firm Resnicow Schroeder Associates.

He has worked with the Museum of Modern Art, the Vatican, and the American Museum of Natural History, and his firm is currently involved with the Harvard University Art Museums.

"At first, there was resistance and suspicion of companies like ours, since we apply practices from the commercial world to the non-profit world," says Resnicow, who founded his company 14 years ago.

"Slowly, surely, we found people who were willing to adapt commercial, professional practices, while understanding that non-profits are there for a different reason," he says.

"If you care about the arts, it's a very rewarding job," he adds. "Our company has a mission, to

enhance the profile and place of culture in society, to integrate it into the community,” Resnicow says.

IDEALISM IN THE REAL WORLD

Ned Hinkle, the Creative Director for the Brattle Theater, says the Oct. 11 brainstorming session event was designed to help out the theatre, but also aid the Katzenbach group in one of the primary goals for any consulting firm: recruitment.

“[Katzenbach] came to us looking for a venue to do a recruitment event, but because the University puts restraints on where you can do your sessions, they couldn’t do one here,” Hinkle says.

Katzenbach offered to organize the session for the Brattle, which was advertised both to arts groups on campus and to potential consultants. It was an informal recruiting session, in a way. “I guess in some ways it’s sort of like an audition for [Katzenbach],” Hinkle says.

Gretchen Anderson, who leads Katzenbach’s non-profit consulting efforts, says such arrangements are not uncommon.

“We have committed as a firm to doing a certain amount of consulting every year at reduced fees,” Anderson says. “It’s not something that’s contributing to the bottom line revenue of the firm.”

Roughly 50 people attended the event. Haddad says the students were divided into four discussion groups.

“The first one was [about] strategic partnerships in the industry, and the second was maximizing relevance to a target audience,” Haddad says. “We took the 18 to 25 demographic and tried to figure out what we can do to get that group into the theatre.”

Haddad says the other two groups discussed ways to attract donors and how the Brattle can distinguish the movie-going experience from a night at home with a DVD.

Eldridge says her group focused on reaching out to college students.

“We talked about publicity, how most people don’t even know that the Brattle exists,” Eldridge recalls. She says her group suggested that the Brattle use facebook.com to communicate with students.

Eldridge says the brainstorming session was her first experience at the Brattle. “It seems like it’s so cool,” Eldridge says. “People there were like, ‘oh I’ve always wanted to see “Casablanca,” but I never knew [this theatre] existed.’”

Hinkle says the session was a modest success. “As always there’s great new ideas and ideas that we’ve already thought about and worked on,” he says.

But he says it will be challenging for the Brattle to convert the abstract suggestions into a concrete plan of action.

He mentions a discussion of “how to present a program that seems of value to donors.”

When asked what that means, specifically, he laughs. “What does that mean? I don’t know.”

But even if the consultant’s vocabulary is not yet familiar to Hinkle and others in the arts, Haddad says that Katzenbach is currently working to synthesize the session’s discussion into a series of practical suggestions.

“What we’re doing now is . . . going back to the details and trying to come up with a more comprehensive document,” Haddad says.

THESE ARTISTS WON’T STARVE

But for some students, the nuances of an emerging field aren't that compelling. Some Harvard undergraduates with a strong background in the arts are reevaluating their priorities in light of post-college financial concerns.

Many Harvard artists are trying to get into consulting of a more conventional variety—consulting focused on management and the corporate world.

Non-profit consultants do not make the same money that corporate consultants usually do. "Our clients are not-for-profits, and profit margins are not the same as for other types of consultants," Resnicow says of his firm.

For some, those margins make all the difference.

"The money is an issue," says Joshua C. Phillips '07. He has been extremely involved with theater while at Harvard, participating in a dozen HRDC shows, performing in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals, and writing this year's Hasty Pudding script, as well as being a member of the Signet Society.

"A life in arts is famously rough for most people, especially starting out. It's a big risk," he says.

Phillips is currently applying to Bain & Company and McKinsey & Company, both premier corporate consulting firms.

"I've applied to the top places," he says. "If I get into them, it'll be worth it for me to do it rather than what I love."

Geoffrey S. Johnston '07 also figures prominently in the Harvard theater community, but he plans to leave that role behind when he graduates. The producer, actor, and HRDC board member is looking for a job in management consulting.

Johnston says for-profit consulting firms are a better bridge into the business world. "They have the tools and resources to spend a lot of time training you," he says.

"I'm interested eventually in getting into the non-profit center," Johnston says. "It's a great way to break into the non-profit world at a level where you'll be able to take charge and control."

He also says that a few years in management consulting can open attractive ways to re-enter the art world.

Johnston mentions a friend he knows from CityStep who spent three years working for consulting firm Bain & Co. "She has gone on to be the Chief Financial Officer at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City," he says.

CONSULTING ON CAMPUS

Arts organizations far smaller than MoMA or the Brattle are also seeking out consultants, even arts-based students groups on Harvard's campus.

Jon A. Stona '07, the president of WHRB, is currently working to bring consulting talent from the Harvard Business School's Volunteer Consulting Organization (VCO) to bear on the issues facing the radio station. "We don't currently have a concrete marketing plan," Stona says.

"We have a great image in Boston, but not so much visibility on campus," says Alexander M. Rush '07, vice president of WHRB. All the more reason, he says, to invite help from consultants.

"There are a lot of advantages to having organizations that are completely student-run, but one of the disadvantages is a shallow pool of experience and outside perspective," he continues.

According to Stona, this sort of consulting work is "not trying to bring money to a company, but trying to help an organization fulfill...its non-profit mission," something he hopes the consulting with the Business School will help WHRB do.

Last summer, Stona worked as a summer fellow at New Sector Alliance, a Boston-based

company that pairs Business School students and undergraduates with professional consultants on non-profit work, and found the process extremely rewarding. He is now applying for consulting positions for next year.

"It got me more excited about working with the consultants," he says. "I realized how much the VCO could help us."

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

"It's easier to understand what the mission of a steel company is, but non-profits tend to be driven by a different mission," says Anderson. Finding that mission is sometimes a difficult task.

For the Brattle and WHRB, it seems that the mission is to function as a significant artistic presence within their immediate communities. Some Harvard students can see a little of that mission in themselves, and a non-profit consulting job can combine an outlet for creative aspirations with financial security.

For Phillips, the money is worth the sacrifice, and for others like Haddad, the notion of "selling out" may be beside the point.

"My interest in the arts has not been compromised at all," Haddad writes in an e-mail. "I think there is a lot to be said about spreading creativity in unlikely channels—such as the corporate world—that sometimes need them more than the gallery space or the museum."

—Staff writer Richard S. Beck can be reached at rbeck@fas.harvard.edu.

—Staff writer Alexander B. Fabry can be reached at fabry@fas.harvard.edu.

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