Students speak out against closure of Oregon College of Art and Craft

Our reporters
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Early this month, the administrative and financial executives in the Board of Trustees voted to close the Oregon College of Art and Craft (OCAC), a small private non-profit school based in the outer-northwest quadrant of Portland. Its final class will graduate in May of this year.

Founded in 1907 by Julia Hoffman of the Art and Craft Movement, OCAC is the last degree-granting art school in the US that focuses on craft, such as metals, woodworking, ceramics, functional objects, textiles and fibers. The school currently serves a total of 200 students, mostly undergraduates, and offers a unique, rigorous and supportive educational environment.

Like many art colleges across the world, especially smaller studio-based ones, OCAC has faced a "budget crisis" with less financial support and higher operational costs. Though students and faculty rarely heard information about the school's financial issues, they were frequently discussed by the administration and Board of Trustees, a body of 14 individuals appointed by the state to oversee the direction of the school.

Eleven of the 14 trustees have long-term backgrounds in private investment, real estate, urban development, business and corporations like Oregon-based Nike Inc.

After two confusing and nontransparent initiatives to merge OCAC with the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) and Portland State University (PSU), the board concluded that there was no way to fund the school on its own. Notably, the board includes Julietta Bauman, a real estate agent, and Harold Goldstein, head of consulting firm OPAD that specializes in mergers.

Students and faculty received an unexpected email on February 6 inviting them to attend meetings February 7 to discuss the decision. They were not aware of the decision to close the school prior to this. The school's administrators, joined by their business partners in the Board of Trustees, made the announcement to these anxious crowds of the closure with minimal explanation. The board members reportedly left the room before anyone could ask questions.

In the official announcement the board explained—with their empty condolences—that they "explored numerous options" to keep the school open, but that "in the Board's best business judgement … thoughtful and orderly closure process offers the best possible outcome for all affected, and is therefore the right and only responsible thing to do."

They made no hiding of their predatory considerations regarding the financial liquidation of the college: "We have engaged a commercial real estate broker to assist with the sale of our campus and property, which will allow us to continue funding operations through the remainder of the 2019 spring semester."

Students, faculty and alumni have organized demonstrations and letters of support to oppose the closure. After students planned a confrontation at the Board of Trustees meeting on campus Wednesday morning, the trustees moved their meeting to an undisclosed location at the last minute.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Portland attended the demonstration and picket on Wednesday morning to speak to OCAC students about the impact of the school's closure, as well as the attacks on art, education and culture as a whole.

Pheo, a first-year transfer student studying painting, said, "Allowing students to go into debt to continue an education that is taken from them is criminal. The fact that they didn't tell us anything is criminal. They should at least have given us a warning about the potential closing of the school, instead of letting us be led by a string of lies.

"Art schools are being closed around nationally. It's a scary thing. It makes you think about what's going on."

Pheo referenced Trump's declaration of a national emergency to build a wall at the US-Mexico border, saying the government cares "more about a fence than the education of millions of Americans who may want to do something more than work a nine-to-five corporate job … The government shouldn't support just one type of idea. The government should support all sorts of bodies of ideas and movements including art. Aesthetics are a key to keeping the society alive and happy.

"They're pushing more money into STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education], because they want more children to go into jobs where they can make more bombs and armaments. Our country is always going to profit off war and work off the military-industrial complex. The art programs around here are secondary, in fact they're probably tertiary. We do not care about craft anymore, because we do not see any profit in craft."

Onyx, a third-year student who will now be unable to graduate with a fibres degree, said, "They are not telling anyone anything. And then on top of that it's like I really just wish I had a say, or just a know even."

Pheo and Onyx spoke passionately about their school. "I've lived here so long I know almost all these people, it's a small

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community," one said. "So, this is literally my home and place, this is my everything."

They condemned the "eight people in a boardroom" who told students and faculty, "We don't have any money, we're not gonna try anymore." The other added, "I guess that's how the world turns, for now. Until the revolution happens, right? But hopefully this is maybe the start, maybe that's the one upside to it."

