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Mary Ellen Petrisko

July 7, 2014

Ms. Elisa Stephens
President
Academy of Art University
79 New Montgomery Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

Dear President Stephens:

At its meeting June 18–20, 2014, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) considered the report of the review team that conducted the Accreditation Visit (AV) to Academy of Art University (AAU) April 1-3, 2014. The Commission also had access to the institutional report prepared by Academy of Art University prior to the Offsite Review (OSR), to any supplemental materials requested by the team following the OSR, and to the institution's May 22, 2014 response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you and your colleagues Nancy Houston, Board Chair; Joe Vollaro, Executive Vice President of Financial Aid and Compliance; Martha Weeck, Executive Vice President-Finance; and Melissa Sydeman, ALO. Your comments were helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations.

Since this reaffirmation review was conducted in keeping with the *2013 Handbook of Accreditation*, the institution was expected to address several components in its institutional report. The institutional report and the review itself were part of the pilot effort undertaken by WSCUC and other designated institutions in order to explore the new review process. Academy of Art University elected to organize its report into six major sections, based on the instructions for pilot institutions:

1. Introduction
2. Essay 1: Ensuring the Integrity, Quality, and Rigor of AAU's Degrees
3. Essay 2: Achieving AAU's Core Competencies
4. Essay 3: Defining and Promoting Student Success at AAU
5. Essay 4: Ensuring Institutional Capacity & Effectiveness in the Future & Planning for the Changing Environment for Higher Education
6. Integrative Conclusion

This report and the accompanying attachments were explored and discussed by the review team at its Offsite Review on April 23-24, 2013. As a result of that effort, the institution was asked to respond to the team's Lines of Inquiry, requesting elaboration on the original documents. The supplemental documents received and the original institutional report formed the basis for the campus visit.

The reaffirmation review was the first since AAU was granted initial accreditation. The team noted the deep engagement of administrative and academic leadership in

shepherding the review process, with more limited involvement of full- and part-time faculty. The team found that the Institutional Review Report (IRR) was a “serious inquiry into student learning and achievement,” but that it “tended to point to evidence in the extensive portfolio of exhibits rather than effectively using and analyzing evidence in the essays themselves, with the result that the IRR... appears to be lacking in depth on critical issues.” Likewise, the response to the Lines of Inquiry “was a good faith effort...but...tended to point to the portfolio of exhibits rather than provide thoroughly developed answers to the questions posed.” Of additional concern to the team was the fact that the confidential email account was sent to AAU constituents a day in advance of the AV, curtailing the ability of the members to perform their work based on community input.

The Introduction to the IRR provided context and highlighted notable institutional accomplishments. Since the time of initial accreditation, AAU has grown substantially, doubling in size. The team noted that this has resulted in a much more complex institution, and that administrative processes are struggling to mature to meet this increased complexity. Essay 1 on the meaning of degrees provided a deep discussion of AAU’s engagement with the Lumina DQP Project, and the team reviewed compelling evidence of the institution’s work to achieve quality and rigor of the degree, especially with respect to student learning outcomes. When coupled with the discipline created by programmatic accreditation, AAU has achieved consequential strides in the measurement and analysis of both Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and the WSCUC core competencies (as described in Essay 2.) Program Review is less well-developed, but appropriate processes and schedules are in place to maintain the activity across all academic programs, and to expand the activity to include co-curricular programs.

Essay 3 on Student Success engaged such matters as retention and graduation, the role of institutional initiatives in helping students and faculty complete their programs and develop their curricula (respectively), and student life. The team noted “AAU acknowledged its low graduation rates and recognizes its admissions policy as a significant factor in the graduation rate equation.” However, the team “echoes earlier concerns [from the initial accreditation team review] about whether AAU can demonstrate that its academic programs can be completed in a timely fashion.” The team noted the accomplishments of the Academy Resource Center and the Faculty Development Department; each has embraced best practices in pursuing its goals. These and other efforts are evidence of an ongoing commitment to student persistence, which was shared with the team in the form of the Persistence Plan. However, it was noted that there are significant challenges to accomplishing that plan, including but not limited to unwieldy administrative policies and unclear pathways for students to address common problems. Finally, the team reviewed the area of student life, noting the institution’s markedly increased co-curricular programming and the positive spirit and tremendous amount of work being done by staff in this area. The team identified three areas for further consideration, dealing with organizational structure, staff qualifications and professional development, and student leadership and citizenship.

