

RYAN A. BIZZARRO, CHAIRMAN

116 MAIN CAPITOL BUILDING
P.O. BOX 202003
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-2003
(717) 772-2297



HOUSE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE

PAHOUSE.COM/POLICY
POLICY@PAHOUSE.NET
✉️ 📘 📷 📧 @PADEMPOLICY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMONWEALTH of PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

University of the Arts Closure
Monday, June 17, 2024 | 10:00 a.m.

Representative Ben Waxman

OPENING REMARKS

10:00 a.m. Rep. Ben Waxman (D-Philadelphia)

PANEL ONE

10:05 a.m. Alex McFadden, Student
University of the Arts

Joey Miller, Student
University of the Arts

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

10:40 a.m. Gehia Davenport, Staff Member, Alumna
University of the Arts

Kevin Mercer, Illustration Faculty Member
University of the Arts

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL THREE

11:15 a.m. Frank Machos, Alum
University of the Arts

Laurin Talese, Alumna
University of the Arts

Q & A with Legislators

Alex McFadden, UArts Class of 2024
Pennsylvania House Policy Committee Testimony for UArts Closure
Monday, June 17, 2024

Dear Mr. Chairman and the members of the Pennsylvania House Policy Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the sudden and abrupt closure of the University of the Arts. My name is Alex McFadden. I am a member of the class of 2024, the final graduating class of the University of the Arts. I have just earned my BFA in screenwriting. While at UArts, I had the pleasure of serving as the first chair of the Student Union from the Fall of 2022 to the Fall of 2023. Although I am no longer chair and my alma mater has recently shut down, I'm here to speak on behalf of the students and the recent graduates of the University of the Arts because I took an oath to protect and serve the members of the student body, and that is an oath I plan to keep for a very long time. I'm also here to share my personal experiences of mistreatment by the UArts administration to protect future artists and students from going through the same experiences I did.

There are many things the committee needs to understand about the magnitude of everything that has happened. For me, the most important thing for the committee to know is that I had the best job in the world. As a student activist and community organizer from Alabama, I jumped at the opportunity to lead the student body. It was the perfect marriage of my two biggest interests: activism and art. I got to amplify the voices of the most creative and talented artists and lead the renaissance of student representation for a school I loved. I was honored to be re-elected for a second term. I was so happy that I couldn't even dream of predicting the dark future that awaited me. It was only a matter of time before things got worse.

Without going into personal details, there were a few on-campus incidents that impacted my safety. It became obvious that the institution would not do what was necessary to protect and support me during my hardest moments. I noticed the dark underbelly of an administration that didn't care about its students. While none of us knew about the severity of the financial hardships that led to the closure of the University of the Arts, many of us can tell you a lack of empathy plagued the University long before the financial issues even began. I determined the best thing for me to do was resign.

There were a few responses from members of the administration after I resigned. 1) They were sorry I was leaving but confessed they weren't paying attention to the Student Union because they had other things to worry about, 2) They told me to stop focusing on the issues of the University and focus more on my art because after all, I went to an art school, and 3) I was told that it was good that I was resigning because it would give somebody else a chance to lead.

So that's what I did. I let someone else lead. I stopped focusing on the issues and injustices I saw within the University, focused on my art, and graduated just like they told me to. Since I still cared about the rights of artists, I decided it would be beneficial for me to go to law school in addition to being an artist so I could continue to advocate for the artistic community. I took an

LSAT practice test, started buying testing materials, and waited for them to be delivered so I could start studying.

The day my last LSAT book was delivered was when I found out through the Philadelphia Inquirer that the University of the Arts was closing for good. Not only was it closing for good, but it was closing for good within the week, the same week that I had planned to go to the UArts library with my books in my backpack, take the elevator up to the mezzanine floor, and begin studying for the LSAT.

I had, and still have, a complicated relationship with the University. But as an artist, an aspiring lawyer, and a human being, I was infuriated that my community had to pay the price for the mistakes of a Machiavellian administration that only cared about money and itself in the same way that I had to pay the price for their mistakes when I resigned as chair of the Student Union.

So I joined the charge to fight for our community and posted resources for the UArts closure. I attended protests at Hamilton Hall multiple times during the final week of UArts. I saw the institution's time end. I also felt the hold of the administration and their terrible comments loosen their grip on my shoulders. I noticed how freeing it was to create art just to create art and dance in the street. I watched as members of this movement emphasized the importance of taking care of our mental health; getting adequate food, water, and sleep; and stressing the importance of our artistic voices for the first time. I realized that the best creative practices blur the line between art and activism just like I do. I regret only getting to know my student body and our power when the University of the Arts was closing.

