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Protests at Emory University. Photography by James Crissman

Emory University Eradicates its Visual Arts Department, Portending an Ominous Trend in University Education

Lilly Lampe, Amanda Parmer

Late in the day on Friday, September 14, Robin Forman, Dean of Emory College of Arts and Sciences, released a letter to the Emory College community stating that Emory University would be closing their Visual Arts Program, as well as the Department of Educational Studies, the Department of Physical Education, and the Department of Journalism. In addition, the administration decided to suspend admissions to graduate programs in Spanish, Economics, and the Institute of Liberal Arts (I.L.A.)––Emory's flagship interdisciplinary Ph.D. program. The tactics used by Emory's administration in arriving at these decisions and announcing the news––delivering the decision to the heads of the departments rather than engaging them throughout the process; blanketing the rationality, reasoning and facts of the decision making process in vague and ambiguous language; and sidestepping the impact this would have on the Emory community––strike a corporate tone rather than one of a democratic university. The effects continue to resonate throughout the university community as details of the decision-making process surface in an erratic and piecemeal fashion, stressing a need for greater transparency and analysis.

Since the economic downturn in 2008, liberal arts colleges and universities across the country have reshaped their curriculums. They have narrowed the fields of study to prepare students for vocational work quantified by employment and statistical analysis, shearing the visual arts––in part or whole––from the intellectual mold that has underpinned students' critical thinking in the United States over the past century.[1]

In 2007, barely preceding the start of the recession in the United States, Emory University implemented Emory Advantage (EA), a financial aid initiative in which Emory replaces Federal Subsidized Stafford Loans through grants to alleviate the burden on students after graduation. Despite the benevolent ethos behind the EA program its start date could not have come at a worse time. Though this was a viable measure in 2007, the money budgeted for EA recipients has since been eclipsed by the changes in the U.S. economy over the past four years. Given the university's need-blind admissions policy there has been no way to manage the increasing number of students who benefit from EA as well as the amount of their award. This has left Emory with an unbalanced budget and a uniquely precarious relationship to the national economy.

It is ironic then that the Emory Advantage website states it was put in place because, "Emory is committed to opening our doors to any qualified student who wants to pursue a world-class education and to use their talents to impact the world. Giving students the opportunity to graduate with little or no debt eases the financial burdens that can limit postgraduate career or education choices."[2] As the economic burden that this well-intentioned program put on the school appears to be limiting the types of educational opportunities for students *while at* Emory.

Given the fact that Emory's student body, a group unexpectedly heavily reliant on financial aid, is selected via a process of need-blind admissions and that the university is reliant on student tuition to sustain the operating budget, Emory's administration finds itself locked in a prohibitive double bind. If one looks now to the macroscopic achievements of the university that tout a growing international student body and an accelerated focus on the hard sciences, a narrative surfaces in tandem yet apart from the rationalizations on offer from

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[1] Following are a handful of recent texts citing this shift away from the visual arts towards a vocational training in the United States liberal arts curriculum: Nick Rabkin and Eric Hedberg, *Taking Note: Reviewing the Official Numbers on Arts Education*(April, 2012) accessible at http://artworks.arts.gov/?tag=arts-education-in-america-what-the-declines-mean-for-arts-participation>; Chrystina Freeland, *The Self-Destruction of the 1 Percent*(October, 2012) accessible at < http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/opinion/sunday/the-self-destruction-of-the-1-percent.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>; *From Liberal Concensus to Neoliberal Chaos: Artists Looking for a Place on Campus in the United States*, Dan S. Wang(October 2010) accessible at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1210/wang/en/print>

[2] This language comes from the Emory Advantage website http://www.emory.edu/FINANCIAL_AID/emory_advantage/

