

THE CENTER FOR CARTOON STUDIES VISITING TEAM REPORT
VISIT ON NOVEMBER 16, 2023

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Preface

The Visiting Team appointed by VHEC spent the day of November 16, 2023 at The Center for Cartoon Studies (hereafter CCS) in White River Junction, Vermont. The Chair had several conversations and one in-person visit to CCS prior to November 16.

The Team is very grateful to everyone at CCS, especially so to CCS President and CEO Michelle Ollie, one of the two co-founders, and to Operations Manager (among many other roles, seemingly the jack of all trades and master of all of them) Dave Lloyd. CCS is an all hands on deck labor of love for many folks besides these two leaders, and the Team is very appreciative of everyone associated with CCS for their participation in developing a very thorough and comprehensive self-study and to those who met with us during our visit. The self-study and visit allowed the Team to understand CCS, its challenges and opportunities, and its hopes and dreams for the future.

CCS did not propose consideration for a substantive change to its academic program.

This VHEC Evaluation report is organized into three sections. Section I describes CCS, following the organization of the self-study, and addresses the accuracy of its content. It made sense to address each of the nine standards in order. Section II addresses strengths, concerns and suggestions where appropriate. Section III addresses the CCS request for recertification of its MFA Program.

The Chair of the Team had met with CCS leaders and staff prior to the visit, and he remained afterward at the end of the day to summarize initial findings with President Ollie.

Evaluation Report

Institution Overview, from the CCS Self-Study

The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) was founded as a place to explore the past, present, and future of cartooning. Since welcoming its first class in 2005, the school remains firmly committed to its vision: that comics—like painting, sculpture, or writing—is a medium, not a genre, and worthy of serious study.

The Center for Cartoon Studies is located in the historic downtown village of White River Junction, Vermont. CCS programs include a two-year Master of Fine Arts Degree, One- and Two-Year Certificates in Cartooning, annual workshops, and regular community programs that center on the creation and dissemination of comics, graphic novels, and other manifestations of the visual narrative. Experienced and internationally recognized cartoonists, writers, and designers teach classes here. CCS's fellowship and visiting artist programs bring many of the most celebrated cartoonists working today into CCS's classes, including Tillie Walden, Robyn Smith, Whit Taylor, Sarah Mirk, Nate Powell, Maia Kobabe, Jen Wang, and Trung Le Nguyen.

The school's founding building is the former Colodny Department Store. This state-owned building was renovated by CCS prior to opening. Since the school's early years, CCS purchased and renovated the old Post Office (2012) and occupies additional space within the village at the Old Telegraph Building and the Italian Market. The school has been recognized as being an essential contributor to White River Junction's cultural and economic revitalization. As part of the institution's mission, CCS recognizes the critical role it can play towards the betterment of its surrounding community.

Throughout its early years and within these more recent pandemic years, CCS has remained solidly focused on helping students build a skillset that serves them in establishing a career, and—just as importantly—to write, draw, and share the stories only they can tell. This is accomplished in a variety of ways that include: a thoughtful, integrated curriculum; small class sizes; state-of-the-art facilities; mentoring and networking opportunities; and mental health support.

The Center for Cartoon Studies has seen success in many areas, including governance and decision making, fiscal and social responsibility, resource management, and launching our alumni in careers that demonstrate the efficacy of the program. As the pandemic created many challenges for colleges, it also created opportunities in the way we teach, learn, collaborate, and operate.

The VHEC Evaluation Review Team found this description to be accurate.

Furthermore, CCS clearly articulates its unique purpose and goals, educates and nurtures its nontraditional students, demonstrates a creative entrepreneurial culture, serves as an intellectual and experiential national center for excellence in cartooning, graphic art and storytelling, embraces its Vermont community, and strategically plans for its future. There is a unique and energetic vibe there. As an innovative and exemplary source of pride to the cartooning community, CCS is a small institution that thinks big. During the visit, someone described CCS as the small school that hits beyond its weight class. We agree.

Section I

Standard One: Mission and Purposes

CCS appears to adhere to its stated mission and purposes: providing a high quality education in the creation of visual stories through art, graphic design and storytelling, encouraging self-publishing, supporting the local community, and avoiding discrimination in admissions as a 501(c)(3) tax exempt institution. It is clear that CCS accomplishes its primary mission through exploring the past, present and future of cartooning in educating graduates well prepared for applying their diverse skills in education, healthcare, journalism, business, medicine and many other professions. A companion goal is to serve as an “ethical exemplar” for its graduates. The self-study cites many examples that support achievement of the above goals.

