

Why are art schools disappearing in America?

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Across the US, the arts and arts education are under attack. A recent article in *Hyperallergic* titled “The Death of Art School” pinpoints some of the destructive forces: financialization, ballooning administrative bureaucracies, and ideological hostility—all converging to systematically convert institutions of learning into market-driven enterprises.

The article’s author, State University of New York-Purchase art professor Hakan Topal, situates the attack on arts education within the context of the commodification of education as a whole, cogently observing, “Students become customers, knowledge becomes a product, and faculty become service providers. The institution is increasingly run like a business rather than a public good.”

He warns that what colleges must produce is not “consumers,” but “a capacity for thinking, for argument, for questioning without a predetermined answer.”

Topal’s article is timely and urgent. Arts education has suffered an unprecedented reversal in the past few years. Art schools, a number of which have served students and communities for over 100 years, have been abruptly closed.

Among recent casualties are: the Oregon College of Art and Craft, founded in 1907 (closed 2019); Memphis College of Art, founded in 1936 (closed 2020); the San Francisco Art Institute—the oldest art academy west of the Mississippi, founded in 1871 (closed 2022); the Delaware College of Art and Design (closed 2024); the 154-year-old University of the Arts in Philadelphia (closed 2024); and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, which ended its degree programs after the 2024–25 academic year. Even the for-profit Art Institutes shuttered their final eight locations in September 2023.

The outright shutdowns are only part of the story. At university after university, the arts and humanities are the first on the chopping block as budgets dwindle following decades of bipartisan defunding of higher education. Art history departments at the University of Chicago, Harvard and Boston University have paused or sharply curtailed doctoral admissions. SUNY Potsdam moved to eliminate programs in art history, dance and theater. The California College of the Arts in San Francisco, founded in 1907, faces a \$20 million deficit.

Enrollment is in decline as young people are confronted with the catastrophic loss of job opportunities in the arts (following the decapitation of the National Endowment for the Arts and an estimated 30 percent contraction in revenue for cultural institutions overall) and the crude prioritization of money over culture.

This “perfect storm” is not a consequence of shifting tastes but reflects a social and political process associated with the decades-long cultural decline and decay, the rise of a parasitic-ignorant capitalist oligarchy, the demeaning of intellectual life, the elevation of “work-ready” training, relentless militarism, the corporatization of education and the toxic growth of social inequality.

The “administrification” of universities

Topal provides important details on the conversion of universities into businesses, which he calls “administrification.” He asks, “Did you know that between 1976 and 2011, admin jobs at American universities grew by a staggering 369 percent while full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty grew by only 23 percent?”

The corporate reorganization of higher education has translated into million-dollar-plus sinecures for university administrators and poverty pay for the teaching staff. At SUNY-Purchase, Topal notes, average top administrator salaries rose by more than 45 percent between 2016 and 2024. Assistant professor salaries grew by roughly 14 percent—well below the 31 percent cumulative inflation rate over the same period. Of the 25 highest-paid positions at the college, only one is held by a professor. Fifteen are held by administrators. Nine are held by police officers.

A 2023 *Chronicle of Higher Education* report found presidents at 21 public universities earning more than \$1 million. For private universities, well over 50 college presidents exceed \$1 million. University of Houston president Renu Khator took home over \$3 million in 2024, while E. Gordon Gee of West Virginia University raked in \$2 million as the university made sweeping cuts to arts and academics. At The New School in New York City, the president draws more than \$1 million annually and refused to cut his salary while eliminating faculty lines.

The proletarianization of the academic workforce

Fewer and fewer academics receive tenure. Topal points out that “tenure lines are replaced by visiting lecturer positions—not even visiting assistant professorships.” Adjunct faculty in the United States typically earn around \$20,000 a year, paid per course, denied benefits, with no job security from semester to semester.

Even these positions are harder to obtain. In 2021, US universities cut 650,000 jobs—13 percent of all higher education workers. The heaviest losses fell on adjunct faculty, food service workers, custodial staff, and support workers. At the City University of New York, 2,800 adjunct faculty were laid off in a single summer. At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 200 employees were let go while the university president continued drawing a \$5 million annual salary.

The lion’s share of the work has been off-loaded to graduate students, who are paid even less and are striking against abysmal poverty wages. On May 1, University of Illinois-Chicago graduate students struck for the third time in seven years. Harvard graduate students walked out on April 21 in what has become the longest strike in the institution’s history. They are part of a national eruption of struggle, including at the University of

Rochester, Columbia University, Boston University, Indiana University, Temple University, the University of Michigan, New York University, The New School and the University of California.

Capitalist metrics rule

Topal describes the inevitable outcome of Wall Street metrics applied to higher education:

The new administrative order sets the terms and decides what counts. What this produces, beneath the numbers, is steady deintellectualization ... Learning does not happen under bureaucratic control.

Within the corporatized university, arts programs are the first to be cut. Studio arts, music, theater, and fine arts require expensive physical infrastructure—kilns, darkrooms, print studios, practice rooms, performance spaces—that cannot be scaled as easily as a lecture hall can. Small class sizes are pedagogically essential.

