

CONFIDENTIAL

The Center for Cartoon Studies

Report of an Evaluation Team to the
Committee on Accreditation & Certification of the
Vermont Higher Education Council

May 18, 2011

Preface

On Monday and Tuesday, May 2 and 3, 2011, an evaluation team for the Vermont Higher Education Council (VHEC) conducted a site visit to the campus of the Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS), located in White River Junction VT. The review was initiated to assess the Center's capacity to continue to offer programs approved by the Vermont Department of Education in 2007.

The team consisted of Peggy Williams (President Emerita, Ithaca College and former President, Lyndon State College), chair of the team; Robert Selby (Assistant Professor, Graphic Arts, Champlain College) and Lauren Wobby (CFO/Treasurer, Norwich University). Larry Mandell (President Emeritus, Woodbury College) acting as the Certification Process Coordinator for VHEC, accompanied the evaluation team.

The evaluation team commends Michelle Ollie (President) and James Sturm (Director) along with trustees, faculty, staff, and students of CCS for their thorough completion of the self-study materials, and for their cooperation and hospitality throughout the process and the visit itself.

Introduction

The Center for Cartoon Studies seeks continuing authority from the Vermont Department of Education to offer the Master of Fine Arts degree in the State of Vermont.

By Vermont statute [16 V.S.A. 176 (h) and 176 (e) (1)], "Prior to any action taken by the state board with respect to any application for degree-granting authority, the board shall obtain the advice of the Vermont Higher Education Council, Incorporated." The evaluation team examined the request for continuation of

degree granting authority, the institutional self-study of conformity to standards established by VHEC, and supporting documents supplied by CCS.

The evaluation team has prepared this report for review by the VHEC Committee on Accreditation and Certification and by the Vermont Department of Education. Part I is the assessment by the evaluation team of the extent to which CCS conforms to the standards expected for a degree-granting institution. Part II is an assessment of strengths, concerns and suggestions of the institution, provided to CCS as advice for its consideration and action. Part III is the evaluation team's recommendation to the Vermont Department of Education and the Vermont State Board of Education regarding action that should be taken with regard to degree-granting authority.

Part I—Evaluation of Standards

Standard I. Purpose, Philosophy, and Objectives

The Center for Cartoon Studies is located in the center of White River Junction. The Center operates under the charter of the National Association of Comics Arts Educators, and is a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization.

There is great clarity about the Center's mission and its commitment to "providing the highest quality of education to students interested in creating visual stories." The Center offers curriculum in art, graphic design, and literature to reflect the wide array of skills needed to create comics and graphic novels. The Center also emphasizes self-publishing to enable its students to publish and market their work. Students who complete a course of study are equipped with a set of marketable skills enabling them to find meaningful employment with graphic design firms, web site developers, art departments of publishing houses, academic institutions, and more.

Complementing the academic mission and purpose, is a commitment for the Center to serve the community — as a socially responsible organization dedicated to improving the cultural and economic quality of life of White River Junction and environs. The presence of the Center has had significant, visible economic and cultural impact on the region, in its short history. It is clear that Center leadership, as well as trustees, are dedicated to these objectives.

The purposes, commitments, and objectives of the Center are in agreement with the mission and vision and goals. They are clearly stated and supported by data and success to date.

There are processes in place to regularly assess the extent to which practices and outcomes align with stated mission, purposes, and objectives. Processes include an ongoing review of key indicators of the Center's performance, as well as review of best practices and trends in the field/profession. These efforts are led by the

administration and ultimately reviewed by the board. All members of the Center's community are engaged in such assessment. Throughout the year, the administration engages members of the CCS community in the assessment in various ways: solicitation of input and advice from internal and external constituencies (including industry professionals and alumni), feedback from individual meetings between faculty and students, and from discussions at regular board meetings. Each spring, to ensure community input, the administration presents on the "State of the School" at a school wide meeting where attendance is required.

The ultimate authority/responsibility for determining the need for changes to mission, purpose, and/or objectives rests with the board. An amendment to the purpose or mission of the Center requires an affirmative vote of 75% of its members.

The genesis of the idea for the Center was to establish a school for cartoonists with the potential to transform the community in which it was located. The mission and purpose remain clear and, in its short history, the Center has made great strides in addressing them.

Standard II. The Program

The evident success of alumni tracked since their graduation over the past four years can be traced in part to the rigor of the portfolio review that forms a critical component of the admission process for both the Masters and the certificate programs at the Center of Cartoon Studies. The ratio of three applicants for each admission this year indicates the selective nature of the CCS and explains to an important degree the school's consistent success in the formation of small but cohesive classes. These classes have proven to be both prepared and able to take full advantage of a sharply focused professional curriculum.

The formation of capable classes has, in turn, allowed the school to take full advantage of a faculty composed of accomplished professionals who step directly from their studios into the classroom, to deliver current experience and the very latest in technological expertise. The faculty corps of practicing professionals is augmented by regular lectures and critiques featuring nationally and internationally celebrated cartoonists and artists who visit the school throughout the academic year. The rotating pool of visitors appears to be drawn deliberately from an ever widening and ever more diverse pool of celebrated experts.