[3] These explanations focus on the unquantified assessment that the programs cut from the budget had not achieved the ranks of excellence in their fields to support their continuation at Emory. In the post *College Downsizes Departments, Phases Out Programs, Faculty Staff* published on the Emory Wheel on September 14, "Forman said in an interview with the *Wheel* that the move is an effort to create "intriguing opportunities by renewing Emory's commitment to academic excellence.'" *Accessible at < http://www.emorywheel.com/college-downsizes-departments-phases-out-programs-faculty-staff/>* [4] According to Beverly Clark, Emory's "applicant pool remains highly diverse geographically and ethnically. Year-over-year growth from 2011 to 2012 has been led by applications from women, Asian-Americans and international students" in the same article Dean of admission John Latting notes: "There is a tremendous amount of work involved in attaining such an applicant pool, and not just in the admissions office," says Latting. "It also involves our alumni, current students, faculty, staff in the college, provost and communications and marketing offices: It is truly an integrated effort to shape the class." Beverly Clark, *Emory Sees Record Application Numbers*(February 2010) accessible at <http://news.emory.edu/stories/2012/02/upress_record_application_numbers/campus.html>

[5] Karen Fisher, *'Fess Up: Foreign Students Are Cash Cows*(October 2012) accessible at <http://chronicle.com/article/What-If-Colleges-Acknowledged/135080/; John Carpenter, *Financial Aid for International Students: It does Exist!*(February 2012) accessible at <

the Dean.[3][4] If incoming students' finances cannot be determined or even considered in the admissions process it stands to reason that perhaps the financial makeup and participation can be shaped some other way.

The choice of departments to excise or reorganize is indicative of shifts intended to shape a curriculum that caters to a demographic with the means to support their own education independent of Emory College's budget. International students and their escalating enrollment at Emory over the past four years––a time that has seen reparations to the university's budget––sheds some light on this issue. Students from abroad do not qualify for need-based funds from the United States. In addition, national records indicate that they often pay their tuition in cash, contributing to the speculation that, lacking an alternative means of anticipating the financial makeup of the student body during the admissions process, the administration is molding a curriculum desirable for this demographic.[5]

The same day Dean Forman published his letter, Lisa Tedesco, Dean of Emory's Laney Graduate School, also released a letter describing in more detail some of the changes the community could anticipate. In an appeal to those disturbed by the loss of the I.L.A. she alluded to discussions of Emory College's investment in "growth areas" such as China Studies, Digital Studies and New Media, Neuroscience, and the teaching of science, which Forman also alluded to though more obliquely.[6] The emphasis on the sciences as well as economic hotspot China is a transparent bid for more financially tenable careers for Emory's graduates. These pending changes emphasize the greater "worth" of the sciences to college graduates, as opposed to studying the visual arts or engaging in the research facilitated by the I.L.A.

Returning to the process that led to the cuts, it has come out that a committee formed in the height of the financial crisis was instrumental in determining these shifts in programming. In 2008, the College of Arts and Sciences at Emory University decided to establish the College Financial Advisory Committee (CFAC) in response to the current monetary hardships. This sub-group of the College Governance Committee (GovCom) comprising seven faculty members was assembled to address and advise the dean, then Robert Paul, during this period. Once formed, CFAC held confidential meetings that, as it has come out, eventually led to these widely-impacting decisions.

According to the CFAC members and the College administration, minutes from the committee's meetings were not kept and the records of the GovCom meetings discussing CFAC reveal the terms of its founding, showing the CFAC growing beyond its initial scope. The minutes from the GovCom meeting held on February 11, 2009 address 'proactive initiatives for faculty regarding resources' and lay out plans for reorganizing the CFAC. This record also states that, "In a worsening situation in which we have to set priorities, GovCom can do a lot together with the College Financial Advisory committee (CFAC) to determine procedure, to help reorganize administratively, to rethink our educational model inherited from the 19th century and to see what our peers are doing."[7]

On March 18, 2009––according to the meeting's record––the GovCom determined that the new Emory College Financial Advisory Committee "should be confined to tenured faculty and senior lecturers and should be representative of disciplines."[8] The conversation did not address how representation would be attained or what would be the means for determining which disciplines would be granted representation leaving a disorienting landmine of lacunas for anyone hoping to gain concrete information about how the constitution of the CFAC was established from this record. Notably, no faculty members from the affected departments were represented on CFAC.