It is remarkable that the vision of founders Michelle Ollie and James Sturm almost twenty years ago remains the guiding light for CCS today, and that the institution has not strayed from its original mission. There is a vibrant culture and climate, both within the school and in the greater community it has chosen to serve.

It also appears that those who lead CCS—the Board, administration and faculty—are jointly and collaboratively committed to staying close to the mission in decision-making for the present and for the future. This genuine sharing of decision-making is not always the hallmark of higher education. Given the size, the committed leadership, and the collaborative culture, there is a sense that leading or guiding or learning from CCS is also a labor of love.

Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation

CCS is clearly engaged in continual self-reflection, and not just for a certification review. There is attention to long-term strategic planning as well as short-term issue resolution. This is challenging with a student population that ranges, at least recently, from 25-35 students who pay a tuition of approximately \$27,000 without significant resources for financial assistance. Given the small size and challenging cost, attending to the needs of current and future students is an important priority. Including those students in planning for the future is critical. The open doors of the President and other full time and part time administrators and faculty are part of the culture at CCS. Short term problem solving and longer term planning are facilitated by this back and forth sharing of problems and opportunities. Students and faculty are included on a regular basis, and all members of the community are updated regularly on news related to CCS so that there are no surprises. This, too, is often unique in the world of higher education. Small size facilitates the open door, but the open and welcoming style of leaders facilitates it as well. This includes updates on the financial health and outlook of the institution itself, quarterly reviews by the Board of Trustees.

The pressures of the pandemic highlighted many challenges for CCS, as for other similar institutions, including but not limited to the continuing concerns for the mental health of staff and students and the ongoing attention mental health deserves going forward, as well as the challenge of affordable housing in the wider area within an easy commute of CCS.

Although there are no formal mechanisms for evaluations of faculty and staff, CCS seems to satisfy the importance of accountability through student assessments and regular feedback in a less formalized approach. It is important to note that CCS enjoys a low attrition rate.

Given the small size of CCS, its donor base has always been a challenge. Hiring a grant writer has been helpful, although still in early stages. Facilities planning has been important to CCS, and the very recent purchase of a third building has been the result of years of planning.

Summary of Telegraph Renovation Project Financing Plan

To fund the Telegraph Renovation project, with an overall budget of \$2,227,626, the capital stack strategy includes public grants, private grants, individual donations, and financing. CCS to date has secured the following funding:

- Northern Borders Regional Commission (NBRC) Catalyst grant of \$971,315, which requires a match and cost share equal to the remainder of the budgeted expenses
- \$200,000 pledge from an anonymous foundation, to be used toward energy efficiency measures
- Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development Capital Investment Program grant of \$75,737, to be used toward building purchase
- VT Agency of Commerce and Community Development Community Recovery and Revitalization Program grant of \$79,110
- Two River Ottauquechee Regional Commission, as our project partner through the NBRC grant, will be assisting us to raise the approximately \$300,000 in remediation funds through federal and state sources (Exact amount to be determined through completion of Corrective Action Plan)
- CCS has committed \$207,913 to fund the building purchase and associated costs
- Mascoma Bank is committing to a loan to cover the remaining \$421,000 in order to secure

the match so we can proceed with the project in Fall of 2024

- o In the meantime, we will be fundraising from major donors and foundations to obviate the need to enact the loan or reduce the debt, if the loan is secured.

Standard Three: Organization and Governance

CCS has a necessarily small group of full time personnel, all of whom wear many hats. The organizational chart would include many dotted lines and a multitude of responsibilities. Given the very unique nature of the school, with many shared duties, it seems to work well. The nine member Board of Trustees include the President (Michele Ollie) and the Director (James Sturm). This is a unique structure in higher education as well. Having the co-founders, obviously enormously dedicated to the success of CCS, as equal members on a nine member Board is another remarkable but apparently effective approach to organization and governance. From the point of view of the team, this structure has helped to nurture CCS as it seeks to nurture and maintain qualitative excellence while keeping all eyes on financial well being.

