

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN

80th Annual Meeting

October 16–19, 2024

Report of the President

Greg Watts

Good morning, it's wonderful to see all of you. I would like to start by noting that we have designed the program this year with a strong emphasis on continuity from last year's meeting. However, for our first-time attendees, I am certain this won't impede you... Because... we also designed the program to encourage engagement—ensuring that we all have ample opportunities for meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas. New attendees—please see this as a good reason to make new friends with our frequent flyers. Frequent flyers, please note those asterisks on badges.

For those of you who were here last year, I will mention that my remarks this time are not A.I.-assisted. That said, we are continuing with the A.I. discussion at this meeting as its significance has not only been sustained but it has grown.

We designed this meeting to be about you. The structure includes many opportunities to interact, share, and collaborate. A new opportunity to further peer-to-peer engagement is the inclusion of the luncheon roundtable where we hope you'll dive deeper into the issues that matter the most to you and your institution. We are pleased to offer this and welcome your feedback on it.

The roundtables—and indeed all the sessions—are based on the topics you have identified as the most pressing. We've listened carefully to your needs and concerns, and we're committed to facilitating conversations that are relevant, timely, and impactful. That said, there have been issues that have come to the forefront since our planning began that each could be the topic of a whole meeting... however, we promise to do our best for you in the sessions that are being offered. Again, as always, let us know what you want more of in the future... (or less of...).

I'd like to offer a few thoughts about what is on my mind as I look forward to the program this week:

I am always curious about (and struggling with) a work/life balance. We are all familiar with how challenging it can be to juggle the demands of our academic life with the pressures of a personal life. Burnout is real, and it is something that our institutions must continue to address proactively. We will explore solutions (hopefully!) for achieving a sustainable balance, ensuring that we can thrive both professionally and personally. 'Work from home' is a current discussion at my own institution and the consideration of measuring work by time or by output is an

example of why we need to think again about our definition of balance. Do we leave work at work—or do we allow it to be fully integrated into our lives? What are appropriate boundaries? I will admit I struggle with boundaries. My dog, Lexi, is a wonderful listener, and walking her when I get home always allows her to problem-solve all the issues of my workday. She always makes me feel better about my decisions and she is always positive. And then she gets her dinner. But it does mean I am taking my work home... boundaries...

I am also deeply concerned about the ongoing attacks on higher education. With the increasing scrutiny and criticism, how do we navigate such attacks? How do we assert the value of the work we do and respond to skepticism, both from within and outside of the academy? This is an area where collective wisdom is invaluable. Crafting responses that continue to protect our integrity while remaining open to constructive dialogue is not easy. Advocacy has become treacherous and sometimes (increasingly) career-ending.

The resignation list for our senior administrators is growing. You may be concerned about where your next institutional leader to fill the latest resignation at the cabinet level will come from. It must be getting hard for search firms to write compelling position descriptions when they need to include requirements such as ‘A visionary with the ability to stare down judiciary committees...’ or ‘A proven listener who can satisfy the politics of everyone on campus without risking their own safety’. I have read several pieces lately on this ‘great resignation’ and offer one to you now—if you have not had the chance to read it already. Last month in the New York Times, Pamela Paul wrote an op-ed about Jonathon Holloway and his decision to step away from the presidency at Rutgers. On this occasion, Holloway was not forcefully driven out. However, deeper and wider forces around him, it could be argued, have done the driving. Holloway offered that “It’s a punishing job in normal times”. It is the word “punishing” that has stayed with me. The piece ends with this “If American universities continue to lose leaders like Jonathon Holloway, higher education is in even greater trouble than it already was”. In thinking about how “punishing” the work is, I wonder what can be done to encourage leaders like you to continue in this work, and to thrive in, and enjoy it. Our work should not be so merciless as it is here described.

So, how do we articulate the value of education now? Because this work is not an activity that should be “punishing”, it should not be unsparing. If education is valued, we as its custodians, will be valued. How should we communicate the lifelong benefits of education, not only in terms of career readiness but also in terms of personal growth, civic engagement, and critical thinking? As always, our annual meeting has the value of education as a common thread and once again, we will discuss how to best advocate for the transformative power of learning.

We have all seen various reports related to the public’s (and politicians’) current perception of higher education. There are consternations about what is being taught... about affordability... about debt... and the overall questioning of value and whether a college degree is worth the time, effort, and money. Confidence in higher education has been waning for years. Education for education’s sake is under heavy scrutiny. I recognize that there are a whole lot of people smarter than me speaking on these concerns. And I recognize that handing the mic to someone

who can say it better than I can is always a good idea. So, once again to the New York Times... the Sunday edition on October 6th, in which, a full-page advert from the American Council on Education was directed to presidential candidates, championing how higher education builds America... and pledging to work with whoever wins to “advance the kinds of growth and opportunity for all Americans that only our colleges and universities can deliver.” And, in talking about intent, Nick Anderson, a Vice President with the American Council on Education explained that the advert is a reminder of higher-ed’s value at a time when it is too often oversimplified or misunderstood. Well said Nick.

Another question... if education can be transformative how are we supporting apparently unprepared students so that they can benefit? We’re told we are facing a growing number of students entering higher education who may not be fully prepared in a traditional, familiar sense, for the academic rigors ahead. What more can we do to support these students, ensuring that they do not just survive but thrive and maybe even transform? I look forward to your thoughts on how to meet students where they are and help them succeed through practices such as early intervention, intentional advising, and peer support programming. Further, issues of accessibility and mental health also rightfully remain at the fore of these conversations about preparedness. The challenge of ensuring that our institutions are appropriately accessible to all students... and that we are supporting the mental health needs of those students, while also doing the same for faculty and staff must be advanced.

Well... That is a lot to consider. I hope you see these and the other elements of our meeting as catalysts to take back to your campus and lead change with an even greater purpose and confidence. As much as we may sometimes feel we are defending ourselves, we are also constantly reinventing (and hopefully championing) ourselves. And that is good work.

When I started attending these meetings I rather innocently perceived that there were fewer critical issues, fewer storms brewing, and certainly (to continue the metaphor) less extreme weather ahead of me than I see now. After decades in this work, I see how broad and holistic our administrative skillset must be to survive—let alone thrive. In summary, I remain determined to provide adequate resources for renewal in ourselves and our field without letting it “punish” us.

I will close these remarks by saying that looking at this room today is a good reminder for me to trust the power of community. We will continue to face significant challenges, but together, we will find solutions, we will support one another, and we will ensure that our institutions remain places of growth, inquiry, and transformation. I personally thank you for being here today and thank you for the important work you do every day. I look forward to the conversations we’re about to have and the connections we’ll strengthen as we move forward... together.