Over the next year and a half––from March 18th of 2009 until November 10, 2010––the GovCom minutes make no mention of the CFAC's activities. This was ended when Michael Giles, professor of political science and chairman of Financial Advisory Committee since 2008, suggested turning over the committee's members.[9] Several months later, at the GovCom's February 2, 2011 meeting, Dean Forman requested the continuance of Financial Advisory Committee,[10] suggesting that the committee transition from "that of meeting short-term necessity to a strategic, long-term trajectory." The language used by Foreman in describing the Committee's modus operandi as "strategic" and "long-term" continue to skirt specificity and foreshadow the kind of obfuscating descriptions echoed in the Dean's letter to the students and faculty of the budget cuts released on September 14, 2012.

Beginning with the minutes from April 20, 2011 there is discernible distrust from the GovCom about the structure and workings of CFAC. According to the meeting's minutes Michael Sullivan, professor of philosophy, "expressed the concern that although this committee [CFAC] reports to GovCom, much of its discussion is deemed confidential. Thus GovCom is seen to be responsible for a committee while being kept in the dark about its work."[11] Sullivan's astute observation was met with the rebuttal that Eric Weeks, a professor of physics, sits on the committee as the GovCom representative yet it is unclear how he conveyed information from CFAC to the GovCom or if he conveyed substantive information at all.[12]

http://www.overturemarketplace.com/financial-aid-for-international-students-it-does-exist> [6] Tedesco, Lisa. "Letter to the Laney Graduate School Community." September 14, 2012.http://news.emory.edu/special/EmoryCollegePlan/LGSDeanLetter.pdf [7] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, February 11, 2009.http://college.emory.edu/home/assets/documents/minutes/2009/governance_feb11.pdf [8] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, March 18, 2009.http://college.emory.edu/home/assets/documents/minutes/2009/governance_mar18.pdf [9] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, November 10, 2010. Note: these minutes were not published but were made available to the authors by a faculty member at Emory University. Here Giles— who elected to remain—stressed that careful selection of the members was crucial, as members of CFAC must have strong credibility with the faculty and Dean, as well as the ability to keep strict confidences [10] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, February 10, 2011. Note: these minutes were not published but were made available to the authors by a faculty member at Emory University.The minutes state, "While GovCom originally established this seven-member committee in response to a specific situation, Dean Forman sees it as an important resource and would like it to continue." [11] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, April 20, 2011. Note: these minutes were not published but were made available to the authors by a faculty member at Emory University. [12] Dean Forman reported that CFAC, "has now shifted to longer-range thinking, with instruments such as Academic Analytics," which, in the minutes, is the end of the discussion. Academic Analytics—"the term for business intelligence in an academic setting"—can be seen as having pervasively influenced the college in the recent abstract assessments of the individual departments that have been announced via top-down managerial tactics. [13] Minutes of Emory College's Governance Committee, April 18, 2012. Note: these minutes were not published but were made available to the authors by a faculty member at Emory University. [14] Julia Kjelgaard (Chair of Emory University's Visual Arts Department) in conversation with the authors, October 11, 2012. [15] Barbara Ladd (Professor of English and Emory University's AAUP representative) in conversation with one of the authors, October 22, 2012. [16] Julia Kjelgaard (Chair of Emory University's Visual Arts Department) in conversation with the authors, October 11, 2012. [17] Forman, Robin. "Letter to Emory College Community." September 14, 2012.http://news.emory.edu/special/EmoryCollegePlan/ECASDeanLetter.pdf [18] *Letter to the Editor: Dean Forman's Budget Decisions Represent "Foreclosure" of Our Freedom*(September 2012) accessible at < http://www.emorywheel.com/letter-to-the-editor-dean-formans-budget-decisions-represent-foreclosure-of-our-freedom/> [19] "Our Opinion: Communication Failure Betrays Students, Faculty." *The Emory Wheel*, September 18, 2012. [20] Emory Arts. "Visual Arts Building and Gallery." http://arts.emory.edu/plan-your-visit/venues/visual-arts-building.html [21] *Tibetan Mandalas* corresponded with other events on campus, including the University's Carlos Museum exhibition *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* and the Visual Arts Gallery's exhibition *Contemporary Mandalas*. While the course prompted the students to engage with the exhibitions, it also brought art historian Jacquelynn Baas and artist Sanford Biggers as visiting speakers to Emory's campus. Biggers also had an artwork in *Contemporary Mandalas* titled *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II*, which was an iteration of a contemporary Mandala using dance floor tiles. This work spurred a subsequent collaboration with the Dance Department who used the Mandala as a form for the exploration of dance choreography over the course of the semester. The successes of the *Tibetian Mandalas* course as the interdisciplinary glue that brought otherwise disparate groups from the college in conversation through experience is one example of how the Visual Arts Department was, in fact, fulfilling precisely the criteria set out by the



