Dr. Elisa Stephens, President

Dr. Elisa Stephens became president of the Academy of Art University in 1992, the third-generation Stephens to lead the university since its founding by her grandfather in 1929. Under her leadership, the Academy of Art University has become the largest accredited private university of art and design in the United States with over 18,000 undergraduate and graduate students on a unique urban campus in downtown San Francisco, and throughout the world online. Dr. Stephens has pioneered the creation of online education programs in art and design, which have propelled the Academy of Art University to its premiere position in the digital education world.

Dr. Stephens has developed a comprehensive education program that prepares today’s students for the art and design jobs of the 21st-century innovation economy. The opportunities for highly skilled artists and designers exist in a global marketplace, of which the Bay Area is a thriving center. A recent report found that the Academy of Art University “provides significant benefits to the San Francisco region” and is a leader in developing talent to fuel the creative industries locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.” The Academy brings together the stakeholders in the creative industries, including students, alumni, faculty, professionals and firms. Those influencing hiring decisions have worked with students in the academic setting, while graduates are exposed to professional performance standards. This provides tremendous opportunity for the institutional transfer of knowledge, and produces professionals who contribute right from the start.
Dr. Stephens acknowledges the importance of scholarships within the greater Bay Area community and beyond for undergraduate, graduate and high school students. To that end, the Academy of Art University has numerous full degree, partial and high school scholarship programs benefiting San Francisco Police and Fire Departments, John O’Connell High School, SF Unified School District, Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of SF, West Contra Costa Unified School District, Oakland Military Institute, “Back on Track,” KIPP schools, Oakland Fund for the Arts and Elks Club. In addition, Dr. Stephens has significantly increased the Academy of Art University High School Scholarship Program, offering thousands of current high school students tuition-free classes that count towards college credit.

Dr. Stephens, and the Academy of Art University faculty and students, embrace a socially responsible role within both the city of San Francisco and the world of art and design. Dr. Stephens actively supports a wide spectrum of community outreach programs, and makes it possible for students from the Academy of Art University to contribute their artistic and community efforts for maximum impact. Current and past beneficiaries include Fleet Week, KIPP Schools, SF MOMA, MoAD and the de Young Museum.

In 2011 Dr. Stephens was honored by the Chinese American Voter Education Committee (CAVEC) for her outstanding contribution in education benefiting Asians and Asian-Americans.

Dr. Stephens has been appointed to serve on the Smithsonian Institution National Board. Dr. Stephens is a member of the Prince of Wales Foundation, Young Presidents Organization, World Presidents Organization, Vistage International, Council on Competitiveness, Committee on Jobs, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, SPUR, San Francisco City Club, Metropolitan Club, University Club, Belizean Grove, San Francisco Junior League, Nob Hill Association, Achievement Rewards for College Scientists (ARCS Foundation) and the Royal Society of Arts. Dr. Stephens completed a two-year term as president of the Nob Hill Association in January 2005.

Dr. Elisa Stephens received a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science from Vassar College and a J.D. from the University of San Francisco in 1985, and is a member of the California Bar Association. She also completed the Foundations curriculum at the Academy of Art University. She served as a law clerk at the San Francisco Superior Court from 1985 to 1986; as in-house counsel at Cellular Holdings, Inc., 1987–1988; and as contributing editor to Barclays Law Publishers, 1986–1988. She also worked as legal counsel for the Academy of Art College until 1992.

Learn more about the Academy of Art University at http://academyart.edu/.