Board members are actively involved in the school as stewards of success. There does not appear to be the kind of micromanagement that plagues other institutions. Both the President and Director are evaluated by the Board Chair. The Board employs an independent auditor for annual review and all finances are reviewed quarterly. There appears to be a healthy relationship among the Board, administration and faculty. CCS does not have an articulated CEO succession plan in place.

All parties were involved in and supportive of the creation of the new Applied Cartooning Center as part of CCS. A family foundation grant helped initiate this project. It appears to be an example of collaborative planning and a source of pride.

Standard Four: The Academic Program

The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) currently offers full-time one- and two-year programs designed to develop and refine competency in the creation and production of narrative visual art. Within this program, students may obtain a certificate or masters degree in fine arts.

The institution's educational objectives are:

- **Craft.** To maximize student competency in the areas of writing, drawing, narrative development, publication design, book production, promotion, publication, and distribution.
- **Conduct.** To encourage a standard of professional conduct to which students will adhere as they pursue and undertake freelance work in the arts and related fields.
- **Community.** To foster a strong community and support system among current students and alumni, establishing a network of contacts that will last beyond the span of the One-Year certificate, Two-Year certificate, and MFA program.

CCS's curriculum is defined by an overarching course coordination map, which ensures that content in any given course supplements, reinforces, and builds upon content in related courses. The first-year structure lays the foundation for and culminates in the second-year Thesis Project, a cohesive package of visual narrative art that represents the student's best work.

Each course communicates its content through a combination of lectures, multimedia presentations, group discussions, guest speakers, hands-on demonstrations, in-class exercises, and homework assignments. Student work is reviewed and evaluated through regular critique sessions with peers, faculty, and outside advisers.

Faculty members meet with the Faculty Chair twice per term to discuss, revise, improve, and coordinate course plans. A third meeting includes administrative staff and is designed to keep everyone apprised of larger institutional developments and concerns.

Students complete instructor evaluation surveys for all courses. Using the results of these surveys, the Faculty Chair, with input from the President and Director, assesses instructional methods and procedures and conducts an annual performance review with each faculty member. Evaluation during performance review is based on the instructor's ability to communicate their expertise on the course content, lead a class effectively, stay organized, help students think critically, address the needs of diverse learners, and engage with each student's work on its own terms.

The admissions standards are designed to select students who will be academically successful in the program without being exclusionary.

The Center for Cartoon Studies clearly articulates objectives and student learning outcomes for all courses.

Assuring Academic Quality

Academic planning and evaluation are the responsibility of the Faculty Chair, in cooperation with the President and Director, and in consultation with faculty.

CCS maintains academic oversight through a combination of administrative and faculty participation. Taking course-specific developments, student success rate, and the state of the industry into account, participants propose curricular changes aimed at improving student experience and outcomes.

While such annual adjustments usually address specific, small-scale issues, holistic changes are occasionally necessary. Based on the evolving interests of the student body, the shifting landscape of comics publishing, and a generational reassessment of “classical” arts training, in 2020 the Faculty Chair and faculty developed a Program Reevaluation document and presented it to the Director and President. The suggestions included in this document were approved and implemented. The school’s small size allows it to remain both flexible on a year-to-year basis, and pioneer evolving educational approaches to narrative visual arts education.

Required courses prepare students for the demands a professional career in the arts, as evidenced by the high rate of success among alumni and positive feedback received from the school’s extensive network of industry contacts.

Annual curriculum review and revision ensures a program able to evolve with the changing times and assist students in achieving a level of competency necessary to forge a career in the arts.

Due to the growth of the comics industry, generational shifts in aesthetic and narrative concerns, and technological advances, faculty should strive to stay abreast of developments that may affect their course content and methodology.

Degree Requirements

All students are governed by the same academic rules with regard to meeting certificate or degree requirements. An MFA is awarded to those with a completed bachelor’s degree who successfully complete the two-year, 60 credit programs at CCS.

Authority and academic oversight of certificate and degree requirements are overseen by the Director, President, and Faculty Chair.

Evaluations of Teaching and Learning

The quality of teaching is under the purview of the Faculty Chair, who evaluates faculty performance and educational effectiveness on an ongoing basis, through a combination of observation, input from other faculty and staff, and the results of student course surveys.

