

March 9, 2017

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

Dear President Stephens:

This letter serves as formal notification and official record of action taken concerning Academy of Art University (AAU) by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) at its meeting February 15-17, 2017. This action was taken after consideration of the report of the review team that conducted the Special Visit to AAU September 27-29, 2016. The Commission also reviewed the institutional report and exhibits submitted by AAU prior to the Special Visit and the institution's November 21, 2016 response to the team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you, and your colleagues: Nancy Houston, Board Chair; Joe Vollaro, Executive Vice President of Financial Aid/Compliance; and Cathy Corcoran, Accreditation Liaison Officer. Your comments were very helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations. The date of this action constitutes the effective date of the institution's continuing status with WSCUC.

The purpose of the Special Visit was to follow up on steps being taken by AAU in response to the Formal Notice of Concern issued in the July 7, 2014 Commission Action Letter following the institution's spring 2014 Accreditation Visit. A Formal Notice of Concern is issued when Commission finds that an institution "in danger of being found out of compliance with one or more Standards if current trends continue." A Special Visit is to take place within four years of the Formal Notice of Concern; as provided in the *Handbook of Accreditation*, "If the Commission's concerns are not addressed by the time of the visit, a sanction is imposed..." The Commission's concerns regarding AAU's level of compliance revolved around Standards 2, 3, and 4.

### **Actions**

1. Receive the Special Visit team report that focused on: (1) leadership and organizational structure and effectiveness; (2) faculty role; (3) student success; (4) student life; and (5) strategic plan and financial conditions
2. Continue the Formal Notice of Concern through spring 2018

3. Schedule a Special Visit in spring 2018 to assess progress on the five recommendations contained in this letter, by which time the concerns must be fully addressed or the Commission will be required to issue a sanction. The institution's Special Visit report is due ten weeks prior to the visit.

### **Commendations**

The Commission commends AAU in particular for the following:

1. Responsiveness to the findings and recommendations of the 2014 WSCUC team report
2. Reduction of the number of direct reports to the President, the reorganization of the management structure, and recent additions to the management team
3. Formative efforts toward the engagement of faculty through a more participatory process
4. Ongoing integration of co-curricular programs with the curriculum and the further development of a co-curricular review process to enhance student life
5. The systematic approach to the forming of a university-wide team that produced a comprehensive 5-year strategic plan with appropriate goals, tracking, and feedback loops.

### **Recommendations**

The Commission identifies the following issues for further development:

1. Continue to clarify the institutional decision-making process and provide greater transparency to all key stakeholders; continue defining management roles and responsibilities and communicating these to the community (CFR 3.6, 3.7).
2. Continue to engage with the whole faculty (full-time, part-time, online, onsite) in a participatory manner to further evolve and formalize structures and processes for genuine shared governance, consistent with the institutional mission and type (CFR 3.10).
3. Further define and codify the faculty roles, levels, and responsibilities (including directors, level leaders, and coordinators, etc.) to foster an institutional faculty culture (CFR 3.10).
4. Build on the emerging institutional research function to analyze, synthesize, and use data to make evidence-based decisions for continuous improvement, particularly related to persistence and graduation rates beyond students' first year, consistent with the institutional mission (CFR 2.10).
5. As the strategic plan is updated, sustain the bottom-up approach taken to planning and inform it more deeply through systematic use of the institutional research function and resulting data to make data-driven changes (CFR 4.6).

The Commission acknowledges the great progress made in each of the areas of commendation and recommendation but agrees with the team's concern that many of these had taken place so recently and near to the time of the visit that it was not possible to determine the level of sustainability and impact required to remove the Formal Notice of Concern.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of AAU'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 AAU's website and widely distributed 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 Commission's action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WSCUC will post a link to that response 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 contributing to public accountability, and we thank you 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/ro

Cc: William Ladusaw, Commission Chair  
Cathy Corcoran, ALO  
Nancy Houston, Board Chair  
Members of the Special Visit team  
Geoffrey Chase, WSCUC Vice President, Staff Liaison  
Richard Osborn, WSCUC Vice President, Staff Liaison for AAU Special Visit