

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN
2006 ANNUAL MEETING

Report of the President

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It's a great pleasure for me to be with you here today and to continue to serve this marvelous organization. In thinking about my first meeting in this new role, I couldn't help but nostalgically reflect on the fact that I have been coming to NASAD Annual Meetings since 1983, the exact period of time in which I have served as a college administrator. But lest I become too impressed by my own tenure, all I need to do is look around the room to see quite a number of faces that arrived here well before I did. Of course, we all had a bit more hair in those days; and for many of us, it was a different color.

Not surprisingly, the NASAD I stand before today is significantly different from the organization I joined in 1983.

First and foremost, we are a significantly larger organization. NASAD's National Office estimates that when I came to my first meeting in 1983, we had 119 member institutions. Today, our registration stands at 320, the largest ever in our history. Our actual membership consists of 261 institutions, about 120% greater than in 1983; and there are 63 more schools in various stages of application and approval.

Our membership is also more varied than ever before. In addition to traditional universities and colleges, the membership includes a full spectrum of post-secondary institutions.

These increases in size and types of institutions make all the more remarkable our coming together today because, in fact, it is our similarities rather than our differences that join us. It is remarkable that so many different schools have voluntarily agreed to co-create and be bound by a common set of beliefs—beliefs that make NASAD what it is today. I, for one, do interpret the continued voluntary growth of this organization as an affirmation that the values and practices we've developed over so many years continue to prove so useful to so many.

It's important to emphasize, especially for the newer members, that it is we who make and are NASAD, not the other way around. I think as we grow, it's all too easy to believe that some huge bureaucracy makes all this possible; but in fact, we have only one comparatively small office staffed by a few very talented individuals who expertly coordinate the efforts of an extensive volunteer base. Without the active participation of so many of you, all that is NASAD simply could not happen.

But happen it does and has done so for a long time. Over its history, NASAD has developed a long and enviable record of ensuring the delivery of educationally sound art and design programs through a voluntary peer-based accreditation process. Indeed, it is NASAD's success that has won the professional loyalty and respect of so many of us. And indeed, it is the evidence of NASAD's achievement that makes the recent activities of the U.S. Department of Education all the more troubling.

As many of you know, Margaret Spellings, the Secretary of Higher Education, convened a commission to devise a comprehensive national strategy on higher education. This commission led a process that, after many drafts, produced a final report which among other things, calls for "increased accountability through assessment." It also says that accreditation must become more open about its activities and findings.

What is not said, but nonetheless concerns many of us, is that the government might begin to demand mandatory testing. Indeed, the commission's report actually recommends two tests for consideration by

colleges, the *Measure of Academic Proficiency and Performance* and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*, the latter of which has been used by the Texas accountability system. Teaching to the test has become a hallmark of *No Child Left Behind* and now one worries, as Bill Durden, President of Dickinson College, put it, we are moving toward the advent of “*No College Left Behind*”

Ironically, the Spellings Commission Report comes at a time when most of our regional accreditors have fully adopted some form of outcomes-based assessment as a significant element in the re-accreditation process.

The other unspoken but not unreasonable concern around the Spellings Commission is that the federal government will get itself into the business of accreditation. Although the Spellings Commission has backed off on earlier provocations about accreditation, it's easy to recognize that the big stick carried by the federal government is financial aid and its connection with accreditation.

Unfortunately, the Spellings Commission Report comes at a time when many of us in art and design are already worried about the effects of the accountability movement on art and design education. Too often, the insistence on systems of outcomes assessment seems to have resulted in the triumph of the quantitative and a “one-size fits all” approach to measuring learning. All too many of these approaches seem imposed from outside and appear fundamentally disassociated from the very content they claim to measure.

At this point, I probably should say that I am personally sympathetic to some of the findings of the Spellings Commission. At the same time, I am deeply troubled by the possibility of the government stepping into processes that have arguably resulted in an educational system emulated throughout the world. This is not to say there isn't lots of room for improvement.

It is to say, however, that in a nation with a long history of suspicion about the goals of higher education and a tendency to look at practical outcomes as the sole measure of achievement, I find the activities of the Spellings Commission especially chilling. Its approach seems at best indifferent to a liberal arts tradition that aims to educate the whole student and to produce a graduate who is prepared to meaningfully and fully contribute to our continued growth as a civilization.

Moreover, I must also confess that ten years ago, I would have been much less troubled by the federal government undertaking this kind of process. However, so much has happened over the past six years that I'm personally not sure I could stand to witness the “*Katrina*” of higher education. Could we, for instance, survive a Michael Brown as education czar?

With all this said and with probably much more that could be said, we are left with the practical question of what to do.

In asking this I assume, of course, that we all have some concern or interest in this topic.

I do worry that our increasing size and diversity all too easily invite a kind of passivity or, at best, a delayed reaction by each of us as individuals.

So my first proposal is simply to *stay tuned*. Learn all you can about the status and activities surrounding the Spellings Commission Report. As you would imagine, Sam Hope has maintained close contact with the progress of this issue and is in continual communication with our sister organizations involved with voluntary accreditation.

