

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance/Postsecondary Approvals

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education renew The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) Certificate of Degree-Granting Authority to offer a Master of Fine Arts, and renew a Certificate of Approval to permit CCS to offer credit-bearing courses leading to a Certificate in Cartooning for a period of five (5) years commencing on January 17, 2018 and ending on January 30, 2023?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education renews The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) Certificate of Degree-Granting Authority to offer a Master of Fine Arts, and renew a Certificate of Approval to permit CCS to offer credit-bearing courses leading to a Certificate in Cartooning for a period of five (5) years commencing on January 17, 2018 and ending on January 30, 2023.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 176 and 176 a

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The State Board of Education is responsible for issuing Certificates of Approval and Certificates of Degree-Granting Authority, or both, to applicant postsecondary schools whose objectives, programs and resources, including personnel, curriculum, finances and facilities, are found to be adequate and appropriate for the stated purpose and for the protection of students and the public interest.

After reviewing completed application materials from CCS, Agency of Education staff agrees with the recommendation from Vermont Higher Education Council (VHEC). In its report to the Agency dated December 12, 2017, VHEC's Committee on Accreditation and Certification recommended the five-year approval for CCS's application for Degree Granting Authority for a Master of Fine Arts (MFA). The full report is available at the Agency.

CCS also requests renewal of the Certificate of Approval for authority to offer credit-bearing courses separately in the form of certificate programs. Postsecondary education staff conducted a review of CCS's Certificate in Cartooning Program and finds the goals, programs and resources to be adequate and appropriate for the stated purpose and recommends that the State Board issue CCS a Certificate of Approval to run

concurrently with VHEC's recommendation for a Certificate of Degree-Granting Authority.

COST IMPLICATIONS:

There are no fiscal impacts to the Agency of Education or the State of Vermont beyond the staff time necessary to process the request and formulate this recommendation to the State Board. That cost has been partially offset by The Center for Cartoon Studies' payment to the department of a \$7,500 fee.

STAFF AVAILABLE: Emily Byrne, Chief Financial Officer
 Cassandra Ryan, Fiscal & Regulatory Compliance
 Coordinator

The Center for Cartoon Studies Final Report

This report was prepared for the Vermont Higher Education Council (VHEC) Committee on Certification and Accreditation after study of the applicant's self-study report and a visit to The Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, VT.

Members of the Visiting Team:

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, Chair, former president of Marlboro College
Kumari Patricia Younce, Director, Education Program, Goddard College
Laurent Wobby, Chief Financial Officer, Norwich University

Observer:

Carrie Williams Howe, Executive Director, VHEC

Preface

The visiting team appointed by VHEC spent the day of September 22, 2017 at The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) in White River Junction, Vermont. Members of the visiting team included Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, Kumari Patricia Younce, and Lauren Wobby. They were accompanied by Carrie Williams Howe, who had organized the schedule for the day and attended a number of the meetings..

The team appreciates the participation of CCS' Board Chairman Warren Bingham and Board Treasurer Ann Hargraves for their generous contributions of time and insights. CCS President, Michelle Ollie, took part in many sessions with team members, sharing her knowledge of CCS' purposes and operations, as did James Sturm, the Director, who while sharing many responsibilities with Ms. Ollie, also focuses particularly on the academic program and faculty. The team also appreciated the knowledge of Operations Manager Dave Lloyd and faculty members Jason Lutes and Luke Howard, along with student Dan Nott, who met with team members and were open and candid in their observations of CCS. As CCS is a small institution, the team found that these representatives of the trustees, staff, faculty, and students provided useful observations, which corresponded to and augmented the school's self-study.

Team Chair Ellen McCulloch-Lovell met with President Ollie at the end of the day to brief her on the strengths and concerns discussed by the team.

Introduction

The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) is a small, independent, nonprofit educational institution, the mission of which “is dedicated to providing the highest quality of education to students interested in creating visual stories. CCS’ curriculum of art, graphic design, and literature reflects the wide array of skills needed to create comics and graphic novels. CCS emphasizes self-publishing and prepares its students to publish, market, and disseminate their work.” CCS also states in its self-study that its goal is “to prepare all graduates to manifest inquiring minds and possess the basic and traditional creative skills necessary to enter into one or more the many specializations related to comic art or use their specialized visual literacy training in a variety of fields.”