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The minutes from the GovCom minutes the following spring-April 18, 2012-*again* restate the mission of CFAC but also hint at future cuts: "The Financial Advisory Committee was formed four and a half years ago in response to the budget challenges that stemmed from the economic downturn. It is an advisory body whose purpose is to provide input as to how to transition to a time when the College can again invest to expand its areas of strength. Crucial to this challenge has been the stabilization in the growth of financial aid expense. The position of faculty on the committee has been that rather than trying to maintain all elements of all programs with fewer and fewer resources, it is preferable to contract in some areas in order to provide for the possibility of enhancement and creativity in the future. The committee does not make decisions. Decisions are ongoing."[13]

Five months later, in the September 6, 2012 GovCom meeting, Dean Forman gave the committee a preview of his upcoming "State of the College" presentation scheduled for the college faculty meeting Wednesday, September 12 reflecting the stakes of letter that Forman released on September 14 to the College faculty and students. Given CFAC's telling name––College *Financial* Advisory Board––and the goals of the committee stated above it is difficult to follow Forman's logic as he explained how the decision to phase out certain programs and curtail others was not driven by financial crisis, but by strategic planning. Though it is true that this plan may play out with an eye to the future it is not without history. Given the trajectory and timing of Emory's budget issues it is difficult to see how Forman parsed the distinction between the imbricated determining factors of the financial crisis and the requisite strategic planning he laid out.

He goes on to say that this newly allocated money would go on to buttress the budgets of other departments in the college and that the specific chairs, directors, departments, and donors would not be notified about the changes until days *after* the faculty meeting. Tellingly, no one in the Visual Arts department, or any of the other affected departments, was represented in CFAC. This lack of consideration may have contributed to the lack of communication that left the Visual Arts Department blindsided by the news. Reflecting on the approach the Dean Forman elected to take in announcing rather than discussing the situation Kjelgaard said, "My expectation would have been that he talked to me or talked to the faculty [who were affected]."[14]

When asked about the formation of CFAC, Barbara Ladd, Professor of English and Emory University's representative for the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), stated, "as president of Emory's chapter of AAUP, a viable committee undertaking deliberations on curricular matters would need to be somewhat larger, would need to have a broader base of faculty representation. It's a serious problem [that no members of the affected departments were on CFAC]. Also, [it's a problem] that chairs of affected programs and departments were not informed in a substantive way early enough in the process of the kinds of moves that were being deliberated. As far as AAUP guidelines are concerned, faculty members of affected departments [also] need to be brought into the conversation more substantively and earlier than they were in this case."[15] She continued, "In this case it seems the committee was very small, that its work was not substantively reported to the faculty. There seems to be less transparency than [the situation] calls for."