In the years since the last accreditation visit, the CCS has expanded its facilities physically to include additional classrooms, an enhanced lecture hall that doubles as a studio for weekly life drawing sessions, and common studio or "home" space for upper class students.

The school has, at the same time, kept pace technologically. They have added new resources that allow student access to the Internet and other off-campus resources, even as the school maintains and upgrades its computer banks to include industry

standard software such as Adobe CS4 and CS5. Ongoing and technological maintenance includes audio and visual upgrades within the school teaching spaces, and advances in library capabilities (see section 5).

Standard III. Student Services

The exceptionally high retention rate enjoyed by the Center suggests that the admissions process does a good job selecting students who are both qualified and motivated to complete the program. The CCS experience was so satisfactory to the students with whom we met that their only complaint was that the experience was over all too soon.

The absence of federal financial aid does not hinder the ability of CCS to meet its annual admissions goals. The administration works closely with prospective students to help them understand the available funding/financing options. Staff do an equally good job assisting students in finding suitable living arrangements and in advising them of the services available in the area. It was clear that administration is available at all times to assist prospective, current, and former students and has created a very supportive environment for them.

The Student Handbook addresses a myriad of issues pertaining to student life and is provided to all students in printed form but is also available on-line. It is a codification of policies and standards and is a resource for students and by addressing academic, fiscal, and hygiene issues pertinent to their matriculation.

Student records are maintained in both paper and electronic format. All are well protected from unauthorized access and from inadvertent destruction.

Standard IV. Faculty and Personnel

President Michelle Ollie and Director James Sturm are the Center's only full time employees who teach. Valerie Fleisher, Operations Manager, is also a full time employee.

Michelle Ollie divides her time between teaching and her duties as the Center president. James Sturm divides his schedule among administration duties, teaching and his own professional practice. Currently the Center for Cartoon Studies lists five additional members of the teaching faculty, all of whom are adjunct.

The credentials of the current CCS faculty and staff are impeccable. Class observations indicate that the CCS faculty is composed of equally adept educators. Faculty lectures are engaging, attention to the individual student is an unparalleled advantage of the school size, and the quality and volume of student output speaks to the efficacy of the in-depth reviews and critiques that are conducted on a regular basis.

Standard V. The CCS Library

The CCS library is housed in a renovated firehouse a short distance from the campus center. Currently the library shares the building with a charming museum that affords the school additional event space. The library holdings have increased from 5,000 to 9,000 volumes since the last accreditation visit and serves the unique demands of the cartoon program. Holdings include: focused collections of graphic novels and “gag” comics; instructional texts that include topics germane to cartooning such as anatomy and perspective; biographies of important cartoonists and artists; books for reference imagery; books on business and legal issues for cartoonists; children’s books; and anthologies of foreign work not readily available in other libraries or markets.

Over the past year, the school library has implemented a transition to a state of the art computer-based catalogue system under the supervision of a consultant in library science. Improvements to the library database and to the physical infrastructure represent a significant advance for the library. Additional developments include the addition of digital readers made possible by grants from the Will and Ann Eisner Family Foundation.

The CCS library continues to enjoy additional support from the nearby Kilton Public Library and from the considerable resources of the Dartmouth College library system and its interlibrary network. The library employs a part time professional on location and enjoys valuable support and advice on best practices from an ad hoc committee of trained professionals. These and other advantages allow the CCS library to serve the needs of the current student body, as well as the interests of graduates, researchers and other professionals.

Standard VI. Facilities and Equipment

The Center facilities include numerous rented buildings in the center of White River Junction. CCS has also entered into community partnerships for shared spaces for specific purposes such as meetings, large lectures and the like. The location of functions in different buildings that are not contiguous creates the sense of a campus. The main building, Colodny, is a renovated department store and, though well-worn, is well-kept, inviting, and suitably configured. It houses the gallery, administrative offices, class room space, production lab and student lounge. The space is being used efficiently and meets the needs of the current student population and employees. The building is available for student use 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The building is on a long-term, ten year lease with an option to buy.

The Schulz Library is located down the street and houses the existing collection of books and media effectively. While it appears that meaningful growth of the collection may be difficult in the available space, the college is confident that by reorganizing the space, implementing offsite storage for rare books and long run serial back issues, and its recent investment of e-readers, that the current location

will serve CCS growth for the next five years or more. This building is on a two year lease.

The Old Telegraph Building is home to the studio space for the second year students and storage space. The vibrancy of the student work spaces distracts from the less than appealing aesthetics of the building. Negotiations are underway to execute a long-term lease for the space; if this is accomplished the Center plans to commit financial resources to interior improvements. The students have unlimited access to this building.

The Center also rents studio and classroom space, as needed, in various other downtown buildings. Renting space allows the Center to respond to changing needs quickly and avoids the business risk associated with debt. The disadvantage of this arrangement is the threat of leases not being renewed; however, the current inventory of vacant space in White River Junction suggests that suitable replacement space could be secured.

