

California College of the Arts faces deep crisis: “The ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization”

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Various media reports indicate that the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco is the latest art school in the US to face severe financial difficulties. The *San Francisco Chronicle* first reported on the crisis August 23. Other accounts have followed.

The school, founded in 1907 in Berkeley, California, faces a \$20 million budget deficit amid a sharp decline in student enrollment. According to one report, the institution is “now reevaluating its course offerings, contemplating layoffs, and even considering a potential merger with another school to ensure its survival.” (*ArtNews*)

CCA president David Howse, writes *Art Forum*, “informed staff and faculty of the deficit in a meeting earlier this month. In a memo sent to staffers on August 23, he mentioned that CCA might look to layoffs as one way to deal with the gap.”

The San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) closed permanently in July 2022 and filed for Chapter 7 liquidation in April 2023. Two years ago, we pointed out that not only

was the SFAI one of the oldest art academies in the US, and the oldest in its Western half, it was located in one of the most dynamic cultural centers in the country historically, the Bay Area. In fact, the institute was a focal point of various artistic trends and movements in the 20th century. Now it has disappeared, without substantial outcry or protest, certainly not from the city’s affluent upper echelons.

At the time, various smug commentators pointed to fiscal mismanagement at SFAI and the fact that the school offered “only fine-art degrees and no (generally more lucrative) design and architecture programs.” Now, the “more pragmatic” CCA is threatened with encountering the same fate, although unlike

its rival SFAI, which prided itself on offering no commercial programs, CCA has always offered a

practical arts education. It was founded in 1907 as California College of Arts and Crafts and has evolved into a multifaceted institution with degrees in architecture and design, animation, critical and ethnic studies, and general humanities among its 22 undergraduate and 10 graduate departments. (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

Enrollment at CCA is projected “to be down by about 30 percent compared to 2019, when CCA had approximately 1,800 full-time students. The current estimate for this fall is between 1,250 and 1,300, down from 1,400 last year.” (*ArtNews*)

The situation at CCA is in part a commentary on the *general disregard* with which capitalist America, philistine, backward and criminal to its core, holds art and the artist. There has not been a precipitous decline over the past decade in the social need for art or even the attractiveness of the artist’s life in the eyes of many young people. However, the prospect of owing hundreds of thousands of dollars after graduating from a four-year program (tuition for undergraduates at CCA costs some \$60,000 per year; graduate tuition ranges by degree program, from \$43,170 to \$75,096), in a society that makes it difficult for more than a relative handful of artists to earn a decent living, is not a happy one.

In 2022, we referred to William Deresiewicz’s *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech* (2020), which took note of a study revealing that “only 10 percent of the two million arts graduates in the United States make their primary living as artists, that 85 percent of artists in New York City have day jobs unrelated to the arts, and that the other 15 percent have median incomes of \$25,000.” Meanwhile, in 2018, “just twenty individuals accounted for 64 percent of total sales by living artists.”

The demise of rival SFAI did not apparently “help” CCA, which for the time being, points out the *Art Newspaper*,

remains the only option for anyone seeking to train at a non-profit art institution in Northern California. ...

Asked how many former SFAI students have enrolled there since the former school's demise, the CCA spokesperson says the number is just 61. That would equate to less than 5% of the school's full-time student population this autumn, should the total land within the administration's current estimates.

The financial problems confronting arts institutions, as the same publication observes,

transcend the borders of Northern California. Officials at the University of the Arts, a 150-year-old non-profit art school in Philadelphia, suddenly announced on 31 May that the institution would close only seven days later. ... The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts made known this January that the 2024-25 academic year will be the last in which it will offer degree-granting programmes. The Art Institutes, a consortium of for-profit art and design colleges, permanently shuttered their final eight campuses across the US in September 2023 after giving around 1,700 students only one week's notice.

And the crises at these art schools

“mirror those that have faced very small higher education institutions in general,” Deborah Obalil, the president and executive director of the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design, told *Inside Higher Ed* this spring. ...

The number of students enrolled in four-year colleges in the US peaked in 2010, at around 18.1 million, and fell every year thereafter until 2021, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Although the organisation expects such enrollment to gradually climb over the next decade, it also estimates that it will never again reach 2010 levels.

The calamitous state of arts education in the US is a symptom of a diseased, decaying society.

Ninety years ago, the highly respected philosopher and educator John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, could assert—and expect to meet general approbation for saying so—that “Aesthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a

civilization.”

At present, the powers that be in the US and much of the media and even academia consider the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization to be some blend of the size of the budget for global war preparations and the latest record set by the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

One right-wing foundation boasts, for example, that the US

spent \$820 billion on national defense during fiscal year (FY) 2023 according to the Office of Management and Budget, which amounted to 13 percent of federal spending. ... Such spending indicates that lawmakers have prioritized national defense as a key part of our budget; indeed, the United States spends more on defense, relative to the size of its economy, than any other member of the G7.

Meanwhile, *Forbes* tells its readers that in 2024 there are some 50 billionaires in San Francisco, the tenth-largest total of any city in the world, an increase of 13, or more than 25 percent, over last year.

Scores of billionaires have sprung up from Silicon Valley's roots, including San Francisco's richest resident, Facebook and Asana cofounder Dustin Moskovitz (\$18.3 billion) and six newcomers, including Ivan Zhao (\$1.5 billion), cofounder and CEO of the productivity and work-apps software Notion; Michelle Zatlyn (\$1.2 billion), cofounder, president and COO of internet infrastructure and security company Cloudflare; and OpenAI chief and tech investor Sam Altman (\$1 billion).



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