

Career Preparedness in the Theatre Arts

A reflective process guided by student challenges related to individuality

Misti Bradford, University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Department of Theatre Arts

Abstract

College students choosing a career in the Theatre face an array of challenges driven not only by their passions and interests, but also by their individual backgrounds, belief systems, choices, and needs. Idealized career mindsets are met with obstacles placed by the ever-evolving Theatre Arts industry and from the evolution of the individual. The anxiety associated with the uncertainties of a Theatre Arts career have also been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This study uses reflections and surveys to provide insight into student problem solving and persistence as they move through their college experience and transition into the professional world. We hope to prepare students for the certainty of uncertainty by increasing understanding about how students persist through these challenges, build resilience, and how it affects their career preparedness at the freshman, graduate, and alumni levels.

Objectives

Project

This SoTL project is an observation on student self-assessment and observations in terms of their personal stories and how that relates to the progress of their individual focus toward career prep.

Learning Objectives

Students in the Theatre Arts students have differentiated career goals, because of this, the objectives will have very individualized outcomes. The purpose is for students to learn how to analyze their career goals and objectives through a scaffolded process considering the outcomes presented in this study.

Factors to Consider

- Career objectives are not a ‘one-size fits all’ template.
- Career objectives do not always develop in a straight line. They can be jagged or curvilinear. They can also be broken and fragmented.
- Career objectives can be changed by outside pressures and obstacles.
- Career objectives are vital to post-graduation success.
- Career objectives have to be relevant to the individual creating them.

Methods

The specific types of data utilized in this study derive from student assessment developed from two levels of career prep courses, Theatre Arts Seminar (first year students), and Business of Theatre (graduating seniors), and a third group of UWP Theatre alumni were also evaluated. The evidence consists of a collection of reflections comprising of anonymous surveys of each group and student narrative reflections throughout the semester.

Anonymous Surveys

The surveys conducted were primarily multiple choice and short answer with a section for comments. The surveys consisted of similar questions adjusted toward each focus group. Examples of the the various prompts:

First-year prompt categories

- Why Theatre
- Strengths and Weaknesses Assessment
- Academic Goals
- Current Professional Goals

Senior prompt categories

- Why Theatre
- Personal accomplishments to date
- Progress of things to work toward
- Individual professional goals

Alumni prompt categories

- Why Theatre
- Path to Professional Goals
- Benefits of the Theatre Arts major
- Continued Professional Goals

Written Narratives

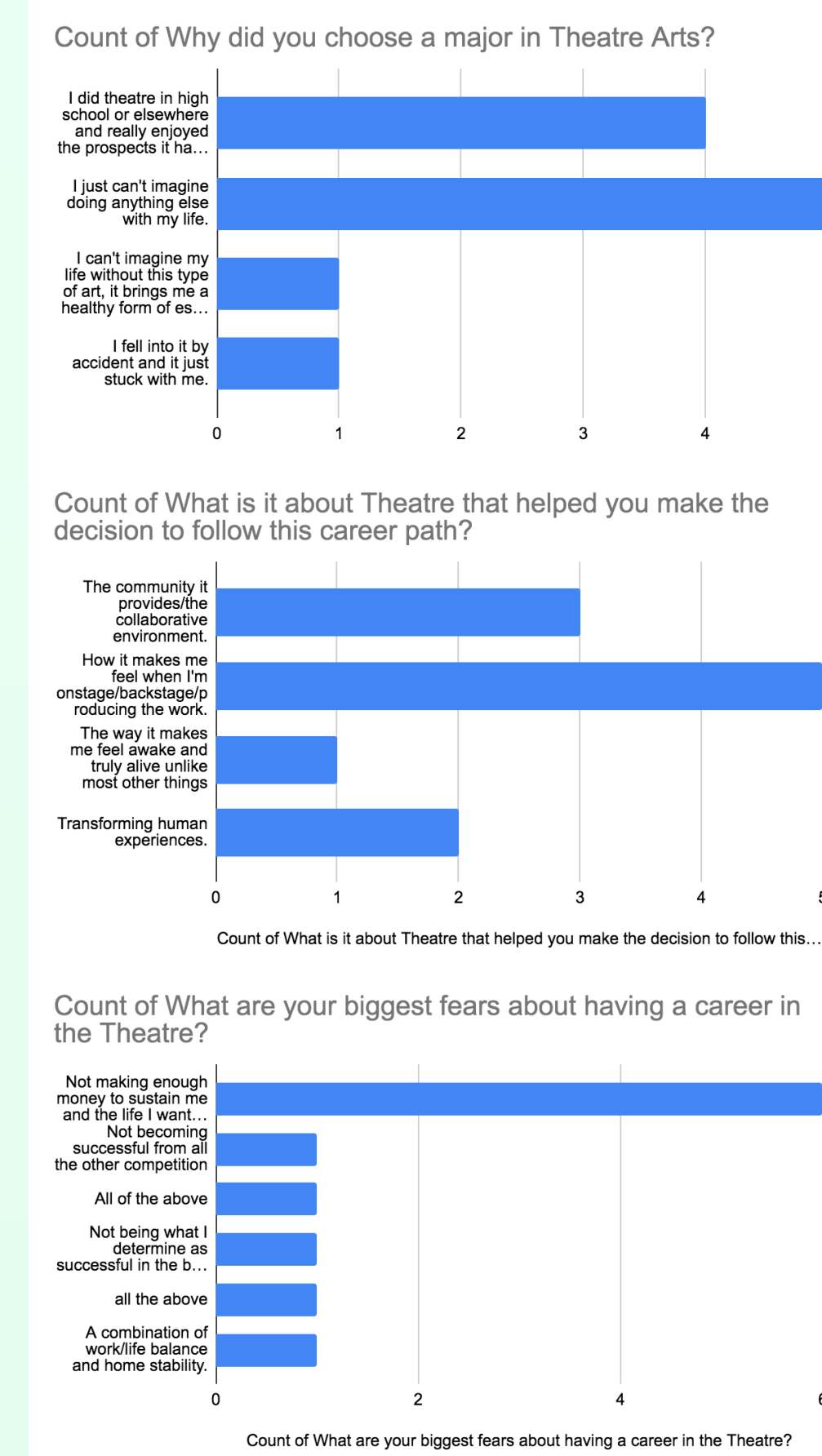
Students enrolled in the Theatre Arts Seminar and Business of Theatre courses participated in written narrative reflections throughout the semester on various themes related to content presented, focusing on the following subjects:

- The changing world of Theatre
- Internships and Early Career Prospects
- Imposter Syndrome
- Finance and Personal Responsibility
- Production Participation Assessment
- Research of Theatre Arts Careers