Students are asked to complete an online evaluation survey for each course at the conclusion of each term. The Faculty Chair reviews the results of all course surveys and takes them into account when considering curricular changes for the following academic year.

Looking forward, specific areas of concentration in the academic program have been identified by CCS:

- Greater diversity in student body and faculty identity;
- Greater diversity in authorial identity when selecting course materials;
- Reevaluation of conventional approaches to media, narrative design, and history;
- Evaluation and incorporation of evolving technological standards;
- Improvement of the hybrid classroom experience;
- Expansion of the writing component of coursework via workshops and dedicated assignments;
- Discussions of the utility and ethical concerns around AI-generated art; and
- Integrating more public facing projects into the curriculum.

Standard Five: Students and Student Services

Admissions and Financial Aid

The Center for Cartoon Studies offers a two-year Master of Fine Arts degree, one- and two-year certificates in Cartooning, annual workshops, as well as regular community programs that focus on the visual narrative. It is a mission driven institution with a focus on developing self-publishing knowledge ensuring that students leave the program with the skills they will need to publish, market and share their work.

In 2022, CCS served 22 students in the MFA program, six students in the two-year certificate program, and one student in the one-year certificate program. In the fall of 2023, there are 14 first-year students and 12 second-year students. Students are admitted to CCS based on a review of their application, portfolio, essay, curriculum vitae, transcripts and letters of recommendation. Students must have a high school diploma or equivalent to apply. Application interviews are conducted via Zoom or in person. It is a rolling admissions process. Given its specific academic focus, CCS will need to continue to seek out innovative ways to ensure that it is maintaining healthy enrollment numbers. The current strategy of connecting with undergraduate art and design programs, as well as the general outreach practices are working well as are the online week-long workshops as a feeder program for prospective students.

CCS maintains a high retention rate of nearly 95%. Additionally, 40% of students who complete the one-year certificate opt to remain at the school to complete either the two-year certificate or the MFA, an indication of the quality of the experience that students have at CCS.

CCS offers limited merit scholarships each year and all students are enrolled full-time. In addition, needs-based and BIPOC scholarships for workshops are available. In 2023, CCS will offer the first Ed Koren Scholarship. CCS does not participate in the Federal Student Aid program but partners with VSAC around private loans. A Tuition Payment Plan is also available. Maintaining affordability is another area where CCS must continue to focus. Considering ways to expand their fundraising abilities and scholarship pools will help to ensure that all students who could benefit from their unique programming are able to afford it.

CCS follows FERPA in relationship to student records, including applications, portfolios and transcripts.

Student Life

First-year students are invited to an orientation which is held the weekend before the start of the fall semester. The orientation includes a review of curriculum and the student handbook, a tour of the campus and town, information on student life, a library orientation and networking opportunities.

As the demographics of students enrolled at CCS has evolved over time and begun to represent more diverse population, CCS has made a commitment to focus on the needs of these special populations. This work will continue to need to be prioritized in the coming years to ensure that all students are being served equitably by CCS and its programs.

Advising

All second-year students are assigned an academic advisor of their choosing to provide mentorship and guidance on their senior thesis project. There are two licensed counselors available in situations when personal counseling may be necessary.

Student Housing, Food and Transportation

CCS does not offer school-run housing but partners with the Hotel Coolidge to provide students with a close, low cost option. The Hotel Coolidge offers shared common areas with single-occupancy rooms. In addition, the school builds partnerships with local landlords to ensure that students can find affordable housing. Like most communities in VT, the struggle to find affordable housing can be a challenge for CCS students. The link between availability of affordable housing and enrollment at CCS must continue to be an area of focus moving forward.

CCS does not provide food services, but partners with the local community around access to healthy meals, sometimes at discounted rates.

White River Junction, where CCS is located, has multiple transportation options including train and bus. There is accessible parking close to the school and the village is walkable, only a few blocks away.

Extracurricular Activities

Like many schools, CCS is still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on learning and community building. During the 2022-2023 academic year many of the school's pre-pandemic traditions and community-building activities were able to return. CCS organizes extracurricular activities throughout the year including hikes, athletic and fitness opportunities, wellness week, outdoor adventures, community meals, game nights etc.

In addition, CCS maintains strong ties to the local community and fosters opportunities for CCS students to take advantage of all that the greater White River Junction community has to offer.