The Center owns all equipment, with the exception of the copiers. The inventory of audio-video equipment, laptops with state-of-the-art software, printers, computer peripherals, and production lab equipment is impressive and seems to more than adequately support teaching and learning. The annual budget funds the replacement of equipment on a three or four year cycle.

Standard VII. Organization and Governance

The Center operates under a comprehensive set of bylaws, most recently revised in December 2009. The bylaws address all major aspects of the organization. The Board and Center President undertake a regular review of the bylaws, to assure that they address the current needs/organizational structure of the institution.

The Center has a very strong, dedicated, and talented board of directors. Consistent with the bylaws, and reflected in practice, the board oversees governance at the Center, and exercises stewardship as well as fiduciary responsibility. The board also serves in an advisory and evaluative role with respect to the Center's fulfillment of goals and objectives. The board characterizes itself as a "working board". The board meets four times a year — a recent change from three times — and is considering a return to four meetings a year. The meetings are well-structured, supported with well-prepared materials and a clear agenda, enabling directors to focus their discussion and attention during the time they are together.

The organizational chart accurately reflects the current organizational structure with clearly defined positions, roles and responsibilities. The two, full-time leadership positions at the Center are the Director James Sturm, and President/Chief Operating Officer Michelle Ollie. James and Michelle are the co-founders of the Center. The Director is responsible for the educational program, faculty, and development. The President is responsible for oversight of all operations that support the Center's mission. Both positions report directly to the President of the

Board. The Director and President work well together. The President of the board meets regularly with the Director and the President to monitor the planning processes as well as execution of the plans and calls upon other board members, as needed, in between meetings.

There are procedures for selecting and hiring principal administrators which involve a search for candidates, thorough review of prospective applicants' credentials and referrals, and presentation. Annually, the President of the board reviews the performance of the administrators.

Programs offered by the Center are developed by the administration and the board of directors. The Center provides opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to participate in program and policy decisions.

Standard VIII. Financial Resources

The most recently audited financial statements show that the Center has a strong balance sheet and positive operating results for the years ending June 30, 2010 and 2009. The Statement of Cash Flows reveals that the Center is generating cash from operations for both years. Their strong cash position serves as a cushion from unexpected revenue shortfalls or expense overruns. The Center has effectively managed its financial resources during the recent economic downturn.

While not trained accountants themselves, the President and Operations Manager are capable of keeping the financial records in a state of accuracy and timeliness. They provide the Trustees with regular budget-to-actual updates. The Board Treasurer, a CPA, provides oversight and guidance in the development and continuous improvement of accounting policies and practice.

The Center is attempting to broaden its revenue base but is currently heavily dependent on tuition and fee revenue. For this reason the annual operating budget has been approved by the Board once September enrollments are known. Wage and benefit increases are also determined at this time. The administration would like the board to approve the annual budget prior to the beginning of the fiscal year, and is putting this change in motion. Should enrollment targets not be met, expense modifications could and would be made to reflect the reduction of revenue.

Standard IX. Publications and Advertising

The Center's Student, Faculty, and Staff Handbooks provide useful information that is clearly stated and in a well-designed format. Although laudable, they pale in comparison to the external communications with prospective students and the general public. Not unexpectedly, the view book, admissions application, annual appeal, and advertising for upcoming events are as charming as they are informative. In this area the Center has a distinct advantage and they exploit it brilliantly.

Standard X. Evaluation and Planning

The Center engages in regular, ongoing self evaluation through meetings and conversations as well as an annual review of achievements measured against stated objectives. The activities of ongoing evaluation involve all members of the Center's community. Responsibility for such evaluation rests, ultimately, with the board of directors.

The Center adopted a formal business plan in 2005, carefully articulating educational goals as well as examination of market conditions and the state of the industry. This plan remains the foundation for operations while the Center undertakes the development of a revised strategic plan. This process of revision focuses on "where do we go from here?"

Planning is ongoing and based on data and well-founded assumptions. The focus of the current planning effort is the examination of drivers that led to success as well as "what if?" questions such as: "what happens if graphic novel departments start springing up on many campuses?"; "what if competition for students increases?"

The Center is satisfied with current enrollment level and is not driven by pressure to grow. Enrollment of 40 is considered ideal, in order to provide students the rich educational experience where one-on-one critique is so critical to pedagogy. The Center accepts 24 applicants per year through a rigorous admissions process. The current retention rate is 98%.

The Center is actively developing academic partnerships. A mobility partnership with Maine College of Art (MECA) was established in 2007. The School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City has agreed to accept credits. Discussions are currently underway with Ringling College of Art and Design, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab — Center for future Storytelling and with the Art Institute of Boston regarding programming opportunities and acceptance of student credits

With enrollment growth not on the agenda, the Center continues to look for revenue enhancement through other avenues, for example summer programs and special programs. Such initiatives do not affect or alter the design or quality of the Center's core academic programs.

There is a plan for closing the school, should that become necessary.

Part III—Recommendation

The VHEC evaluation team submits to the VHEC Committee on Accreditation and Certification the following draft recommendation:

That the State of Vermont grant the Center for Cartoon Studies authority to confer the academic degree Master of Arts for five years.