"There's a lack of transparency and a lot of deception," said Diego, a second-year student, in considering the motives behind the closure. "From what we are finding out, there was a lot of talk about buying the property before they even announced this. That lack of transparency should really get to us. We pay tuition here. The school would not last without the alumni and the students who currently go here, so why aren't we informed by the private administration and board members?"

Faith, a cross-media student at OCAC, reiterated these points: "They didn't even tell us that we were in any kind of financial trouble. I asked the president herself, why are we merging? I don't want to merge with them. She said, 'It's not for financial reasons, it's just because we wanted to go with PNCA because the facilities are better.' They legit lied to me. I am from Texas, I moved cross country on my own and I'm totally screwed."

"You should have seen the meeting [where they announced the closure]," fourth-year student Alani told IYSSE members. "There were so many tears, synchronized sniffling. Some teachers brought boxes of tissues."

She explained why she attends OCAC. "It's one of the only craft schools left in the US. It's also so small, and the faculty here is amazing. All of our teachers are fantastic, and it's them who are going to be hurt the most. They have to uproot their whole careers. Some of them have moved across the country just to teach here. Some of them have been working here for decades."

Will, also a fourth-year student, explained, "We sought this place out because it was small and one-on-one. I love that this place is small, weird and funky, and focuses on craft. To see it all crumble like this …

"We have seen this coming for a while. We've known the school was in dire straits, financially. I'm one of the last ones to get out scot-free, and I feel guilty about that in a way. Like survivor's guilt."

"It says a lot about the state of craft and arts in general, and how much the administration cares about any of that, which is not at all. I mean, it's been happening all the time, small colleges going under."

In the United States, dozens of small private art schools like OCAC have closed or merged in the past couple of years, including the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; Memphis College of Art; Corcoran College of Art + Design; and many Art Institute campuses around the country. Just within the Portland area, Marylhurst University and the Art Institute of Portland closed, and tuition hikes are common at PNCA and other schools still in operation.

Around 11 small private colleges close each year in the US, with the rate of closures expected to rise in coming years, according to bond-credit-rating agency Moody's Investors Service. The same patterns of closures are seen throughout the world, especially in Europe and Australia. As one example, students, faculty and artists expressed fierce opposition to the closure of the Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney in 2016.

The universality of these closures reveals the broader processes at play. As the global capitalist system confronts a protracted crisis, the ruling elite of every country are responding with attacks on social and democratic rights of workers and youth. Like all aspects of life, arts education and culture as a whole are subordinated to the profit interests of corporations and investors, which are readily appointed as trustees to oversee the response to the "budget crises" arising from the funneling of society's wealth to the ultra-rich.

Scott explained how the administration had no concern over the impacts of the closure on the health, finances and futures of those affected. "I don't think they are taking it into consideration at all. I think they are taking into consideration that the campus is worth $13 million. They realized they could make big money off of it."

Trent, a fourth-year student, said, "I think that access to education is a social right. Choosing art is one of the best ways to make a difference in culture. Perhaps not in the economy, and that is what turns people off. That is why we don't get funding. We are not supported by the government in a meaningful way, since they are not furthering the investment in culture."

When asked if arts education is a social right, a first-year student from California named Maia said, "Oh yeah. It's a right for people to own guns and carry them around. Why shouldn't people be supported in creating and producing art?

"I think a lot of people really, really enjoy [art], and actually take it to heart most of the time. Right now, in our society and in our world, we really need something to keep us going. And that's art, to me and a lot of other people. All the different forms of art."

Jens, an OCAC student and IYSSE member, spoke with student peers about the roots of the small school's closure in the crisis of capitalism, and its inability to defend basic rights. "The board has shown that their interests are only to be found in private profit, not in the interests of art or the safety or future of students, staff and faculty. With arts education under capitalism, the Board of Trustees act as an unreliable source of income, since their interest is only dependent on their own profits and wealth.

"Students all over the world are faced with the traumatic experience of their self-chosen educational institution closing. There is also the threat of the financial elite to morph and distort the program's mission and statement to better fit the interests of their own profit.

"However," Jens stressed, "students and teachers are responding with mass walkouts, protests and strikes. The increased radicalization of the youth and working class and the use of direct action are showing the ruling class that we will not roll over. The fight for proper education is something which the youth are willing to fight for."

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