The school utilizes Discord to communicate and many of the student life activities that are offered are driven by student interest or are student-initiated.

Student Grievances, Safety and Security, Student Conduct

Student grievances are heard by the college president and if not resolved, can move on to the director. Academic buildings are secured by key card access and cameras are being installed.

CCS Standards of Conduct are included in the Student Handbook which is reviewed at orientation.

Health Services

While CCS does not provide healthcare plans, it connects students with local providers and community health resources. In addition, wellness week seeks to raise student awareness about healthy lifestyles. CCS has an agreement with two local counselors and is looking to broaden available counseling services.

Career and Alumni

CCS strives to provide graduates with the skills they will need to succeed as working cartoonists. Alumni of the program have had success in publishing and beyond and CCS maintains a robust network of alumni to help further career connections.

All second year students have a 60 hour internship and Industry Day is an opportunity for all students to become connected to the larger comics community. In addition, the coursework in the Professional Practices course helps students to prepare for the world of work.

Standard Six: Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship

Faculty and Academic Staff

Faculty members at CCS are practicing professionals, both experienced instructors and professional cartoonists. CCS's small class sizes and single course of study offers students ample opportunities to interact with faculty in and outside of the classroom.

The focused curriculum creates an immersive learning environment.

CCS will continue to explore ways to support instructors with their professional development interests. A professional development budget is established annually to support workshop registrations, purchase books and resources, attend conventions, etc.

Due to CCS's program size, efforts have been made to broaden student exposure to other teaching perspectives beyond the school's faculty. The efforts include weekly visiting artists, numerous guest speakers, special topics instructors, and thesis advisors for second-year students.

Faculty and Academic Staff Scholarship

CCS faculty have won multiple awards – including Eisner and Ignatz awards – and are published by prominent comics publishers, including Disney, DC Comics, Random House Graphic, among others. Faculty also work as freelance cartoonists for *The New Yorker*, *The Nib*, and *Slate*. Many also work as freelance illustrators on projects as varied as children's picture books and editorial illustrations.

Faculty is currently primarily female/non-binary and other forms of intersectional diversity (LGBTQIA+ instructors, BIPOC instructors, etc.).

While utilizing remote instructors has become more accepted due to the pandemic, CCS still emphasizes in-person learning as the primary modality for instruction within the program.

There can be challenges to recruiting professors or professionals to a rural area, especially one with such limited employment opportunities.

The administration is engaged in the process of assessing ways to attract and increase faculty retention.

Teaching and Learning

CCS's single course of study is tightly integrated across the curriculum by the Faculty Chair.

At CCS, a range of teaching methods are used depending on the course and the instructor. These include demonstrations, lectures, hands-on software training, one-on-one mentoring, group assignments, research-based projects, peer-to-peer presentations, and client and community-focused assignments. Central to all of these approaches is an emphasis on completing assignments that require students to conceive, create, craft, and distribute a finished publication.

The pandemic required CCS to bring their entire curriculum online using Zoom, Google drive and docs, and course sites. Timely new support for faculty, staff, and students included a tech help line, training videos, orientation comics, and a best-practices site with links to resources, faculty training sessions, etc. CCS teachers quickly adapted to the new learning platforms. CCS also boosted its mental health resources and offerings to better support its students through an unprecedented period of change and turmoil.

CCS will continue to reevaluate the role virtual classrooms will play in CCS's future without compromising its commitment to in-person learning.

Standard Seven: Institutional Resources

Human Resources

The Center for Cartoon Studies currently employs four full-time employees, including the two founders of the school. This number of employees, along with part-time faculty and temporary staff, is sufficient to fulfill the mission of the school.

All federal and state mandated employee benefits are provided by CCS. CCS contributes to the retirement fund of full-time employees. CCS's group medical insurance plan is provided to full-time employees. Access to this medical plan is also available to part-time employees. At this time, CCS does not offer employees either a vision or dental insurance plan as an employee benefit. CCS administration acknowledges the employee benefit package is not competitive with what is offered by other institutions of higher education and there is a commitment to improve employee benefits as finances allow.

Human resource policies are clearly stated in staff and faculty handbooks. These handbooks are regularly updated.