Faculty-to-student ratios necessary for genuine instruction look inefficient on a spreadsheet. And as tuition has risen and the job market for working artists has been squeezed, enrollment in fine arts programs has declined—which then “confirms” their inviability and justifies further cuts, in a self-fulfilling cycle.

The Trump administration is now moving to codify this logic as federal policy. In May 2026, the Department of Education proposed a rule—stemming from Trump’s “One Big Beautiful Bill”—that would strip federal student loan eligibility from programs whose graduates fail to meet earnings benchmarks. Fine arts, music and studio arts programs are among those explicitly identified as most at risk. Close to 2,000 colleges and universities have at least one program that could fail the test, potentially cutting off over 600,000 students from federal aid.

The ideological thrust is unmistakable. The government is using federal funding policy to direct young people toward education that serves industry, the military, or “measurable” career training. STEM fields, defense-adjacent research, and vocationally oriented programs are implicitly favored. The arts and humanities—history, philosophy, literature, creative and critical thought—are rendered not merely unprofitable but ineligible for public support.

Who Benefits?

The financial picture becomes clearer when one looks at who has benefited and what has been funded. The retreat of public funding for higher education coincided precisely with the rise of hedge funds and private equity in university governance. These financial actors did not simply take advantage of a crisis—in many cases they helped engineer it.

Yale University appointed a Lehman Brothers and Salomon Brothers veteran to lead its endowment in 1985. Harvard gave the Baupost Group hedge fund \$1.96 billion in endowment assets to manage by 2017. The University of California system, under private equity billionaire Richard Blum—appointed to its Board of Regents by Democratic governor Gray Davis—responded to budget shortfalls with tuition hikes, bond borrowing and enrollment freezes that shut out thousands of qualified California

students.

When deficits appear, the well-heeled and politically connected consultants move in. Purchase College paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to Gray Associates, an enrollment consulting firm, for recommendations that were, as Topal notes, “obsolete within a few years.” The University of California’s turn to Wall Street “reformers” produced mounting debt, enrollment freezes, and tuition hikes—while the financiers collected their fees.

Art, critical consciousness and war

While many of Topal’s points are important warnings and statements of fact, they are limited. He fails to mention that as federal and state resources were stripped from universities, the budgets for war abroad and domestic repression have ballooned. This policy has been enthusiastically embraced by both Democrats and Republicans.

Since 1980, inflation-adjusted US military spending has grown by more than 60 percent—rising from roughly \$500 billion to over \$820 billion annually—while state funding for public higher education collapsed as a share of university revenue, falling from nearly 80 percent to closer to 50 percent, and students absorbed the difference through a 165 percent real increase in tuition. The choice of what to fund, and what to abandon, is a political one.

This is just the beginning of these attacks. The current war of extermination against Iran has already cost, according to CBS, close to \$50 billion. It is the working class, youth and students who are being made to pay for it.

Topal cites the brutal role of universities against pro-Palestinian students, underscoring that the suppression of freedom of speech, freedom of association and outright collaboration in arrests of outspoken supporters of the Palestinians is the clearest expression of the corporate control of universities. He concludes that the “university has not simply become a business—it has become an ideological policing institution.”

According to Human Rights Watch, more than 3,100 protesters were arrested across at least 25 states. Post-encampment repression included suspensions, withheld degrees, demands for letters of apology, and—at the University of Michigan—permanent bans on student government resolutions addressing genocide.

However, Topal ignores the fact that many of these universities are controlled by Democratic Party operatives who directed the suppression of free speech in service to both the Biden administration and Wall Street. The billionaire “donor revolts”—wealthy financiers threatening to withdraw endowment support unless pro-Palestinian speech was suppressed—were not a departure from the normal functioning of the financialized university. They were its clearest expression. These measures have only deepened under the current Trump regime.

The Trump “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” issued in October 2025, openly declares that universities must advance the “national interests and priorities of the U.S. government”—or lose federal funding. No policy better captures the logic than the Nazi concept of *Gleichschaltung*: the forced coordination of all institutions to serve state power.

A ruling class committed to war, oligarchy, and the suppression of dissent has no use for institutions whose purpose is the free development of critical human faculties. As the WSWS has observed, quoting Lenin: finance capital, in both its foreign and domestic policy, “strives not for democracy but for dictatorship.” Endless war requires not only the diversion of social resources toward military budgets, but the direct suppression of political and cultural opposition.

Artistic consciousness—by its nature thoughtful, exploratory, and very often critical of the dominant social order—is incompatible with the imperatives of imperialist war, oligarchic rule and the drive toward authoritarian governance. Art “has the ability to alter the thinking and feeling of masses of human beings”—an ability that requires freedom to pursue knowledge without market justification, and freedom to challenge rather than satisfy.

The defense of art, culture and intellectual life, as well as jobs and living standards, requires mobilizing the only social force capable of abolishing capitalism, the working class. Young people fighting to end the subordination of social life to the profit system should turn to the working class, break with both Democrats and Republicans, and take their place in International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality.



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