The closure of UArts allowed me to see what it would've become had it not been led by envy and greed. Its closure means an entire community has been set free by leadership that has hurt them more than it has helped them and can be shepherded by leaders who prioritize care and compassion. It's proof that the arts can live on despite tragedy, and if an institution isn't willing to fight for the UArts community and its magic, other institutions can fight for the rights we deserve. I speak on behalf of the students and recent graduates of the University of the Arts when I say I would be honored if you would be an institution that holds the UArts administration accountable for waging the world's cruelty on its community. I would be honored if you joined the UArts community in the fight for our basic humanity and led the charge to investigate the evil and intolerance that existed long before the closure of the University. I am not the person or the entity who should've stepped aside and let someone else lead. The UArts administration is. And I strongly believe an entity that should lead the UArts community through these tragic circumstances and onto a brighter future is all of you.

Thank you.

2024

It Came Without Warning!

DAVENPORT, GEHIA
UARTS BFA IN DANCE EDUCATION 94'
UARTS FORMER STAFF MEMBER

My name is Gehia Davenport and I am not only an alumna of the University of The Arts, but was also an employee for what would have been 30 years in October of this year. I started as a work study student at UArts and after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance Education in May of 1994. I was hired as a full-time staff member in October of 1995.

The closing of the University of The Arts was devastating. I was in a state of shock when I first heard the news on Friday, May 31, and was having trouble processing it all. I couldn't believe that an institution of this magnitude was closing and shutting its doors on the following week on Friday, June 7, without any warning.

It is devastating that an institution of this caliber, which has been a part of my world and my family's world for over half my life would close so abruptly with no warning, no indication that there were any problems, and no opportunity for any of the staff, faculty, or students to prepare and make financial or educational arrangements. These unexpected layoffs also left no time for any of us to process this situation. It has been mentally, emotionally, and physically taxing on all of us.

When I heard the news that the University of The Arts was closing I was in the middle of processing paperwork for staff and faculty payments in the School of Art Dean's Office. It is very upsetting to me because I set deadlines to make sure all paperwork went out on time. Now I am not certain if the paperwork went through and it is extremely frustrating, not knowing if the staff and faculty were paid what is owed to them.

My family depends on my income. I have one son in college and another son who will be entering his senior year in high school this fall. I was planning to have him attend the University of the Arts Pre-College program this summer and then attend the University of the Arts in Fall 2025 as a benefit of my tuition remission. One of the reasons I stayed at UArts for the last 30 years is because of all the opportunities it has provided my boys, through their Pre-College Programs and the potential undergraduate college options. I was also planning to focus on advancing my own education and career options, once my youngest son finished high school, by earning a Masters at UArts...which I could never pursue without the tuition remission benefits I worked so hard to be able to use.

The burden of my finances have shifted solely to my husband. In today's economy you need two incomes to get by.

I am not sure how all my bills will get paid. School tuition, loans, credit cards; all in jeopardy of going into default.

UArts will no longer match my Tiaa retirement plan.

My husband and I had also been planning for our eventual retirement and because of the stability UArts provided all these years, I never imagined I would have to start over at a new job. If I had known UArts was going to close, I would have worked a lot sooner to find a job at another university and help maintain a sense of security for my family...especially since we are not receiving any severance pay and will not have access to health coverage through UArts after June 30th.

In addition to the devastating impact this sudden closure has had on my family, my heart breaks for all our UArts students, incoming, current, and students were one or two semesters away from graduating and now will not be able to earn their degree from the UArts and will likely have to delay their graduation as a result of transferring to another University.

The way the UArts closure was handled was a horrible blow to our entire campus community. It was not ethical and it was not lawful...and the university administration needs to be held accountable for all the lives that have been affected. Even now the process to move forward is being hindered. Zoom town hall that was supposed to answer questions was canceled 10 minutes before it was scheduled to start. Very soon after, the president resigned. The students have been camping out on the campus of UArts Hamilton Hall steps on Broad Street.

While they can never make up for the totality of unexpected losses we have experienced, they have a responsibility to make things as right as possible for all of us.

Thank you for the opportunity for letting me express my feelings, concerns and disappointment in the devastating closure of the University of The Arts.

University of The Arts, we pray that you will do the right thing and look out for those of us who have looked out for this institution all these years. Thank you!