CCS is making a concerted effort to improve the diversity of faculty (and students through a targeted scholarship program). CCS reports BIPOC faculty have been hired and the proportion of female faculty has increased as well as LGBTQIA+ identified faculty in recent years. However, the location of CCS remains a challenge when it comes to recruiting employees.

Financial Resources

Institutions of higher education with smaller enrollments which are almost entirely dependent on Net Tuition Revenue to operate do not survive unless the leadership of the institution has the ability to fully manage the finances of the institution. The administration and staff and Board of The Center for Cartoon Studies are capable budget and financial managers. They have especially demonstrated this ability in recent years addressing enrollment fluctuations and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CCS's fiscal year end Statements of Financial Position as of June 30th remain strong each year with increases in Total Assets while Total Liabilities have decreased. The majority of Total Liabilities is Deferred Revenue which consists of Tuition Deposits for the upcoming academic year. The current plan is to purchase and renovate the Old Telegraph Building with grant and contributed funds without taking on new long-term debt. The majority of Net Assets do not have any donor restrictions.

CCS administration and Board members' ability to manage the annual operating budget supports the ongoing financial stability of the institution. Enrollment fluctuations affect Operating Revenues and this is effectively managed. In addition, CCS administration understands financial aid (discount of Tuition) can be an effective tool to increase enrollment but must also be effectively managed. Financial aid awards amount to just 5% of total Tuition. The fiscal year operating budget is not finalized until September once the Fall Semester enrollment is confirmed and this contributes to the successful management of the Operating Budget. CCS Net Income from Operations has been positive in recent years.

CCS has recently made progress in diversifying their revenue sources. In addition to the rental income from organizations which lease CCS spaces in the Post Office Building, educational graphic novels have been produced with partner organizations. In addition, online workshop programs are now offered with more in development. CCS expects contributed income and grants will increase as well as the number of donors with the addition of a full-time grants writer staff position.

An independent certified public accounting firm audits annual financial statements for CCS which includes an unmodified opinion that the financial statements fairly represent the financial position of the institution. These financial statements are provided to the Board of Trustees as are interim financial reports during the fiscal year and an annual “Communication with Those Charged with Governance” report prepared by the accounting firm.

The audit firm also provides CCS with a “Letter of Recommendations to Management”. The CCS Self-Study included such a letter dated June 30, 2016. This document includes non-material findings which are intended to improve operating efficiency. CCS administration reports all suggested comments have been addressed.

Information, Physical, and Technological Resources

The Center for Cartoon Studies was founded in downtown White River Junction almost 20 years ago and originally housed in various leased facilities. CCS operations are now located in three buildings. The Post Office Building is owned by CCS with classrooms, the Schulz Library, faculty and administrative offices and spaces for students to socialize. Upstairs spaces are rented to outside organizations. The Colodny Building is a former department store and the ground floor and basement are leased by CCS. A public gallery, offices and the production lab are located in the Colodny Building. The Italian Market building is also leased and provides temporary studio space.

CCS administration is managing the process to purchase the Old Telegraph Building in town. Environmental issues are under review as part of the purchase of the building. Once the Old Telegraph Building has been purchased and renovated, CCS will no longer lease the Colodny Building as all current school activities in the Colodny Building will be moved to the Old Telegraph Building.

None of the buildings occupied by CCS were built as academic buildings. CCS administration continue to demonstrate their ability to evaluate the best way to utilize and renovate the buildings occupied by the school. Renovations and upgrades are completed as finances allow. The Post Office Building is not fully accessible (there is no elevator) and requires some masonry repairs. Otherwise, the spaces in this building are well-suited to the function of the room and the building is safe and secure. Once the Old Telegraph Building is purchased by CCS, the renovations will create suitable space for school activities and full access throughout the building.

The Schulz Library is located in the Post Office Building. The library’s collection includes over 23,000 graphic novels and books, 10,000 comics and zines and 5,500 pieces of original art as part of the Wortman Archive. The Schulz Library is open six days a week and staffed with CCS students and alumni. Other nearby libraries are available to CCS students and faculty. The Schulz Library and CCS Archive are an important source of information for CCS students and faculty and are integrated into the academic program.

Up-to-date and reliable technology is key to the success of the academic program and effective administrative support at The Center for Cartoon Studies. CCS leadership routinely evaluate whether the CCS’s technology infrastructure is sufficient and appropriate to achieve the goals of the institution and faculty and students are consulted prior to any upgrades or changes. Regular technology upgrades are completed. The development of online instruction accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic and CCS technology infrastructure continues to support this initiative.