The Center for Cartoon Studies offers a two-year MFA degree and both one-year and two-year certificates in cartooning. It is also an objective to graduate students with “a set of marketable skills” for “meaningful employment as independent artists as well as with design firms, web site developers, art departments of publishing houses, in academic institutions and more.”

With the specific objective of enhancing the creative and economic life of a small Vermont town, The Center for Cartoon Studies occupies three buildings in downtown White River Junction. It is small by design, currently at 31 FTE students, with aspirations to grow to no more than 40-45.

CCS has very clear articulation of purpose and set of goals, which keep it focused on a particular niche in the world of higher education. It demonstrates an entrepreneurial spirit, open to experimentation and adapting to a changing field, while also attracting the top talent in this area of graphic art and storytelling. It aims to be a national center for cartooning and has established a strong brand through its programs, publications, and book series.

The team found the self-study informative and straight-forward, showing insight into the strengths and concerns of CCS.

I. Purpose, Philosophy, and Goals

The Center for Cartoon Studies was founded in 2004 by current President Michelle Ollie and Director James Sturm, both of whom come from the fields of visual art and cartooning. They envisioned a place with a strong community spirit where all students receive individual attention, which would also contribute to the surrounding rural economy. The purpose is clearly articulated as to the skills students can expect to acquire and/or develop and their career prospects after completing the course of study. As the self-study states, “CCS’ curriculum of art, graphic design, and storytelling reflects the wide array of skills needed to create comics and graphic novels.” CCS emphasizes “preparing students to produce, market, and disseminate their own work,” as well as to “apply their skills to diverse fields.”

In addition to teaching foundational skills, CCS also provides for education in digital techniques. The school also sees the importance of serving as “an ethical exemplar,” demonstrating how to manage one’s career and also to serve the broader social good through one’s work. CCS collaborates with the Center for Restorative Justice and the nearby VA Medical Center, where students have learned to interview patients with PTSD.

With such clear direction, CCS’ board, administration, and faculty can make decisions in light of mission. The Board of Trustees reviews a “dashboard” of key performance indicators at each of its quarterly meetings. The Director presents a “State of the School” report at the annual meeting with time for discussion with faculty and students. Each spring, there is a Town Hall session to provide for discussion from all constituents.

The school’s small size allows for continuous feedback from constituents. It recently conducted its first alumni survey, hearing from graduates. Course evaluations, faculty critique of student work, thesis advisor reviews, and other surveys provide useful information. The Chairman described CCS’ culture as one of self-evaluation and responsiveness. Small size may also limit insights; however, CCS’ network of visiting artists and experts allows for outside perspectives on their program.

II. Educational Programs

The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) offers one and two year certificate programs and an MFA degree. The only difference in selection criteria and program content is that the matriculated MFA students must hold an undergraduate degree. All students attend full time. The curriculum is integrated and offers first year students the chance to build skills and second year students the ability to develop a professional practice identity as well as to focus on a thesis. All final MFA thesis work is exhibited at the school.

A robust visiting artists program offers a seminar on Thursdays where a different guest artist presents work every week and can share insights with students and faculty. Every thesis student has an advisor who is a professional artist and who mentors them every two weeks with conversations and support as the thesis project is developed. These advisors can be faculty or other artists who may anywhere in the world.

Courses include: the cartooning studio which is the hub course, life drawing, publications workshop, survey of the drawn story, professional practice seminar, visiting artists' seminar, and thesis. Courses are taught by faculty with extensive experience in the field who combine academic learning with real-world application. There is intentionality among faculty toward integrating courses such that the work students are completing in one course can be complemented by work in another.

CCS' grading policy offers a pass or no credit. As the self-study states, students are "evaluated through the semester by faculty review, group critiques, peer review and/or written comments from instructors." Students must pass all required courses to receive the certificate or the degree. Students also have the opportunity to evaluate their faculty members, who receive the summarized feedback and an annual review by the Director.

Faculty and staff work together to support all students both academically and personally, providing attention to help students adjust to Vermont and to build a strong community that demonstrates care and concern for individual differences and respects the developing artist.

The school is small, with a total of 31 FTEs for 2017, enabling the close contact and attention for which CCS is known.