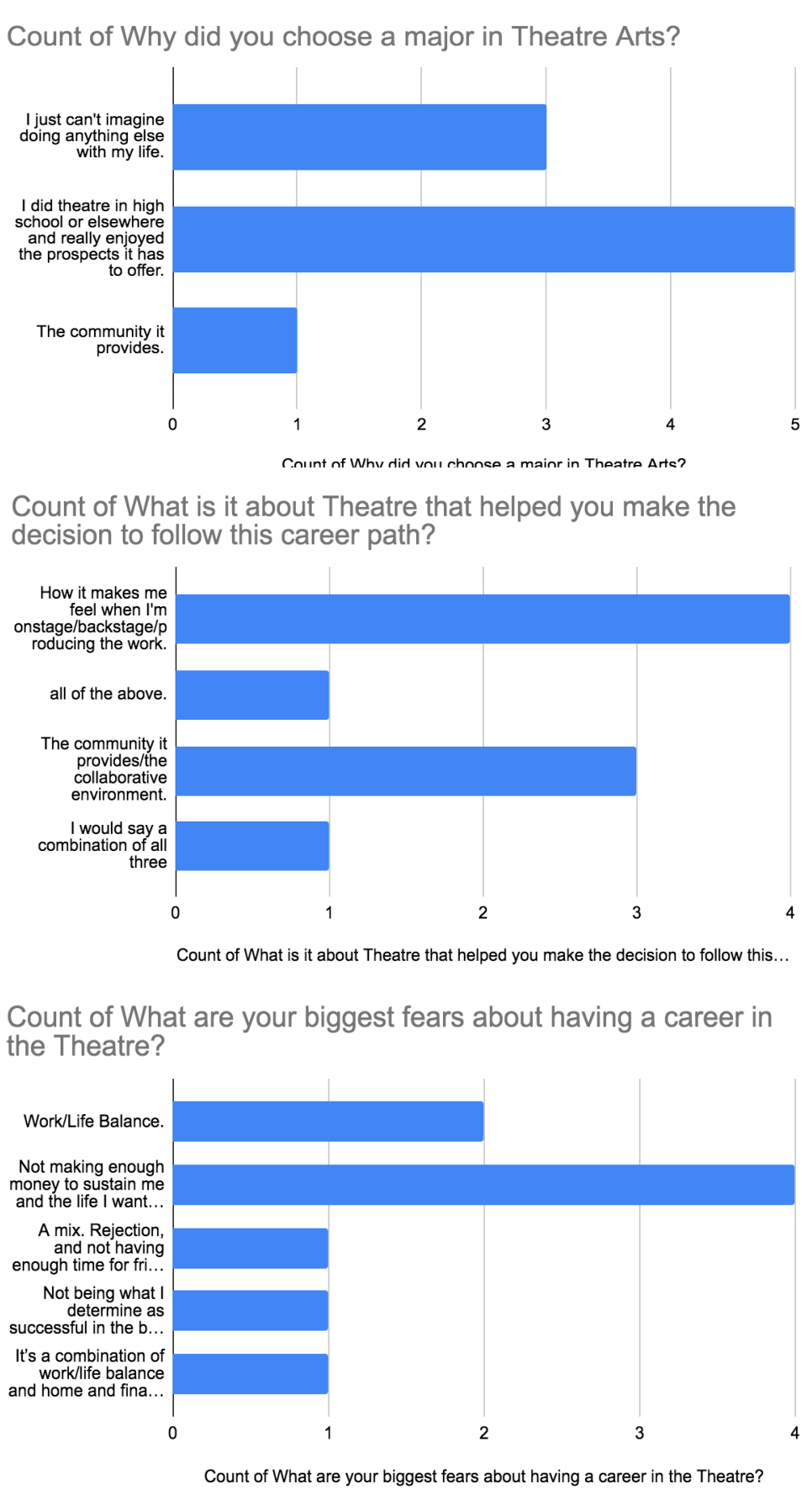
Results

When analyzing the data based on the various methods of intervention, there were fundamental consistencies presented that provide insight into understanding why students reach certain perspectives and conclusions. The following is a sample of selected survey questions that were asked of all three focus groups.