I would recommend any of you interested in exploring this and other related issues further attend the session on *Current Policy Issues for Advanced Administrators* presented by Sam, Bill Barrett, and Mark Marion this afternoon.

A second suggestion as to what to do would be to *get involved*. Help us to sustain the quality of our current scope of activities by volunteering to participate. As I noted earlier, all we do relies primarily on the gift of your time and involvement.

This has never been truer than at this present moment. The fact is that our current rate of growth threatens to outstrip our pool of trained volunteers. We desperately need to train more evaluators in order to meet current demands. So please don't be shy about offering your services; and if asked, please serve.

In other circles, this would be known as activating the base.

My third and last proposal is more inherently thorny. I believe that rather than waiting to react to something that might potentially come from without, we need to take responsibility for initiating a conversation around the issues of relative quality and achievement within our member schools. Despite what I said earlier about our differences, I find that in respect to comparative quality, we all too easily act as though we share exactly the same students and contexts. It's time, I believe, for us to begin to describe the invisible elephant in the room.

To encourage this process, you'll notice that this year's program is dominated by conversations on this very subject. Additionally, there is a white paper in your packet entitled *Achievement and Quality*. It does an excellent job of laying out all the complexities and considerations prompted by this discussion.

I know this could be a difficult and potentially divisive conversation. However, I believe no other organization is better positioned to interpret our relative differences to the larger world or to discuss how what we do contributes to the richness and vitality of our culture. It is we after all who own the content and it is we who should rightly determine the means and terms by which it should be understood. Both the success and limitations in the *US News and World Report* approach remind us of the hunger for this understanding in the outside world and the kinds of mischief that can occur when some entity outside our circle takes it on.

In addition to the general discussion on quality, and in light of the increasing number and type of institutions that come up for re-accreditation each year, I believe we have to work harder than ever to ensure consistent behavior as our individual members carry out the collective business of the organization.

Most importantly, we need to collectively find ways to review student work in greater depth as a central and critical part of institutional assessment. We need to do this in a way that recognizes and respects differences of context and purpose.

I know these goals around quality are ambitious but I believe we are at a place in the maturation of this organization to undertake this challenge; and if it is done in a spirit of open and generous searching, it will be a lot of fun. Quite honestly, this is so complicated an issue that no one of us holds the answer as to how to do this best. At the same time, however, there's no question that the greater culture is seeking our considered opinion in new formulations. We have a creative challenge before us.

Moving on from the topic of reactions to Spellings and what we might do, I'd like to turn to a couple of other issues which I think warrant at least our reflection and, hopefully, discussion.

The first of these has to do with NASAD's function as one of our primary sources of professional development and fellowship. While this function is admittedly collateral to NASAD's primary mission, I know I speak for many of us when I say that throughout my membership, the professional relationships I have developed within this organization have served me throughout my career.

As I reviewed my memory of our annual agendas over the past decade, it appeared to me that there has been a gradual shift away from issues that centered on the content of our curriculum toward an increasing emphasis on issues that might be described as reactions to outside forces. Chief among these and easy to pick out has been the perennial concern over technology and technological processes, i.e., how to get it, renew it, and what to do with it. Questions about resources such as what to buy, how to develop faculty, and how to integrate dominate these conversations. A second example is the proliferation of issues related to management processes that each of us need to administer on a cyclical basis. Issues around various forms of assessment and evaluation feature prominently in these conversations.

As these concerns increasingly take up the oxygen in our respective offices, I worry that we are in danger of privileging technique, i.e., how to do things, over substance, i.e., what the core content of our programs should be. I also worry that increasingly, we are choosing to talk more about those things which however more vexing, we can, and must, directly effect. Perhaps we do this at the expense of speaking to those things that most of us can affect only indirectly, such as our continued responsibilities to the teaching of traditional studio practices.

In the world in which each of us spends our daily lives, we find ourselves trying to do more and more, both in our offices and curricula, in the same amount of time.

So my question goes to whether one of the continued values of the NASAD annual meeting might not be the creation of a more contemplative time and space in which to address precisely the kinds of philosophical issues that the pace of our day-to-day lives seems to forbid. I personally crave conversations that focus on our continued need to persuasively transmit the values and skills of the past while ensuring they are relevant to the present. Many of us, for example, are actively asking what a curriculum in sculpture should look like in a world that is no longer able to define exactly what sculpture is. In the new paradigm we find ourselves, what are some of the strategies for pedagogically balancing the development of skill, scope, and concept?

Lastly, as an organization dedicated to focusing on higher education in the visual arts, we probably have the greatest leverage and therefore, responsibility for ensuring the preparedness of the next generation of the professorate. The current conversations on the doctorate notwithstanding, the MFA in this country is still the primary qualification for teaching art and design at the college level. I hope that throughout our ongoing review and discussions, we continue to ask ourselves what we can reliably build into our respective MFA programs that allows those interested to truly prepare themselves for delivering college level art and design instruction. This, I believe, should be an important part of our legacy to our profession now and to those who will follow us.

Clearly we have a lot to do together, and I look forward to working with you in the days and months ahead.

I thank you for your kind attention and I thank each of you for your part in making service to this organization such a rich and rewarding experience.