III. Students and Student Services

Student services at CCS consist of admissions, new student orientation, student support, classroom and studio space, and retention. One full time Operations Manager and his part-time assistant also support this work, along with the Director, the President, and faculty members. For those seeking mental health support, two community-based counselors are retained on a referral basis, with three visits per semester provided to students at no cost. Faculty members advise students on academic matters but also are alert to personal or health issues that might affect the student's performance. The school works as a community to support students, in particular helping new students to adjust. Faculty also help organize social events for students.

Students come from all over the country as well as abroad and recruitment efforts occur in different ways: the website, alumni referrals, faculty referrals, conventions, recruiting events, and from the reputation of the school. Although not eligible for federal financial aid or loans, CCS is trying to provide scholarships, offering aid when grants or specific gifts are available. There is one half-tuition scholarship awarded per year to an incoming student. On occasion, the Center secures funding for targeted scholarships. CCS offers a

Tuition Payment Plan and provides information about private loans available from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC.)

Inquiries from prospective students are received by the full-time Operations Manager and at times handled by the new assistant who is a CCS graduate. The application process includes the essay, a portfolio, a comic, CV, transcripts, and letters. Also included is the requirement of an original cartoon based on a prompt provided by CCS. Once accepted and a deposit is secured, a new student can be considered for a scholarship.

There is no differentiated curriculum from the one-year or two-year certificate students and the MFA students. Only difference is in criteria for admission: the MFA applicants must hold an undergraduate degree. All students attend full-time.

Enrollment has declined somewhat in the last two years but appears to be recovering. The lower enrollment was attributed to the diversion of resources from marketing and admissions, as well as to growing competition from other schools offering a similar program of study as cartooning grows in popularity. A new recruiter has been hired on contract. Portfolio Review Days are held and the Summer Workshop Program attracts interested students who later apply to the certificate and MFA program.

CCS arranges with the nearby Hotel Coolidge for some student housing, which also includes a shared kitchen and commons area although many students also arrange their own local housing. Downtown restaurants and cafes, groceries, a theater, and the train station are all very close.

The publications lab often serves as a social space for gathering and student networking. Faculty and staff make efforts to organize social events and the school offers information on health and well-being classes and ways to connect with the local community. Dartmouth College is not far away and offers additional social and cultural enrichment; in fact, CCS often partners with Dartmouth to bring speakers to the area who are shared between both institutions.

A wide array of student activities is offered and students also participate in and help to create community events, such as the town's Halloween parade and dance.

IV. Faculty and Staff

The Center for Cartoon Studies has three full-time staff, six part-time staff, and seven adjunct faculty members, who each teach the core courses, which run for an entire year. In addition, there is a Visiting Artists Program hosting an artist a week, a Fellows program, and the provision of an outside advisor for each student in their second, thesis year. The thesis advisor is an external artist/cartoonist, often with considerable experience, who regularly interacts with students as they complete their thesis. CCS faculty help students to select and connect with professionals in the field to fill this role.

Two senior faculty have been with CCS since the beginning. Newer ones, like the faculty member who teaches the publications workshop, is a CCS graduate; he also works half-time as a program coordinator and manages the Visiting Artists Program. James Sturm, Director, often joins classes as a guest speaker to offer new and innovative components in courses. Many courses are co-taught, especially if class size or enrollment increases.

Faculty possess many professional accomplishments in the world of cartooning, illustration, storytelling, graphics, editing, and publishing and most hold advanced degrees in the visual arts. They include prestigious and award-winning cartoonists and writers. Their professional activities are encouraged. Faculty are chosen based on their commitment to stay active in professional life and their publishing records in addition to their enthusiasm to teach and mentor students in the craft and art of graphic storytelling.

Clearly, faculty enjoy their work and feel committed to teaching the students in this unique environment. They appear to have no concern over teaching part-time or about compensation, as they also maintain lives as professional writers and cartoonists. One faculty member holds a part-time job as a program coordinator. Faculty enjoy seeing the success of their students and mentoring new professionals in their field. Also, faculty take on social roles with students like game night or hikes or ski trips, etc. There is a camaraderie and community built around learning that personalizes instruction to meet the academic as well as the social needs of all students.

Faculty are hired course by course for one semester or for one year and evaluated at the end of the course by students. Those evaluations are shared with the Director, James Sturm, and he discusses performance with the individual faculty member. Dismissal of faculty is rare; instead the academic director attempts to work with faculty to improve teaching performance before considering dismissal. It seems that when a dismissal does occur, it is generally not contested.

