

TO: Members of the IBHE AFA Steering Committee
FROM: Jeff Boshart, Co-Chair, IHEAA
RE: The Role and Scope of the AFA Degree in Art
DATE: 15 April 2008

At our semi-annual meeting on April 11, 2008 the members of the Illinois Higher Education Art Association met to discuss issues facing art in higher education, students in our majors, matriculation and articulation, as well as recent actions of the IBHE regarding the Associate of Fine Arts Degree. It is in regards to this last issue that I address you in this letter.

Our association has been in existence since March of 1977 and our purpose has always been to facilitate dialogue between transfer institutions and baccalaureate degree granting colleges and universities. This collegial gathering has focused discussions on foundation course content, media, and transferability. Over the years we have worked hard to alleviate many of the problems the IBHE and ICCB have raised.

We in the IHEAA know there is something going on that affects our students and majors. The IBHE is reticent to come forward and be transparent with us. Quite the contrary, they established a new degree steering committee and selected no one from the IHEAA or IAI Art Panel with experience and history regarding the task at hand, whatever it is. In so doing, the new committee and its duty is suspect to many art faculty.

In an effort to reduce that suspicion and help you address the governance of the AFA degree, I'd like to share with you some history and observations. First, the Associate of Fine Arts degree is not, and never has been, intended as a General Education transfer degree. It says so right on the IAI (itransfer.org) website. The AFA degree was intended to let community college students transfer (matriculate) to art major programs at the junior level having completed the art fundamentals (core) at the community college level. That is the primary function of the AFA.

Students transfer knowing full well they must meet the senior institution's general education graduation requirements. What they also know is that they are fully ready for a sophomore portfolio review and placement at the junior level in the art major. This means they have satisfied the generally accepted art "core" consisting of Art Surveys I & II, Drawing I & II, 2/D Foundations/Design, 3/D Foundations/Design, Figure Drawing PLUS at least three studio courses that cover the basic technical and aesthetic instruction in various art media. The degree is intended to be a generic replication of the common studio arts curricula comprising the first two years of a BFA.

What I am attempting to explain is that the AFA degree allows students to properly focus on their intended major earlier than the Associate of Arts degree allows. In the AFA degree the curriculum is similar to that of the senior institution in that it allows students to finish taking general education courses at the junior and/or senior level. This reduces the need for them to take heavy loads of studio art classes to get caught up because they didn't have the introductory courses earlier in their program at the community college. (A situation that would leave transfer students at disadvantage when compared to native students)

Obviously, the AFA cannot be a perfect match to every BFA curriculum in Illinois. Each senior institution has some variance to the common core, whether that be an entirely different "core" pattern or simply the inclusion of a single, unique course. It is important to note that the AFA does reasonably match the most common foundation program structure in Illinois and, when completed, does meet the F.A.T.E. (<http://www.foundationsinart.org/>) goals for foundation arts education and thus prepares students for entrance in a BFA program at the junior level. Alterations to the AFA could jeopardize that achievement.

Equally important is the matter of accreditation. The primary accrediting body for the visual arts, NASAD (<http://nasad.arts-accredit.org/>), requires that studio art degrees carry a ratio of general

education to art coursework of 35% to 65% respectively. The current AFA design falls short of that standard, but can be argued as the “equivalent” of the degree requirements under locally common BFA programs. This argument is being tested with NASAD and their response is anticipated in the next month or two. Any reduction in the ratio of general education to art course credits will greatly undermine the acceptability of the degree in comparison to national standards. Based upon the best practices and common curriculum of art colleges nationwide, there is no legitimate reason to increase the amount of general education required of lower-division art students nor is there any legitimate reason to decrease the number of art courses required of them.

You have undoubtedly also been informed of the relatively low graduation rate (3%) as opposed to the enrollment in AFA programs. To suggest that statistic as an indication of failure is to be blind as to the nature of community college art programs. Students enroll at community colleges for a variety of reasons, only one of which is to complete a degree. Within art programs rests a substantial enrollment of “lifelong learners” (part of the community college charge and charter) that offset the graduation ratio. There are also many educated artists returning to school to learn a new technique or to refine their portfolios (often in preparation for graduate school). Neither of these populations has any intention of pursuing or perceives any use for completing an associates degree.

Additionally, many students attend community colleges to discern what they wish to do with their lives, vocationally and otherwise. Many of those students discover the desire to be an artist and transfer to the senior institution well before they would earn a AFA. While such is not necessarily to their benefit, it is their goal. And likewise, many discover that the artist’s life is not what they envisioned (an equally valid outcome) and move into another more lucrative or less competitive field. For all of these groups, the AFA serves as a model for personal growth and educational planning, whether or not the degree is a planned goal. To that end it is consistently a useful tool.

We certainly agree that improving a graduation rate is desirable (in any circumstance). But any new initiative ought to consider the realities of the community college and not some bureaucratically convenient statistical marker of success. The real success marker is whether or not students are attaining their educational goals.

If there is a problem with the AFA, it rests with the lack of understanding within the “non-faculty” segments of higher education in Illinois. To that end, whatever you can do to address this aspect of consistent implementation would be most beneficial.

In our opinion, the IBHE was frustrated with the IAI Art “Advisory” Panel when we could not identify a reduced art core. Even though we carefully explained the nature of the studio art core and the common need for art majors to start their major in the sophomore year, it was obvious the IBHE did not want to accept that answer. Since that meeting, members of the Art Panel (also regular participants of the IHEAA) have not had contact with the state. The IBHE failed to conduct/attend a fall meeting with the IAI Art Advisory Panel and would have done so again this spring if we had not contacted them a week before our meeting to ask about what was going on, or in this case, not.

The state may be wishing to show the citizens of Illinois they are monitoring programs in higher education and working diligently to trim excess or costly programs that cause the state to increase taxes to fund higher education. Targeting the Associate of Fine Arts degree is not the answer. Of the three degrees offered in art at the community college level, the AFA is the only one that honestly reflects a curriculum that allows a student to get an associate degree, a baccalaureate degree, and complete that course of study in four years. Neither the AA or AS degrees can do that because upon transfer, the art major is woefully behind in their major studio coursework and inconveniently ahead on their general education coursework which is an extremely difficult inversion to correct in just four semesters at the senior institution.

If the intent of this new steering committee is to develop a totally inflexible course of study, in the nature of the AAT degree, we regret the lack of willingness to allow students to make choices in their educational programs under the pretense of graduating “on time” and without additional expense, which we know is false.

The members attesting to this letter are not intending to be intrusive or belligerent. Quite the contrary, we are letting you know we are here to help you sort through the intrigue posed by the IBHE and ICCB and develop a fully functional transfer system for our students. If we can be of any service, please do not hesitate to ask. Chuck Boone (College of DuPage) and I are the current co-chairs of the association and would be more than happy to meet with the steering committee to provide background or information spanning thirty years of experience working with the articulation of art majors in the state of Illinois.

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