Essay 4 dealt with Institutional Capacity and Effectiveness and Planning for the Changing Environment. With respect to finances, the team found that while AAU is fiscally sustainable it is heavily reliant on tuition income, and a downturn in enrollment could have a considerable effect on institutional capacity. In that regard, the report specifically encourages the institution to consider examination of the balance sheet to leverage financing to ensure operations have sufficient capital. In addition, the team noted the absence of “a multiyear budgeting process and/or financial model”, which could enhance the current operations ratio. The team also noted that the organizational structure is especially flat, with a total of

27 direct reports to the president. With the absence of a President's Cabinet or other executive management body, organizational decisions are subject to a bottleneck. The team was advised by the Board of Directors that "an organizational consultant [has been engaged] to evaluate and recommend changes to the management structure in order to create a more effective and efficient leadership system and decision-making process."

The team also considered strategic planning and the role of the faculty. While many elements of an effective process for planning are in place, "more often than not...AAU follows a top-down model of planning and meetings with faculty most often take the form of faculty development...rather than engagement of faculty in a planning process." The liability of this practice is that fewer people contribute to the institution's goals and direction, and that constituencies can be isolated. This is particularly true of faculty, since the institution does not have an institution-wide governance body or formal committee structure. Additionally, the full-time faculty teaching load provides few if any stretches of time for professional artistic or scholarly work.

The team review of the Integrative Essay found that the effort was inadequate to the task, in so far as it does not consider the self-review process as whole and what has been learned from the effort. In addition, it found the strategic focus to be less comprehensive than would have been anticipated in a rapidly changing higher education environment.

Academy of Art University is to be commended for:

Centrality of Mission. AAU is driven by its mission and exhibits an abiding passion that is evident across the institution.

Community Among Students. Whether online or onsite, students are engaged with each other and their disciplines as a community of learners.

Focus on Students and Learning. AAU is profoundly committed to students and their learning aspirations. The engagement in the DQP project is but a single (and substantial) example of the devotion faculty and staffs have to ensuring that students succeed.

Mature Distance Education Programs. The institution has been a pioneer in developing unique online learning environments for the art and design student, resulting in the development of sophisticated learning platforms.

The Commission also endorses the recommendations of the team and wishes to emphasize the following areas for continuing attention and development, in addition to the recommendations contained throughout the team report:

Leadership and Organizational Structure and Effectiveness. The institution currently manages its affairs in a flat organization structure, impeding efficient decision-making and planning. Given its increased complexity, the team salutes the decision to undertake, and encourages the institution to consider the results of, a study of alternative management processes which do not depend upon a single individual to effect action. (CFRs 1.3, 1.7, 1.8, 3.4, 3.5, 3.8, 3.10, and 4.6)

The Faculty Role. The participation of the faculty in the greater life of the institution, valuing their opinion and perspectives, is incumbent upon a maturing institution of higher education. AAU should examine how to engage faculty meaningfully in this greater role to ensure compliance with WSCUC Standards. (CFRs 1.4, 2.4, 2.8, 2.9, 3.3, 3.11, 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8)

Student Success. The institution is encouraged to continue its commitment to improve graduation rates (and thus retention) and to close achievement gaps. (CFRs 1.5, 2.6, 2.10, 3.6, and 4.5)

Student Life. There is a need for deeper integration of the curriculum with co-curricular programs, and for further maturation of the assessment of co-curricular offerings. This should include an examination of the need to increase the organizational role and professional profile of student affairs staff. (CFRs 1.7, 2.11, and 2.13)

Strategic Planning. The basic planning processes of the institution should be examined and recalibrated to provide for centralized academic, operations, technology, and budgeting plans which are mutually supportive of one another, and which draw on the perspectives of multiple constituencies, especially faculty.

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Reaffirmation Review team report and reaffirm the accreditation of Academy of Art University for a period of seven years
2. Schedule the next comprehensive review with the Offsite Review set for fall 2020 and the Accreditation Visit tentatively set for spring 2021
3. Require a Mid-Cycle Review in spring 2018
4. Issue a Formal Notice of Concern and schedule a Special Visit in fall 2016 focusing on the institution's responses to the five concluding recommendations contained on pages 18 - 20, as well as the complementary recommendations, observations, and encouragements contained on pages 8 (second paragraph), 9 (third full paragraph and last paragraph), 10 (third paragraph), 11-12 (bulleted points), and 13 (last sentence of third paragraph) of the team report.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that Academy of Art University has satisfactorily addressed the three Core Commitments to Student Learning and Success; Quality and Improvement; and Institutional Integrity, Sustainability, and Accountability, and has successfully completed the multi-stage review conducted under the 2008 Standards of Accreditation, according to the 2013 Pilot Review Process. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is encouraged to continue its progress, particularly with respect to student learning and success.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of Academy of Art University's governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be posted in a readily accessible location on Academy of Art University's web site and widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement and to

support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in these documents. The team report and the action letter also will be posted on the WSCUC website.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that Academy of Art University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of this process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/cno

Cc: Harold Hewitt, Jr., Commission Chair
Melissa Sydeman, ALO
Nancy Houston, Board Chair
Christopher Oberg, WSCUC Staff Liaison