

February 2022

OPEN LETTER
RESPONSE TO THE ACQUISITION OF SFAI

In higher education it is often repeated, “The Students are the Most Important.” Yet in recent years many students have been disregarded through school closures, and acquisitions of smaller schools of higher education by larger schools who possess the financial means to swallow whole struggling colleges and universities, often accumulating property and assets at a valuation exceedingly less than would be possible on the open market. On Tuesday, February 1, 2022, The San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) announced its intention to merge with the University of San Francisco. In an hour-long Zoom meeting with Students, The Board of Trustees and SFAI Leadership announced their intention for a merger by acquisition with The University of San Francisco (USF). It was reported in the NYT on February 3rd that “they have formalized plans to integrate operations and academic programs with the University of San Francisco, a private Jesuit university, in a process they say will eventually lead to the university acquiring the 150-year-old art school.”

Some students are hopeful that the acquisition of SFAI by USF will bring financial safety, additional resources, and ensure they can finish their degrees. Students are hopeful that if SFAI is able to remain an independent school within the University and state its independence from religious affiliation, it can maintain its legacy, at least partially. Many hope the school would have its own dean and administration. Additionally, the school should have a certain level of financial independence and donations should be directed to an “SFAI-account”. Prospective donors should have the freedom to offer SFAI and not the Jesuit mission or the USF leadership. However, students have been told that in all likelihood, SFAI will probably be a department rather than a school. Also, if they graduate beyond Spring 2022, they will not get the diploma/degree they signed up to get from one of the most prestigious art schools, but instead, they will get a diploma from a University they did not intend to pursue their studies at. Especially that one’s choice of not graduating from USF is not necessarily linked to the University’s academic programs, but could also be to their religious affiliation and internal regulations. Many SFAI students find it perplexing that the SFAI Board of Trustees would countenance a serious conversation with a religious organization as a way to absolve themselves of their own fiduciary responsibilities. Many of us are not aligned with the legacy and values of this institution and therefore will no longer be able to continue to choose SFAI for our education in art.

Several members of the community are worried that merging with a Jesuit institution will not attract the diversity, the uniqueness, or the depth of thinking we possess at SFAI now. We observe that the Jesuit mission is in conflict with artistic freedom. Even if SFAI can maintain some form of autonomy and offers promises of freedom of expression, there might be forms of self-censorship that will be observed in the student’s art practice due to the school’s new affiliation with a religious institution. Whilst USF might express some pride for its “diversity”, their president and general leadership follow Catholicism, which does not allow women to be

priests, does not support homosexual marriage, sexual freedom, abortion, and more. Despite the apostolic (Pope's) apology, people cannot forget that the Catholic church has grievously harmed indigenous people and children and then shielded itself from the consequences of those actions by means of institutional cover-ups and deception for several years. Their legacy holds of violence, cultural genocide, predation as well as land and resource extraction, and those are not elements that the students of this school of fine arts want to belong to, even if in its current form this religious organization attenuates its positionality with money, semantic niceties, and corporate-speak. The Roman Catholic church has traditionally been a prime example of classic patriarchy; the male-dominated hierarchical structure of the church is legitimated by sacred doctrine. SFAI will potentially lose women who believe they should have access at all levels to positions of power, LGBTQ+, and many more, students who are not aligned with the Jesuit mission. In summation, the essence of SFAI would be compromised and contradicted by this proposed "merger".

Some students choose to disregard the history of the Jesuit church and focus on their administrative approach and educational mission. The issue nevertheless, is not only the fact that USF is a catholic institution. While various Catholic institutions around the world remain silent in regards to their religious concerns and focus on the educational mission, it seems that the current administration of USF prefers to be very vocal on such issues which feels very oppressive and patronizing. The current president acts as a politicized right-wing celebrity speaker and gives statements on various issues including sexual harassment. The USF President, Reverend Paul Joseph Fitzgerald, S.J., stated in one of his interviews: "non-college attending young women are more likely to be sexually assaulted than women who are in college." What does the USF board have to say about that? Additionally, USF's administration seems to prefer to keep the number of schools under their university minimal and groups various departments and majors under one school. Will SFAI have to exist as a department within the College of Arts and Sciences? Also, very importantly, SFAI has given no guarantees to its current students that they will keep their financial aid packages and current curricular path. There is a loss of faith due to this and prior lack of protection for its current students and many feel betrayed. According to USF's website, their Board has raised tuition every year recently: over the last few years, annual increases have ranged from 2.8% to 4.4%. Full-time assumes 12-18 credits per semester for the San Francisco Hilltop campus. With no guarantees for current students who have started degree programs, we are left in fear of lost time and money, and behind schedule in education and our careers. We are also in mid-February and most colleges in the U.S. are not accepting Transfer applications anymore. Also, no one has mentioned what would happen if the merger does not go through. Why did SFAI accept new students and promise them an SFAI degree if they won't be able to pursue that? Can they guarantee a teach-out for the current students?

The historical irony of the potential purchase of the Diego Rivera mural for pennies on the dollar is not lost to us students: Rivera, a communist dedicated to liberation from servitude to capital and religion, would be appalled that his magnum opus would be sold to the very entity that his life and practice opposed. SFAI students are not deceived: whatever material benefits that would come from this proposed "merger" would not be worth the price of our

artistic freedom and integrity. No amount of nice facilities, friendly gestures, or bromides more suited for the professional-managerial class will reassure us in the face of the truth of the matter: the end of one of the last independent and free-standing art schools in the nation for the sake of donor-prestige and the enlargement of asset portfolios. To make it palatable, the SFAI Board and Leadership are calling this a “merger by acquisition”. The primary difference between mergers and acquisitions is that a merger is the combining of two organizations into an entirely new entity, while an acquisition is when a company absorbs another, but no new organization is created. Will USF make any amends to its mission and vision? That is very unlikely and has never been mentioned. What will we say to the students that were coming from places where they were being censored and persecuted, hoping to find safety at SFAI? We do not think that SFAI will continue to be the safe haven for progressive, dissenting art that it has been throughout its history. Its legacy will inevitably die without the home in which it was created. This acquisition is a masked death for SFAI - for all that the institution stood for and built its legacy on.

A coalition of SFAI Students
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