There is no tenure model at CCS but senior faculty comprise the core faculty. Mentoring occurs between core faculty and newer faculty. Faculty are assigned courses in content areas that “play to their strengths,” according to the Director. He explained that the curriculum is an “integrated curriculum” where all courses work alongside each other to support the graphic storytelling objectives. It is an intentional curriculum created by James Sturm in consultation with others and faculty engage in re-evaluating learning outcomes and projects at the end of each course. There are generally four faculty meetings a year and many e-mail communications and impromptu meetings regarding support for individual students. Although faculty are very responsive to students, they reported that they are “at their limit” in terms of student services.

Courses are taught within two major buildings in White River Junction. The old Post Office serves most classes and the original building on long-term lease holds classroom space and the publications lab in the basement.

V. Library and Media Resources

The Schulz Library sits in the newest building and has a full collection of graphic comics and illustrated stories, and also features faculty and alumni work. It is known in the cartooning world as a premier collection and was named for Charles Schulz, best known for the comic strip *Peanuts*, with permission from his family.

The library is staffed by students who are paid temporary employees. They take pride in their role as librarians and often contribute improvements to the library's exhibits and processes. The library is open to the public at designated hours, and is open for students immediately following class sessions.

CCS also maintains an institutional membership to nearby Kilton Public Library (West Lebanon, NH) and the Dartmouth College libraries (Hanover, NH), with full borrowing privileges and access for students and faculty. Dartmouth College is on the Advance Transit bus Orange route, and Kilton Public Library is located within one mile of CCS.

VI. Facilities and Equipment

The school's facilities are in the center of White River Junction in buildings both owned and rented. The positioning of functions in different buildings that are not contiguous creates the sense of a downtown campus. The recently purchased former Post Office building provides classroom and office space, and is home for the wonderful Schulz Library. The building also provides a revenue stream in the form of office rents on the second floor. It has been renovated into attractive and functional space, while maintaining much of the architectural charm of the building. This was a wise investment for the Center, and the Board's intentional acceleration of the payment of principal is equally well-reasoned.

The other main building, Colodny, is a renovated department store a short walk up the street. Though well-worn, it appears well-kept, inviting, and suitably configured. It houses the gallery, administrative offices, classroom 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 that was recently renewed.

The Old Telegraph Building is home to the studio space for the second year students and storage space. It is currently being provided as donated in-kind space. The students have unlimited access to this building. The Center also rents studio space for faculty within walking distance of the other buildings.

There is evidence of a back-log of maintenance that will need to be addressed. For example, the Post Office building will need masonry repairs, estimated at \$150,000. True handicapped access to the publications lab will also take an investment. The roof was replaced in 2013.

All equipment, with the exception of the copiers, is owned by the Center. The inventory of audio-video equipment, lap tops 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 production laboratory appears to be well equipped to accomplish the academic and ancillary program requirements while also providing a rich social environment. The annual budget funds the replacement of equipment on a cycle appropriate to the equipment.

Maintaining current software and equipment is a persistent challenge vexing all of higher education, and is also one for CCS. The work-around to allow handicapped students access to production equipment demonstrates a strong commitment to accommodating special needs. However, students who cannot access the basement of Colodny are denied the social experience that was so clearly evident during our visit.

VII. Organization and Governance

The Board of Trustees is composed of people with the experience and skills to oversee the institution. The board has created Bylaws and procedures and approved a strategic plan consistent with good governance. The Bylaws have been revised four times, most recently in 2014. The Board meets quarterly, enjoying full attendance. The agenda and written materials are issued in advance to make meetings efficient. The trustee Treasurer reviews all financial reports and the board employs an independent auditor.

The Board Chair contacts all trustees one on one each year to ask about board performance and to discuss the performance of the two chief executive, the President and Director. Although the chief administrators serve as ex-officio, voting members of the Board, the Board meets in executive session without them and evaluates them once a year. It appears that the Board knows where to draw the line between its role and that of management and understands its fiduciary and oversight roles.

The board Chair describes CCS as a “mission-driven organization” that continuously evaluates itself against its stated goals. The 2011-16 strategic plan is “still in progress;” however, the board leadership understands it needs to be updated and plans a December retreat with a facilitator to review it.

