

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

NUMBER 5

OTIS COLLEGE OF ART + DESIGN 9045 Lincoln Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90045

A message from Samuel C. Hoi

As Otis faculty watch three hundred new students settle into college life this fall, the importance of our work as educators once again becomes vivid. These students are driven. Their commitment and their talent will sustain them through the challenges of a rigorous education. They perceive Otis as a bridge between their past and future identities.

What promise does Otis make to them? Recently, the Otis community grappled with this question and articulated the guiding vision for the College:

Otis prepares diverse students of art and design to enrich our world through their creativity, their skill, and their vision.

To honor this vision, we must focus on each and every student to cultivate his or her own voice, prepare each to achieve, and instill an awareness of responsibility that comes with talent.

How do we do this? Through teaching. Teaching is the College's life breath. Teaching is what our students will remember the most about Otis. Not the buildings, not the equipment—as essential as those elements of education are, they can't inspire deeply. Only a teacher can do that.

I want to use this letter as an occasion to share how the gift that teachers impart to their students comes to life. I have asked faculty leaders from three departments to describe their practices in our studios and classrooms.

At Otis, the learning journey begins with Foundation year, a unique program among colleges of art and design in Southern California. All incoming students follow a common interdisciplinary curriculum that grounds them in fundamentals of art making while fanning the sparks of their individual voice and vision.

Katie Phillips **Chair, Foundation**

Phillips discusses the values that underpin Otis' introductory year.

In Foundation, we believe that the best indicator of success is not IQ or even some previously demonstrated talent, but the level of intensity the student brings to the learning process. Every student, given sufficient desire, can become a star. Foundation teaching's strength is that it enables students to identify their strongest artistic propensities and sparks a desire for excellence.

To connect students vitally with their own creativity, to instill the motivation to develop outstanding skills and vision, Foundation teachers must be skilled at overcoming a laid-back, disengaged attitude that is prevalent among young people today. Unfortunately, our culture doesn't support enthusiasm. It tends to promote cynicism and alienation, especially in the large public high schools that many of our students have attended.

Addressing this need, faculty members begin by exemplifying the desired behavior. That is, every teacher is an engaged, enthusiastic, professional artist who shares information about her or his studio activities and art world experiences with the students. Second, we emphasize hands-on instruction, characterized by faculty demonstration and active student experience, which is particularly well suited to the visual acuity of our students. Educational research shows that an active learning format produces significantly better results than the traditional lecture format.

For the entire duration of a class session, Foundation teachers remain involved. We never sit at the back of the room while students work on a task. We're always circulating, giving independent instruction, talking to a few students in small groups, giving more examples. In more difficult classes such as Perspective Drawing, we have two faculty members and a teaching assistant for a class of no more than 20. Students

seem pleasantly—and productively—surprised by this individualized attention. To the extent that we attend to them, they attend to the task.

We also try to reinforce students' confidence and motivation through assignment evaluations. Instead of just saying, "This is an F," we would measure a student's work against expected outcomes. So we might say, "This is a wonderful thing you've made, but it doesn't meet the criteria of the problem. Why don't you go home and try again?" We never tell students, "You're not any good. You shouldn't be here." Never ever ever!

Complementing the student-teacher relationship, Foundation year instruction also promotes a strong sense of community among the students. This serves two purposes. First, research indicates that people will take more creative risks if they know and trust the others they're working with. Second, community-building activities prepare students for their responsibility as artists to enrich the world. Foundation students attend all their studio classes with the same group, or section, of students. In addition to collaborating on frequent group projects, section-mates take part in a year-long ethics orientation process that includes nine one-hour personal development modules. Many Foundation students forge such strong relationships that their section-mates remain their best friends throughout their Otis career.

The Foundation curriculum progresses from highly structured assignments towards those in which students have extensive freedom of choice. At the end of Foundation year, students make one of their most significant educational decisions—what their major will be. As they enter their sophomore year, they have acquired the information, skills, self-knowledge, and confidence to take the next crucial step in their journey as artists.

Scott Grieger **Professor, Fine Arts**

Grieger, who has taught since 1979, explains how Otis fine arts faculty members introduce their students to painting.

All Otis painting teachers teach invisibly. Students feel as if they have made the discovery themselves because we lead them to the values and habits that will define them as artists. Our job is to help students join the tribe of the art world—they are entitled to this by being enrolled here—and to help unravel the art world’s mysteries. In some circles, this process is called mentorship.