Standard Eight: Educational Effectiveness

CCS employs a number of tools regularly to ensure educational effectiveness: student oversight, student course evaluations, faculty office hours (each faculty holds 2 hours per week), faculty guidance, and faculty meetings (5 per year spaced to address student progress through curriculum).

CCS trains students for independent careers, with a focus on skills that will serve them best as self-employed freelancers. 88 % of the faculty and staff at CCS are working cartoonists, their collective experience directly impacts curriculum development, institution-wide standards of professional practice, and networking opportunities.

Many graduates have proven the value of the curriculum by successfully self-publishing, signing publication deals with mainstream book publishers, winning top industry awards, developing and teaching comics courses in higher education, and creating streaming television series.

Aside from continuing to produce comics, alumni have gone on to find employment in a wide range of fields within or adjacent to the arts, including editorial posts at major publishers, video game development, animation storyboarding, graphic design positions at prominent studios, and many others.

Yearly, CCS faculty and administration assess data from recent course surveys in order to recognize any shifts in interests, concerns, and skill sets that accompany generational shifts in the student body and consider whether changes to the program and/or institutional policy are necessary.

Like most educational institutions, CCS had to adapt in order to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The school has engaged in diversity training and taking steps to accommodate different learning styles in the classroom.

CCS is engaged in ongoing work to assess educational effectiveness, term-to-term and year-to-year, current areas identified by CCS as priorities are: Diversity in the classroom, Annual evaluation of course objectives and outcomes, Updated student surveys, Alumni outreach (new position created).

Standard Nine: Integrity, Transparency and Public Disclosure

CCS asserts commitment to high ethical standards, demonstration of integrity, maintenance of best practice standards and ongoing communication with its internal and external communities.

CCS shares policies and procedures regularly with all stakeholders utilizing the intranet, course sites, email and printed materials. CCS provides students with the student handbook at orientation and utilizes the Standards of Conduct and Policies to communicate its expectations on ethical behavior.

The restructured website follows a style guide and publishes clear information about admissions, tuition and fees as well as alumni profiles and is reviewed on an annual basis.

CCS is developing a Consensual Relationship policy that will be incorporated into the handbook in the spring of 2024.

The development of the self-study itself was cited as an example of collaboration, transparency and inclusion of stakeholders.

Section II: Strengths, concerns and suggestions

Standards One, Two and Three

The CCS mission and purposes are clear and transparent. They are brought to life in day-to-day operations, and there appears to be a broad understanding of what the school is about as well as its hopes and dreams for the future. Its size on a human and accessible scale, the long time commitment and involvement of its two founders, and the nurturing of the community, both within the school and in the Upper Valley as well as across Vermont, all combine to support and bolster CCS for the future. As noted in the description of the CCS adherence to the standards, there is an uncommon (in higher education) and unified culture that permeates mission, evaluation of the present and planning for the future. The organization of CCS, and most notably its leadership, invite collaboration in all of these areas of mission, purpose, evaluation and planning. It is both unique and impressive.

The Evaluation Team supports the ongoing revision of the Mission Statement as articulated by CCS, and in planning for the future that takes into consideration the ongoing mental health needs of students and staff.

Furthermore, the housing crunch in the Upper Valley creates a multitude of challenges for students and staff, perhaps creating the future need for CCS access to its own housing for students and staff.

The Team recognizes the progress that CCS has made in the search for external resources to support student scholarships as well as capital projects. This will be critical to the continuing success of CCS going forward.

It would be in the best interest of CCS to develop a CEO succession plan for the future.

Standards Four, Six and Eight

-It is clear that CCS delivers a rigorous and supportive, student-centered curriculum that can be accessed by all students regardless of their abilities or strengths. The MFA program structure is on par with other innovative and well-regarded MFA programs in the fine arts although CCS distinguishes itself through the singular study of cartooning.

-The CCS MFA program's first year foundations curriculum gives students a solid grounding in craft/skills acquisition, professional best practices, and history/context of the medium, while the second year (thesis year) is self-directed and includes meeting production expectations, continued professional practice, engaging in critiques with classmates, etc.

