

Nashville art school students, alumni oppose takeover by Christian college

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The proposed takeover of the 130-year-old Watkins College of Art by Belmont University, a private non-denominational Christian university, is still being fought by Watkins faculty, staff and students.

The announcement of the planned merger of the two institutions, both located in Nashville, Tennessee, came late last month without any discussions with Watkins faculty, staff and students.

Watkins staff would lose their jobs without any severance package in place.

Faculty might be offered jobs at Belmont but would face the job requirement that they be Christians and be prepared to sign an affidavit of faith.

Many if not most students were dismayed at the prospect of a Belmont-controlled school of arts where their work would be circumscribed by conservative religious thinking and they would be required to take two semesters studying the Bible.

“I have heard in their live drawing classes models have to wear complete body suits which is ridiculous to me because in the Vatican there are a bunch of naked bodies,” Watkins alumna Jessica Yohn said.

Yohn was one of dozens of people who attended “Watkins: The Other Side of the Story,” a pop-up art exhibit Saturday evening at Nashville’s Sevier Park organized to protest the takeover.

“What’s at stake is the Watkins community we are losing here, and I have a lot of anger and frustration with the board of trustees for their lack of transparency,” Yohn continued. “One of the major issues here, this merger—better to call it an absorption because this is not really a merging—it did not give anyone a chance who would be affected personally to say something and it has—what’s the word I’m looking for?—capitalist undertones.”

“The lack of transparency coupled with the fact that

real estate deals are already discussed as per the sale of Watkins is misleading, corrupt, and disgusting,” Amanda Sledge commented in an online petition—now with more than 5,000 signatures—opposing the merger.

Watkins opened in 1885 after Samuel Watkins (1794-1880) donated land and \$100,000 in his will for creation of a school to teach “the business of life.”

A whiff of a real estate deal has surrounded the merger from the very beginning.

Belmont would take over the art school while the property would revert back to the state, which was made the owner when the land and \$100,000 was first donated to Nashville by the Watkins benefactor.

Watkins Board of Trust includes Tennessee’s Republican Governor Bill Lee and the state’s attorney general as ex-officio members joining well-placed and rich individuals.

Lee joined Nashville Mayor John Cooper recently on a trip to California in an effort to attract the multinational computer technology corporation Oracle, valued at \$175 billion, to the city. This is after the city and state combined to give \$103 million of “incentives”—which included \$65 million in cash—to the richest man on the planet, Jeff Bezos, to bring an Amazon regional transportation hub to Nashville. The “It” city, as Nashville is being called, has been turned into a cash cow for corporations looking to move, and now the Watkins property is being primed to be sold off at bargain basement prices along with mouth-watering tax incentives

Belmont is also home to Belmont Law School head Alberto Gonzales, attorney general under the George W. Bush administration, and a fountainhead of legal opinions justifying torture. In his spare time, Gonzales is working with investors who are seeking a major league baseball franchise for Nashville.

What are the lives and dreams of a few hundred art and film students along with their contributions to culture when compared to multimillion-dollar business deals?

While seemingly limitless amounts of public funds are available to underwrite corporate incentives, art students and faculty at Watkins must spend their own money to pay for pencils and art supplies.

Josh Thomas understands the connection.

Thomas described himself as an “industrial worker” in a local factory. He said he attended the pop-up with Yohn as an act of solidarity with the Watkins students.

“These students came to this school specifically for a reason,” Thomas said. “They didn’t want to go to Belmont.

“This is happening over and over again in this city; the entire identity of what we hold as a culture in this city is being attacked to make a buck [and] I think it is disgusting,” he continued. “We are losing ourselves in the city to just whoever can make the quickest buck. I am here to support all these artists who have had this taken away from them.”

“What artists do is not separate from work,” Thomas observed. “Art is work. Art is labor. And through solidarity is how we stand together and how we prevail.”

In that work, the art or film students must be “free and comfortable in going into areas they might not have gone into,” one Watkins Visual Arts teacher, who ask not to be identified, explained. “We are concerned about the students’ work being censored and limitations on their ability to explore their process as artists.”

David Cypress’s grandmother went to Watkins and studied typing and shorthand after her husband died in the 1918 Flu epidemic.

“That was how she was able to survive the Depression,” he said

A graduate of the University of Oregon in 1972 with an art degree and the Nashville School of Law in 1981, Cypress received a degree from the Watkins Film School in 2010 and will graduate from Watkins again this spring with a general degree in art.

“I was disgusted,” Cypress said of the take-over by Belmont. “I knew for years that Watkins was having some financial troubles, but the way this was done in secret, it was just horrible. ... There was just something

underhanded about the whole deal”

“I was devastated because I knew my son would be devastated,” said Riunita Martin, the mother of a Watkins freshman. “He has been there for not quite a year, and now the vision he had at Watkins has been thrown away.

Martin said although she considers herself a Christian, Belmont’s plans to acquire a school that might not have included Christians should have been made obvious before.

“I just think it is wrong for a president to make a commitment like that without including his faculty and staff,” she said.

Following a vote of no confidence by faculty and students, the Watkins president has been placed on administrative leave with pay and has reportedly been offered a job at Belmont.

Martin’s son, Dallas McDonald, a film student, said he felt “shock, anger and betrayal”

“You do not do this to a community and not tell anybody,” he said.

McDonald said the Watkins community was diverse and wanted to be able to express themselves freely, but a lot of them feel like they won’t be able to do that under Belmont.

Yohn called on all artists to come to the aid of Watkins. “You can do it by signing the petition, getting the word out, even if it’s just reposting or re-blogging online,” she suggested.

Other artists need to use their own creativity to get the word out, “That is what art is for, to get out messages,” she concluded.

The petition can be found here.



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