As a teacher, I have always believed that art does not exist in free space—art serves the interests, background, values, point of view, and pre-existing talents and skills of the artist. Consequently, instruction must primarily help students ferret out those aspects of their identity. How does this process work? A few examples will illustrate the concept.

On the first day of sophomore painting class, we ask students to fill out a form listing their nicknames; their favorite artists, musicians, and authors; their hobbies, skills, talents, and abilities. Next, their first assignment is an allegedly “free” assignment where we simply ask them to show off their best painting skills. Over the next few weeks, we coach and nurture them on this assignment. But there is a trick here. What we are really looking for is insight into their skill level and conceptual thinking ability.

With this information, we begin to recommend research on possible influences or points of view. The better the students’ influences, the better artists they can become. Again, there’s a trick. I never ever bring books, slides, or other “light entertainment” to class. I make students get the material themselves. This promotes ownership of ideas and turns the energy of the class inward so that students actively share information. We also push students to become their own worst critics so that they learn to initiate self-improvement.

But as valuable as these classroom activities are, the more important work probably takes place outside the classroom. The offhanded conversation in the hallway or parking structure—this is when I get to say, “You ought to look up so-and-so in the library,” OR “I was thinking about your painting...” OR “There is an art opening you should attend,” OR, better yet, “Let’s go to lunch. I want to discuss an artist I know.” In this unrecorded time, I try to make specific, meaningful connections for students to follow, connections that can lead them to a clearer perception of their emerging identity as a professional artist.

With painting and all majors, the College emphasizes the importance of joining a professional community. Talent emerges not simply from within the individual, but in dynamic association with other practitioners, with the traditions of the art forms, and with the marketplace. Recently, Fashion Design launched a bold new “think tank” teaching initiative aimed at preparing students for the unique demands of the 21st century.

Rosemary Brantley

Founding Chair, Fashion Design

Brantley describes the department’s pioneering new ambitions.

If I could put one word next to “Fashion Design” in our department name, it would be “change.” The fashion industry has always defined itself as a process of change: every six weeks to three months, we shake things up dramatically for the public. Otis’ Fashion Design program prepares students to lead this relentless process of change. By the time they graduate, students will think of themselves as fashion innovators and visionaries—people who know how to keep learning and how to keep imagining fresh, creative solutions to design problems.

Otis’ Fashion Department is becoming a pioneer for the fashion industry. In addition to training students in the skills necessary to produce incredibly high quality work, we impart the forward-looking creative thinking strategies that are essential for leadership. We’re focusing on new technology, new ways to see clothing in the world. Now when I contact designers to serve as mentors for our students, I tell them that first and foremost, we want to operate as a think tank for their business. Is there some intriguing new equipment or material in which they’re reluctant to invest heavily because of too many unanswered questions? “Bring it here,” I say, “Let our students figure it out.” In one upcoming project, a Lunada Bay designer will teach students to apply Avid’s latest high-speed digital printing process to swimwear. To my knowledge, no other fashion program in the U.S. offers this instructional approach.

Social responsibility is important in our teaching. We encourage students to think deeply about the impact they can have on the world and to dream big dreams. For instance, we’re

doing a design project with Patagonia, a company that has an remarkable degree of environmental integrity. Using fabrics made out of soybean, flax, and corn, students will use dyes made from tomatoes, beets, and coffee; for buttons, they might slice betel nuts and punch holes in the discs. Not every student will go on to pursue this particular vision professionally. But all will have been exposed to it, and their minds will be richer as a result.

Through leading edge instruction, we prepare students to meet the demands of the new economy fashion industry, which has markedly changed its values. Salespeople used to be the industry heroes. Today, manufacturers realize that as differences in price and quality shrink due to global competition, creativity is the only arena left in which to compete. Otis fashion students will be uniquely prepared to meet that need.

Within Fashion Design’s think tank, the faculty remains our single greatest asset. We hire only instructors who are working in the industry, so they can immediately bring into the classroom information about changes that are happening right now. We look for people who are good at training others and who can quickly understand and respond to the unique needs and aspirations of every single student. After every class, we have a lab session, which functions as a supervised study hall so that students can ask more questions and get more advice from our best faculty. From today’s leaders, students learn how to create the future of fashion.

The Otis journey, then, will take this year’s three hundred new students from aspiration to achievement. Otis will equip them to take their places in the world as successful creative professionals. Guided and nurtured by teachers who have traveled that same road, students define their own vision and chart a path to achieve their goals. Through inspired teaching, they catch hold of their dreams. They start to become the person they could once only imagine and prepare to enrich the world with their unique gifts. That is our promise. That is our calling. That is our mission.



Samuel C. Hoi, President