

In another blow to arts education in the US, Philadelphia's University of the Arts closes down

Landon Gourov
10 June 2024

On May 31, the University of the Arts (UArts) in Philadelphia abruptly announced it would cease operations in a week's time, shocking and angering students and faculty. The closure follows the shutting down of other art schools in the US, including the Oregon College of Art and Craft (1907-2019), Memphis College of Art (1936-2020), the San Francisco Art Institute (1871-2022) and Hussain College (1946-2023) in Philadelphia—a number of the closures occurring since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.

The announcement by the board of trustees of UArts, which has been in existence for 154 years, asserted that, like many other institutions of higher learning, the art school “has been in a fragile financial state, with many years of declining enrollments, declining revenues, and increasing expenses,” and that the school lacked the funds to cover significant expenses.

The University of the Arts, which had 1,313 students in the 2022-2023 school year, was located in central Philadelphia, a culturally rich environment. After the American Revolution, Philadelphia became home to what is now the oldest art school in the country, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, founded in 1805.

Graduates of UArts include many significant figures, such as watercolorist Samuel Joseph Brown Jr., the first African-American artist during the Depression hired to produce work for the Public Works of Art Project, a precursor to the New Deal's Federal Art Project; Julian Abele, prominent African-American architect who designed buildings at Harvard, Duke and various museums and libraries around Philadelphia; Stanley Clarke, jazz bassist and pioneer of jazz fusion, along with being a five-time Grammy winner; composer Marc Blitzstein, whose 1937 musical *The Cradle Will Rock*,

directed by Orson Welles, gained particular prominence after it was banned by the Works Progress Administration for its pro-union and left-wing stance; Judith Jamison, dancer and choreographer, for many years the Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; celebrity portraitist and fashion photographer Irving Penn; and American classical pianist André Watts, among many others.

Students and staff at UArts were both shaken by the announcement of the school's closure on such short notice. The school scheduled a town hall for students and faculty on June 3, but canceled the meeting minutes before it was to begin. Students and faculty organized protests around the campus to demand answers and keep the school afloat, but they went unheeded by the school's board.

The next day, the school's president, Kerry Walk, resigned from her position and subsequently canceled negotiations with the faculty union to discuss receiving payment for their work. It was unclear to the faculty how they would receive their final paycheck from the university. Some 85 percent of the teachers at the school are adjunct professors, working on a contractual basis.

A lawsuit has been filed on behalf of the university's 700 employees, asking for two months' pay, healthcare coverage, vacation pay and damages covered under the Pennsylvania Minimum Wage Act. The United Academics of Philadelphia union also filed an unfair labor practice claim with the National Labor Relations Board due to the cancellation of negotiations by the college.

Students were also left confused as to how, where and if they would be able to finish their education. The university released a statement indicating that some local colleges, such as Temple, Drexel and Moore College of Art and Design, have offered to accept students from the

closing university.

Drexel University also offered a 50 percent reduction in tuition costs to students who transferred from the University of the Arts. Despite this reduction, however, tuition for transferring students would still be prohibitive in many cases.

One UArts student, Poppy Martignetti, told the *Washington Post* that with financial aid, her tuition at the art school was roughly \$18,000 a year. Even with the reduced costs at Drexel, Martignetti pointed out she would still have to pay roughly \$30,000 a year to attend the school.

A number of issues contributed to the school's downfall. The former president (2016-2023) David Yager launched a campaign to raise funds for the school, and claimed to have raised \$67 million and increased the school's endowment by \$24 million.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reports, however, that on "June 30, 2023, the UArts endowment was worth \$62.44 million—\$10 million less than on June 30, 2017, before the fundraising campaign started, according to the school's tax returns."

In an interview with the *Inquirer*, the former president, Walk, revealed that "an unspecified amount of gifts, grants, and other revenues the school was counting on had not materialized."

Over the past ten years, tuition at the school has increased by 33 percent, while enrollment decreased by 36 percent. Faculty members in 2021 disapproved of Yager's handling of finances and reportedly planned to organize a vote of no confidence against him. The faculty ultimately did not hold the vote because the school's board told them it would hurt the whole school.

Rising inflation and the high cost of living in a city like Philadelphia have also added pressures. Another contributing factor in the school's closing was the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic saw the wealth of the world's billionaires skyrocket to an extraordinary degree. This only accelerated the tendency of the ruling elite to view activities that didn't immediately amass profits, such as the arts, as unnecessary and useless. During the first two years of the pandemic, artists were among the most affected workers, with 63 percent of artists experiencing unemployment and 95 percent reporting income loss during that time.

According to the online *Observer Media* ("Why So Many Independent Art Colleges are Shutting Their Doors"), numerous members of the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design (AICAD) have

either closed down or been forced to merge with other institutions in the past decade. That list includes "the San Francisco Art Institute (currently up for sale after foreclosure), Lyme Academy College of Art in Connecticut, Oregon College of Art and Craft in Portland, and Memphis College of Art in Tennessee, as well as most of the roughly forty for-profit Art Institutes."

The *Observer* article continues,

The closure of independent art colleges and their absorption by larger institutions also tracks with national trends affecting liberal arts colleges and state universities in the U.S. Fewer people are applying to pursue higher education (referred to in the education field as the "enrollment cliff") as the cost of earning a diploma continues to rise, and more high school age students are questioning the value of a degree—particularly if all that degree guarantees is years of paying off student loans.

A trustee at UArts, Laurie Wagman, told the *Inquirer* that it would take around \$40 million to fix the school's financial problems. Certainly the resources exist to keep the school open. According to *Forbes* in its May issue, for example, Pennsylvania's 11 billionaires are now worth a collective \$84.48 billion, up from 9 billionaires worth \$76.3 billion in 2023.

Philadelphia has never had any difficulty finding money for the police department and social repression, with the city's pro-police, Democratic Party mayor Cherelle Parker increasing the department's budget this year by tens of millions of dollars.

Despite the massive amount of wealth that exists in the city, Philadelphia is plagued by social inequality and deteriorating educational opportunities. The closure of UArts ultimately speaks to the decline in cultural life within the United States and the general bankruptcy of the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact