

June 21st, 2022

An Open Letter to Vermont College of Fine Arts Chairman Goldstein, Vice Chair Carvelli, and Members of the Board of Trustees,

We can never know what strange challenges we, or the leaders we choose for ourselves, may have to face. VCFA went through a change in leadership immediately preceding the unexpected global upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption the pandemic caused was chaotic, intense and unpredictable, and every leader of every community struggled during this time. Still, as members of the board, you accepted the responsibility to steward an organization and a community, for better or for worse. It is important for the future of VCFA that the board of trustees as a body understands its role, and learns from the consequences of its choices: both the selection process, and final choice of leadership severely compounded the disruption to VCFA as an institution.

As such, we members of the alumnx community of Vermont College of Fine Arts would like to voice our profound disappointment in, and strong objection to, the sudden decision to move residency activities to the campus of Colorado College, and further, to only offer in person residencies once per year. In particular, we are troubled that this decision and its method of communication seem to directly violate VCFA's own governance policy, approved by the Board of Trustees on January 12, 2008: *"Information about issues, proposed developments, and decisions will be communicated in a timely and helpful fashion to assure that all members of the college community are given an opportunity to provide input on matters affecting them;"* *"VCFA assures faculty governance of academic programs and participation of faculty in college-wide governance."*

The feedback from your community following the recent announcement of a "reimagining," has been almost universally negative, and will require mitigation beyond the follow-up email sent June 18th. In our home communities, as professionals and academic leaders and teachers, board members and parents of students ourselves, we have witnessed, experienced, and led many educational change initiatives. Few are met with outright grieving, and few are as poorly and suddenly communicated as this one. The messaging surrounding this move alone devalues the

institution, and the degrees your alumnx paid for. It also presents VCFA as an unstable choice for charitable donations.

To select leadership, most educational institutions engage search firms that are solely dedicated to the particular process of sourcing and selecting educational leaders. As there was minimal transparency involved in the selection process that VCFA went through to hire the current president – herself a former board member – it is unclear if the board engaged in a selection process appropriate to an institution of higher education. We cannot recommend more strongly that you consider doing so for any future choices in leadership for VCFA. The process of selecting an experienced educational leader makes stability and progress possible during chaotic times. There is a playbook to follow in these cases for a reason.

President Leslie Ward is an alumnx, who came with enthusiasm for the job and fresh ideas. Less fortunately, her background is only minimally related to the mission and operational function of VCFA, and this knowledge gap has created liabilities organization-wide. An experienced leader would have known to engage in strategic planning appropriate to an educational institution during this time — including forecasting and scheduling rotating facilities maintenance. A leader experienced in the world of education would have also known that if a change of this magnitude were truly necessary — the proposed uprooting of the community and sale of the campus — then communicating that change would require significantly more delicacy than was exhibited here.

Change like this requires generating buy-in from the community, offering opportunities for feedback in advance of the change, and above all, understanding that the community itself is what gives the institution its value. Again, there is a playbook here. Even if the writing is on the wall and the ink is dry, the community needs to feel heard and engaged in the change. Transparency and effective communication are paramount. The news that faculty and staff were informed immediately before the announcement was frankly shocking.

With all that, we urge you to reconsider this choice, and offer several practical suggestions:

- Engage with the City of Montpelier and the State of Vermont to see what support may be available to you in terms of facilities maintenance and upgrades, particularly given the historic nature of the campus. This proposed change significantly impacts the entire municipality, and city leadership would surely have an interest in finding a mutually workable solution. The state of Vermont also offers a grants program for historic properties.
- Consider selling a smaller portion of the property to fund facilities upgrades, or service debt, if this is an issue.
- Source and engage a consultant specific to higher education to assist your executive leadership in making organizational choices appropriate to the domain.

- Consider a rolling capital improvement campaign. Your alumnx community has a genuine love for VCFA, and it's an asset that is being devalued by current practice.
- Consider sourcing an alternative location from within the community itself. This is a community with significant experience, expertise, and connections. Make use of them!

Your role as board members is to choose leadership and provide oversight. This is likely the most important time in the story of VCFA for you to do so.

Thank you for your service.

Alumnx and Students of Vermont College of Fine Arts

Adam Grabowski, Writing (Poetry), '20
 Ramona Rikki Bell, Music Composition, '17
 Rachel Sarrano, Music Composition, '15
 Richard Tuttobene, Music Composition, '17
 Amanda N. Anderson-Boss, Writing (Fiction), '17
 Devin Barone, Music Composition, '19
 Carla Criscuolo, Creative Writing, '14
 Michelle Demers, Creative Writing, '03
 Kristie Daugherty, Creative Writing, '05
 Leslie Frost, Music Composition, '20
 Yvette Frock Gottshall, Poetry, '07
 Angela Knauer Haase, Writing, '16
 R.W. Hartshorn, Fiction '10
 Melissa Mills, Writing, '21
 John Proctor, Creative Nonfiction '11
 Tracy Robert, Creative Writing, 1991
 Jaquay Smith, Music Composition, '22
 Breana Steele, Creative Writing, '16
 Nicole Troxell, Creative Writing, '15
 Keith Butler Jr., Music Composition, '22

Lynn Adele Acheson, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '08
Siarra Quinn Riehl, Writing, '20
Taylor V. Card, Writing, '20
Mara Sineps Miller, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '99
Shelby Hogan, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '12
Cheryl Wright-Watkins, Creative Nonfiction 2012
Allison Tartaglia, Music Composition '22
Sarah LeMieux, Music Composition, '19
Mary Donovan, Writing, '98
Christy Ferrato, Poetry, 2008
Paul D. Acciavatti, Writing and Publishing '19
Elizabeth Booker, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '16
Tavia Gilbert, Writing, 2013
Andrea Simpson, Poetry 2005
Rhonda Zimlich, Writing 2018
Sarah Leamy, Writing, 2019
Cathy Barber, Writing, 2013
Nancy J. Fagan, Writing, 2022
Robin Oliveira, Writing, 2006
Ben Lieberman, Music Composition, '19
Amanda Laven, Music Composition, '16
Ben Hahn, Writing, 2015
Jan McBride, Music Composition, '19
Michael Staffieri, Film 2017
Melissa McClung, Film, '18
Melinda Lujan, Film, 2020
Laurence Unger, Film, 2018
Jessie Ewing, Film, 2022
Frances De Larminat Film 2019
Keith Kolecki Film 2019
Alla Kovgan, Film, 2020
Robert Maffia, Film, 2015
Paul Lorenz, Music Composition, '19
Ann Malaspina, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '16
Catherine Masud, Film 2020
Josh Koury, Film 2016
Jessica Crossman, Film, 2018
Tamara Perkins, Film, 2019
David Lombino, Film, 2019
Tami Anderson, Film, 2018

Sabrina Resnick, Visual Arts 2023
JohnPaul Beattie, Music Composition, '18
Ethan Foote, Music Composition, 2020
David Angell, Film, 2018
Patricia Meriam, Visual Arts 2024
Marjorie Halloran, Music Composition 2015
Nichole Rodriguez, Art & Design Education 2018
Fred Bubbers, Writing, 2019
Kieran P. Holohan, Writing, 2016
Joshua Johnson, Film 2021
Shari Swanson, Writing for Children and Young Adults, 2012
Paula A. Allen, Film 2016
Trevor Southall, Film 2021
Robert Macauley, Fiction 2012 (Board member 2013-2017)
Julie Cole, Writing 2018
Katherine Quimby Johnson, WCYA, 2014
Carol Anshaw, Writing, 1992
Julie Graves Krishnaswami, Visual Art 2021
Alyssa Karis, Visual Art 2023
Marq Evans, Film, 2020
Maiyan Linane, Visual Art, 2022
George Nicholas, Film 2017
Melissa Lowrie, Writing, '19
Laura Ojeda Melchor, Writing for Children and Young Adults, '17
Emi Warren Visual Art, 21
Nicholas Lima, Visual Art, 2022
Kate Kelsen, Film 2016
Craig Downing, Film, 2021
Rodney Reyes, Film, 2016
Ian Rand, Film, 2015
Jena Burchick, Film, 2020
Leah Manasseh, Film 2020
Kimberly Ashley, Writing for Children and Young Adults, 2019
Soren Sorensen, Film, 2019
Emilie Upczak, Film 2015