On Wednesday, September 12, two days before the cuts were announced to the students, Dean Forman held a faculty meeting in which he notified the college that there would be cuts and he would speak with the heads of the affected departments on Thursday, September 13. Julia Kjelgaard, Chair of the Visual Arts Department at Emory, had been scheduled for a meeting with Dean Foreman that Thursday; the college-wide meeting was her first indication of what was to come.

Dean as "academic units [that] make contributions to other academic programs." [22] Skorton, David J. "The Arts are Essential." *Edutopia.org*, January 28, 2009. http://www.edutopia.org/arts-education-humanities-creativity [23] James Wagner (President of Emory University) stated in a public address on October 30, 2012 that other universities have commended Emory's actions and are looking to Emory as a model for instigating these changes on their campuses. http://www.emory.edu/president/ [24] Clark, Beverly. "Emory College Sees Record Application Numbers." *Emory News Center*, February 17, 2012.http://news.emory.edu/stories/2012/02/upress_record_application_numbers/campus.html

Kjelgaard had spent the previous months mapping out the Visual Arts curriculum in order to continue developing significant ties with other departments in the University and had scheduled her meeting with Dean Foreman to share these achievements with the administration. Instead of an opportunity to discuss these accomplishments and the future of the department in her meeting, she was informed that the Visual Arts Department would no longer be included in the University budget. “It was very cut and dry, very formal. Dean Forman gave me a piece of paper telling me that decisions had been made and the decisions were final and he reiterated what was in the piece of paper.” Retelling the events, Kjelgaard noted, “I’ve talked to the other chairs of the departments who were affected and it was, I think, a surprise for everyone. It’s a strategic way of handling a situation but not one that I expected in an academic situation.”[16]

In his public letter announcing the cuts, Dean Forman stated, “For the college to reach its intellectual goals requires more than simply breaking even, we must have the flexibility to make the investments that our aspirations require.” These investments echo trends in American university education that are occurring piecemeal around the country but add up to a significant impact and erosion of the visual arts in liberal arts colleges around the United States. The dropping or downsizing of the effected departments at Emory in favor of other programs that fall in line with academic fashion reflect ongoing questions about the make-up of the liberal arts in universities around the United States. In Forman’s letter announcing the cuts he cites questions taken into consideration: “Which programs have achieved distinction, what new investments are required, and which programs are truly essential for a twenty-first century liberal arts education? We have also considered carefully the ways in which our academic units make contributions to other academic programs and to the broader College and University admissions.”[17]

Indeed, the cuts at Emory––how they were conducted and the departments targeted––have rocked the foundations of the university’s liberal arts education. As one student posted in an open letter to the editor on *The Emory Wheel*––the independent student newspaper of Emory University––“By its existence alone, the ILA critiqued the prevailing organization of the academy and called into question attendant hierarchical political. In closing or downsizing the journalism major, visual arts department and the ILA, the Emory administration has preemptively attacked potential zones of dissent on campus.”[18] The title of an editorial written by the staff *The Emory Wheel*––“Communication Failure Betrays Students, Faculty”––suggests the lack of democratic engagement with the university’s community has become increasingly pronounced as the opacity of the determining process for these sweeping changes persists.[19]

In contrast to the Dean’s implication that the Department of Visual Arts and the Visual Arts Gallery insufficient contribution to the Emory community the two have, in fact, been the catalyst of dialog and exchange between the College of Arts and Sciences disparate departments in recent years and stands out as a marked achievement for the University. Though the visual arts first appeared at Emory in 1967 as the Studio Arts Program of the Art History Department and moved to a stand-alone facility in 1995, it was not until 2004 that the visual arts became a separate program. Around the same time, the university invested $1.5 million in the visual arts building, adding offices and the Visual Arts Gallery. Following an external review in 2009 the Visual Arts Program became a full department with the capacity to grant dual majors and hire tenured faculty.[20]