-The curriculum, courses, and faculty are regularly reviewed through robust and thoughtful qualitative feedback and observations from students, faculty, and administration. These constituents work collegially and collaboratively with shared purpose. Administrators are responsive to evolving student needs and faculty suggestions for program improvements.

-CCS creates a supportive, safe and inclusive space for students. Integrated mental health support.

-Students are well prepared for careers in professional cartooning as evidenced through the proven accolades, achievements and reputation of alumni and the program.

-While institutional objectives are clear and individual course learning objectives and outcomes are stated in syllabi, MFA program student learning objectives and outcomes should be established (if not already) and made publicly available to students and potential students. We could not locate MFA program objectives/outcomes on the CCS website, program literature, or self-study. Program objectives/outcomes would also benefit the already robust program/curriculum evaluation and assessment process at CCS.

-Continued evaluation and integration of evolving technological standards of the medium and educational delivery modes.

-Continue already established efforts to increase access for students, and to cultivate greater diversity in both student and faculty bodies.

-Ensure fully accessible studios and classroom spaces which appears to be planned with the future development of the Telegraph Building.

-Increased grant or institutional funding needed, as noted by students during the visit, to support their desire for travel to industry conventions.

Standard Five

Given the relatively reduced enrollment during and after the pandemic, with 26 students matriculated in the fall of 2023, it will be important to continue fundraising efforts for scholarships and outreach to both traditional and nontraditional students. As noted earlier, finding reliable and quality housing will be important in attracting new students, especially if CCS were able to secure more long term access.

The very high retention rate of almost 95% is remarkable, a tribute to the quality of education at CCS.

As CCS emerges from pandemic restrictions it will also be important to continue, and in some cases rejuvenate, extracurricular opportunities, as well as the continuing access to mental health care going forward.

Standard Seven

In the area of Human Resources, adjunct faculty pay exceeds average pay for that group generally. CCS has made progress in attracting more diversity in students and faculty. The CCS staff and administration are experienced, showing long term commitment for the benefit of students.

There are challenges, however. Employee benefits are not competitive with other higher education institutions. Improving diversity is an ongoing challenge for any institution. And just as students benefit from experienced faculty and leaders, as long-term employees retire there will be a loss of institutional knowledge, particularly important in a smaller school that benefits from such wisdom.

In the area of Financial Resources, there is a strong balance sheet, with a year after year increase in Total Asset value with minimal Liabilities. There is a strong balance sheet, no long term debt, and the tuition is less than other colleges offering similar, or close to similar, academic programs.

There are challenges as enrollment fluctuates as CCS balances the operating budget. There is an ongoing challenge of affordability for students who do not have access to federal financial aid. Without an unrestricted endowment, CCS must manage financial challenges with available cash.

In the area of information, physical and technological resources, there are solid strengths in a number of areas. The Schulz Library is an important academic resource and social space. The purchase and full renovation of the Old Telegraph Building will be both a boon and a challenge to the school, and an important next step in the evolution of CCS. There is excellent support from and integration with the wider White River Junction community. CCS also benefits from up-to-date technology supporting the academic program.

It would be advisable to have full access to all CCS facilities, and this will require new elevators.

There is always the challenge in a program such as this to maintain technology into the future, and in fact wherever possible and affordable to lead the way with state of the art technology going forward.

Standard Nine

CCS is mission driven with an impressive academic focus. There is a unique connection with White River Junction, with Vermont and with the larger comics industry. There are very strong alumni connections, with some now teaching at CCS. Community members expect and get transparency and integrity from CCS.

The self-study conducted by CCS is a good example of community outreach and collaboration. It was a very high quality product, with all hands on board. It served, and still serves, as a mirror of the institution and community it sought to describe: one of introspection, communication, transparency, dedication, commitment and hope.

It is remarkable that CCS remains a creative and open book, a school that emulates its mission with engaging story telling. They are who they say they are. The operation of the school, and its hopes and dreams for the future, seem inseparable from its mission. The proof is that the self study and the visit to CCS created a visual story that is as innovative as it is exemplary, truly an example for the rest of higher education. That 95% of its students remain at CCS is further testimony to our findings.

Section III—Recommendation

The VHEC visiting team recommends certifying the Center for Cartoon Studies for another five year period, without stipulation, to offer the MFA degree in Cartoon Studies.