With a drop in enrollment in FY17, the administration and Board acted quickly to balance the budget, cutting pension payments, lowering expenses, and increasing fundraising and alternative revenue sources.

Although there is 100% giving among trustees, the percentage of trustee giving in relation to the fundraising goal could be more significant. It should be noted that a board member provided a reduced price for the purchase of the Old Post Office building, making acquisition possible for the Center.

VIII. Financial Resources

The FY17 audited financial statements report the school enjoys a strong balance sheet and ample liquidity. The results of operations were not as strong, reflecting the recent, and apparently temporary, decline in students. The administration demonstrated the ability to respond quickly to the reduction in student revenue through fund-raising and additional workshop revenue. The Statement of Cash Flows reveals that CCS is generating cash from operations most years. The strong cash position serves as a cushion from unexpected revenue shortfalls or expense overruns and provides funding for new initiatives. CCS has effectively managed its financial resources during the recent student decline.

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 school recently changed auditing firms, demonstrating the Board's understanding and commitment to best practices. The administration is providing timely and accurate financial information to the Board, permitted the Board to provide appropriate and effective oversight of the finances.

The Center is attempting to broaden its revenue base but is currently heavily dependent on tuition. For this reason, the annual operating budget is approved by the Board once September enrollments are known. Wage and benefit increases are also determined at this time. Until enrollment targets and other predictable and sustainable forms of revenue can be counted on with a high degree of certainty, approving the budget in September reflects a pragmatic approach to managing and allocating resources.

Notwithstanding the drop off in enrollment last fall, CCS has demonstrated an ability to consistently enroll classes in the low 30 FTE range. If the desired state is in the low 40 range, as was expressed by a Board member, a fresh look at recruitment and pricing may be in order. Need-based financial aid is a tactic that improves overall net tuition revenue when it successfully increases the size of the student body.

Donor response to the student revenue challenge in FY17 demonstrates there is a willingness and ability to support The Center for Cartoon Studies. The current reliance on a small base of donors for the bulk of the gifts and grants leaves CCS vulnerable if some donor support is withdrawn for some reason.

IX. Publications and Advertising

CCS's Student, Faculty, and Staff Handbooks provide useful information that is clearly stated and in well-designed formats. The external communications created for prospective students and the general public are unique and imaginative. As might be expected, the view book, admissions application, annual appeal, and advertising for

upcoming events are as charming as they are informative. In this area, CCS has a distinct advantage, which it exploits brilliantly.

Publications are mainly distributed at fairs and conventions and the brochures that are most popular are tracked. Large scale name buying is cost prohibitive, but brochures are sent to selective art and writing programs. Brochures are very intentionally created to speak to a particular theme, like the recently created piece entitled “Location, Location, Location” to address the question of what is it like living in a rural area. To meet the rise in international interest, CCS is trying an on-demand printing service that will meet the request for information and collect the cost of the mailing from the enquirer. This is a novel way to address the cost and time constraints that accompany requests for information.

X. Evaluation and Planning

CCS is operating under the 2011-16 strategic plan, which was revised in August 2015. It enumerates a series of objectives under the headings of: Academic Excellence, Research and Innovation, Faculty Development, Student Experience, and Local Cultural and Economic Quality of Life. The Board Chair explained that some of its objectives took longer to implement than anticipated and so the plan is still in place. However, it is due to be updated and a board retreat with a facilitator is anticipated for December.

Evaluation happens in a number of ways at CCS. The Board reviews a dashboard of key indicators prepared by the chief administrators for each meeting, which are mostly financial and related to admissions.

Students are evaluated by faculty in a number of ways and students also have the opportunity to evaluate faculty and to participate in school-wide discussions. The President and Director present a year-end report that covers all operations of the school, including findings from both faculty and student evaluations.

The President and Director are evaluated annually by the Board and the board Chair contacts trustees annually to assess board performance.

The chief administrators have both been on the job for many years and are considering taking their second sabbaticals. CCS’ planning should include provisions for keeping these hard-working leaders renewed as well as plans for succession in key positions.

The team did not see a specific plan to address the maintenance needs of CCS’ facilities. In terms of overall institutional awareness, the team did not discover anything major that was not revealed in the self-study.

PART 3 - 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.