In conjunction with the growth of the program into a department, the visual arts faculty has collaborated with other programs to create cross-disciplinary courses. In the spring of 2012, Julia Kjelgaard, Satya Negi and Sarah McClintock collaborated on *Tibetan Mandalas*, a course that brought together the analytic and aesthetic tools of the Religion and Visual Arts departments, as well as the influence of the Emory-Tibet Partnership and Emory Distinguished Professor the Dalai Lama. The course considered “aspects of religion in relation to culture, such as theories of ritual, religion and psychoanalysis, feminist critiques of religion and culture, postmodern interpretations of religion”–– effectively aiming to unpack the philosophic and psychological meaning embedded in the Mandala’s rich symbolism. [21]

Another example of such interdisciplinary exchange is the John Grade Piedmont Drive Project ––a multi-dimensional sculpture––situated on the campus Quad and the lake in Lullwater Preserve that was completed by Seattle-based environmental artist John Grade during a two-week residency at Emory. The work engaged the Dance Department and Department of Environmental Sciences and Public Health, including a panel discussion open to the students. This project with the specific contextual issues of the environment in the city and highlighted important conversations between science and art and to raise environmental awareness for students, the greater Atlanta community, and the Southeastern region as part of Emory’s year-long interdisciplinary focus on water, innovation, and sustainability.

Top research universities like Cornell and Yale have championed the visual arts as a core discipline. In a 2007 public address, Cornell University President David J. Skorton stressed the importance of the arts. “Although they do not always lend themselves to the kinds of metrics used to demonstrate proficiency in reading and math, the arts and humanities play a vital role in the educational development of students. They keep and convey our cultural heritage while

opening us up to other societies and civilizations around the globe. They help us explore what it means to be human, including both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions. If science and technology help us to answer questions of "what" and "how," the arts and humanities give us ways to confront the intangible, to contemplate the "why," to imagine, to create. If ever there were a time to nurture those skills in our young people, it is now, when our nation's future may depend on our creativity and our ability to understand and appreciate the cultures around the world as much as on our proficiency in reading and math."[22] Skorton's statement displays a keen understanding of the kind of the intellectual tools at stake in shaping a liberal arts curriculum that includes the visual arts and humanities.

The hope is that this is not the end of arts at Emory, or worse, a precursor to further cuts of the arts at other universities.[23] According to Leslie Taylor, Chair of the Department of Theater and Dance at Emory, and a member of CFAC in 2009, there are members of the Governance Committee, who are fighting for the continuation of the Visual Arts at Emory. Taylor says they are looking at other models to see how it may be possible to maintain or reintroduce the Visual Arts Department. She stated it is, however, likely that its new incarnation would be a return to program status rather than its current state as a department that offers a dual-major or minor.

Taylor mentioned Princeton University in particular as a model for maintaining the presence of the arts on campus. At Princeton, in all arts except for music a certificate program is available to students to supplement their understanding of other disciplines. This explicitly subordinates the visual arts to a functionalized role in relation to the other degree granting programs. The downgrade of the Visual Arts Department to program stands to be the thin edge of the wedge in homogenizing the liberal arts program at Emory University, precluding the kind of holistic, "high quality liberal arts education found within a major research university and pre-professional programs" that John Lattingly, Dean of Admissions at Emory, asserts the students desire.[24]

This abstraction of the terms around what it is that the students desire, which of the many different types of students these statements refer to and how this information has been assessed propel the need to continue asking what the considerations are that are shaping the future of an Emory education and––in a globalized economy––what this relationship is to foreign desires and bank accounts. Sadly, Dean Foreman's attempt to reform the curriculum by eradicating the Visual Arts Program, as well as the Department of Educational Studies, the Department of Physical Education, and Department of Journalism only further impairs the student's capacity to compete in an international market that increasingly demands the kind of innovation and creative thinking these constitutive components of a liberal arts education provide.