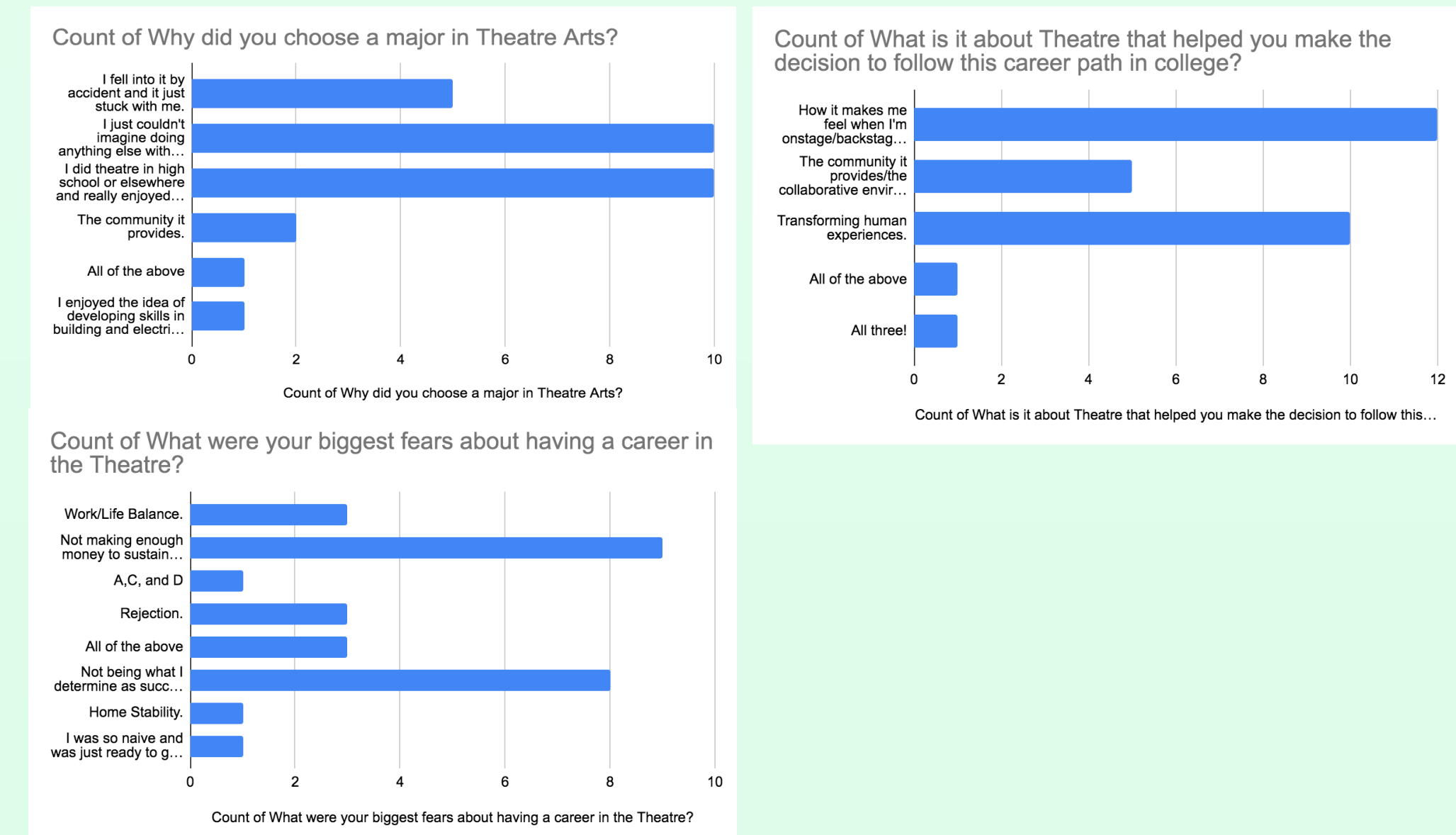
First Year Students



Graduating Seniors



Alumni Group



Sample Narrative Question

How do your individual perspectives of personal backgrounds, belief systems, choices, and needs affect how you answered the questions above?

Results: Focus Group Consistencies

- **Socio-economic background** – this was a clear driving factor for the need of work-life balance and financial stability.
- **Values** - the idea of belonging to a community, and giving back to that community.
- **Creativity** – self serving one’s own need for a creative outlet, to fulfil a ‘passion’ (this word was used over and over when evaluating the response).

Conclusions

Data Conclusions

The results after examining the three focus group surveys and collection of prompted narrative statements, the findings became clear that students who choose a career path in Theatre Arts have consistent points of view pertaining to their personal values, individual priorities in socioeconomic status, and a desire to express themselves with a creative outlet that values personal relationships and human connection. When reviewing the current students self assessments, I found that a sense of belonging and community to be the number one driving factor as the reason why students made this choice and yet followed through with the major.

Evolution of the Results

Example - One prompt given to the Alumni group asked them to evaluate their current position and perspective after graduating with a degree in Theatre and having transitioned into the professional world. The answer was unanimously, yes, they have changed their perspective. The reasons why were in alignment with the development or change to the individual’s perspective of the three main consistencies found in the surveys of the current students, as mentioned above.

- Socio-economic status
- Personal value system
- Individual need for self expression
- Community

Summary of Next Steps

Determining the leading factors that contribute to the student direction in their career choice as Theatre Arts majors, brings me to the conclusion that this information can be utilized to examine how I approach the focus of guidance and self-assessment in a career prep course.

Assessing ways to better prepare Theatre Arts students for the ‘certainty of uncertainty’ in this professional industry can only aid in the preparation of building resilience, persistence, and a sense of accomplishment throughout their time in the major and into their professional careers. The ability for students to comprehend their own foundation of reasoning in regards to making such important choices can only help aid them on their journey toward a more meaningful career.

Contact Information

Misti Bradford
Associate Professor of Theatre, Department Chair
University of Wisconsin – Parkside
bradford@uwp.edu