

GOOD NEWS FOR STUDIO SCHOOLS

May 19, 2014 James Lancel McElhinney

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The League has operated without accreditation since 1875. It was recently awarded recertification by SEVIS, due in part to administrative reforms that could revolutionize studio education as delivered by non-accredited atelier schools

THE NEW CONSERVATORY: A REVOLUTION IN STUDIO EDUCATION?

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If necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps an emergency can be the midwife to inspiration.

With a few exceptions, the marriage of university education with artistic training was never a happy union.

Facing economic difficulties and chary of the unquantifiable, many American universities are revising their missions away to step back from teaching artistic practice. Tenured job lines vacated by retirement are disappearing. Emeritus profes-

sors are replaced by junior hires. Few of them will earn tenure. As tenured job lines disappear their course loads are divided among several adjuncts, now more than a million strong at work in higher education.

A few years ago Ira Goldberg, Executive Director of the Art Students League of New York, enlisted my help in solving a problem.

SEVIS—Student & Exchange Visitor Program, a division of the Department of Homeland Security—had adopted new regulations requiring all institutions of higher learning that served non-resident aliens to be recertified. Raising slight concern for accredited colleges and universities, the new regulations threatened to strip many non-accredited schools and for-profit institutions of higher learning of the capacity to obtain visas for their students from abroad.

The League offers a four-year certificate program that serves a student population predominantly comprised of non-resident aliens. Without the League being recertified these students would be unable to continue in the program, or remain in the country.

Calling for multiple letters of support, regulations allowed that in lieu of accreditation, the applicant institution would have to give proof that accredited institutions had granted credit to students for attending classes at the non-accredited institution.

The Art Students League had kept no such records over the years. It was purely by word of mouth that I was aware that a woman was receiving college credit from Empire State College for taking my class. Through her I obtained access to the dean of the college, and to faculty mentors who supervised students' progress toward a bachelor's degree. Documenting a single case was one thing but proving that a pattern of such activity existed would be far more difficult.

At the time there were no registration protocols in place at the League to identify students from accredited colleges and universities attending League classes for credit. In those cases we discovered, the students in question had entered into learning contracts with their respective colleges, under provisions for off-campus and independent study, and thus were under no obligation to notify the League of their purpose. Whatever evidence we might have gathered was in the wind.

The next step was to review transcript requests in an attempt to discover instances where League study might have been accepted as credit toward a degree.

To my delight there were hundreds of requests. To my dismay no records existed of where these transcripts had been sent. This was not due to lassitude but to tradition. Since 1875 the League had operated as it always had done, following administrative habits long abandoned by the world of higher education.

Upon completion of their studies, League students were handed an official transcript, while in mainstream practice official transcripts only move between institu-

tions. This allows one institution to see how another is using their records. The League's antiquated practice ceased at once and mainstream protocols were adopted.

In the past two years we have seen large numbers of League official transcript requests sent to college admissions offices, with a smaller amount sent to registrars.

With the deadline for SEVIS recertification materials looming, nerves grew taught with real worries that like another historic studio school in Manhattan, the League might lose its certification.

Our last ditch effort focused on crafting memoranda of understanding with a number of accredited institutions including units of the State University of New York, CUNY, University of California, along with some AICAD and NASAD accredited art schools and a few private colleges and universities. These MOUs varied in content but all stated that under certain conditions the accredited partner would grant credit to its students for attending League classes. This was not precisely the evidence the government required but it was evidence in kind, submitted with an implied request for a variance or exception to the rule.

Our administrative unit was restructured to serve these new partnerships, and our promotional documents were retooled into an institutional profile formatted like a college self-study report. New positions were created and new hires were made. None of these changes were visible to the students or instructors working within the League's traditional open studio environment. New tracking protocols enhanced our capacity to serve students from places like St. Olaf College in Minnesota, Empire State College, CUNY and Syracuse. A League certificate graduate was recently awarded 32 college credits toward a degree at Empire State College, based on Prior Learning Assessment. Two weeks ago the League was recertified by SEVIS.

But that is not the end of the story.

College or university art departments that are being forced to drop courses could outsource those classes to facilities-appropriate non-accredited venues. Adjunct professors facing subsequent layoffs could continue to teach the same course, but in a different setting.

Hypothetically any studio art department cutting courses and firing adjuncts could outsource them instead to any suitable 501C3 not-for-profit art space, workshop and cultural events venues serving the local community. A memorandum of understanding is crafted to specify what will be taught, how students are tracked and how they are to be evaluated. The 501C3 hires same adjunct professors to teach the same classes they had taught at the college, which awards college credit to its students who attend them. Everybody wins.

The college or university art department retains its course offerings by outsourcing its endangered courses to a non-accredited partner institution.

The partner institution might be able to charge less for its classes, which would be tantamount to tuition relief to students who by saving money are able to accelerate their progress to degree. A key factor used to rate college departments, apart from full time enrollments and student retention is time to degree. As economic hardships force students to take five or six years to earn a four-year baccalaureate degree, the performance rating of the department in which they are earning their degree suffers. Relieving financial burdens can accelerate students earning a timely degree, and thus enhance department ratings.

Departments benefit by being able to offer more courses and thus serve more students.

Adjuncts continue to work, but as self-employed contractors in a less hierarchical environment that can provide them with other income enhancements such as exhibitions, workshops and launching pads for personal enterprises.

In effect this is nothing more than adapting the time-tested model of learning contracts governing field studies, study abroad and independent study experiences conventionally reserved for mentor-student agreements, to create working agreements between accredited and non accredited institutions that will benefit them both.

The simplicity of this concept is such that it often takes multiple conversations for academics to get their heads around the idea.

In the midst of a sea change in higher education, this might be more than just a lifeboat. It could become a new model for studio and conservatory training.

LEARNING TO SEE ANEW: PRIORITIES IN DRAWING EDUCATION

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