

REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM  
SPECIAL VISIT

To: NewSchool of Architecture & Design

November 28 – December 1, 2023

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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## **SECTION I: OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT**

### **A. Description of the Institution, Accreditation History, as Relevant, and Visit**

Founded in 1980, the NewSchool of Architecture & Design (NewSchool) provides a professional architecture school in the San Diego area. It currently occupies 83,000 square feet of industrial maker space in San Diego's East Village. NewSchool is a for-profit institution, whose ownership has changed multiple times in recent years. Laureate Education was the most recent long-time owner from 2008 to 2020, and with approval from the Commission, Ambow Education Holdings Ltd. (Ambow) purchased NewSchool in spring 2020. The commission approval required a commitment from Ambow to cover any NewSchool budget or financial deficit for the first three years following the implementation of ownership change.

Since the ownership change in 2020, NewSchool has gone through a series of transitions including major leadership and staffing changes at both the president level and the campus level. Shortly after the unexpected passing of the president who oversaw the 2018 reaffirmation visit (whose tenure began in January 2016), the then chair of the board took over as the interim president. The interim president led the preparation and submission of the institution's 2022 special visit report. A new permanent president began her tenure at NewSchool in March 2022, but left abruptly shortly after. The current president has been serving as the interim president since September 2022, and with full support from the Board of Directors, became the permanent president effective October 1, 2023. Additionally, NewSchool terminated the shared services model that was implemented previously to provide student services and operational support (e.g. technology, accounting & finance, human resources, bursar,

registrar, and financial aid services), and now has staff positions on campus to provide these services. Related, staffing turnovers in various areas also took place in the past few years including Chief Financial Officer, enrollment and marketing personnel, and student support services staff.

NewSchool's mission is "to nurture and inspire design-minded learners to become citizen architects and designers." The principles of project-based pedagogy and humanistic approach underlie the institution's programs and operations. Academic Pillars that identify student academic values (professional preparation, engagement with community, human welfare, environmental empathy, service), affinity areas that provide faculty scholarship foci (design + practice, design + strategy, design + health, design + environment, service), and the interrelationships between the two frame the institution's offerings. As of fall 2023, NewSchool offers seven bachelor's programs and six master's programs, with a total enrollment of 280. Approximately 80% of the students are undergraduates, and over 60% of the students are enrolled in the Bachelor of Architecture program. NewSchool offers all programs in-person except for the online Master of Construction Management program; they have been approved to offer this program in person as well. Integrative Studies, NewSchool's General Education program, also offers some asynchronous online courses. Enrollment at NewSchool has been struggling for the past few years, with several programs having single digit enrollment. Efforts have been put in place to increase enrollment, which will be detailed later in this report.

NewSchool was initially recognized by the Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) in 1991, and received initial accreditation from WSCUC

in 2014. NewSchool received six years for reaffirmation of accreditation in 2019, with an interim report scheduled for 2021 to address issues in finances, assessment, and program review. The ownership change from Laureate to Ambow prompted the Commission to replace the November 2021 interim report with progress reports in fall 2020 and fall 2021, followed by a special visit in spring 2022. These progress reports and the special visit sought updates regarding the status of transition to Ambow including transparency and integrity of operations, enrollments, and the financial position of NewSchool. Another special visit took place in October 2022 following the abrupt departure of the new president and the chair and members of the governing board, and examined issues in finances, enrollment, board governance, and leadership. The Executive Committee of the Commission placed NewSchool on Notice of Concern as a result of this special visit and requested additional information. At its review of NewSchool in February 2023, the formal Notice of Concern was removed and a Warning was issued due to failure of NewSchool to demonstrate compliance with Standard 3 (CFRs 3.4 and 3.9 specifically). At that time, a special visit was required in fall 2023 (this report). The special visit detailed in this report examined the following issues: 1) Financial viability; 2) Marketing, enrollment, and retention; 3) Institutional leadership; 4) Governing board; and 5) Staffing structure to support student needs. In addition to WSCUC, NewSchool's professional architecture programs – Bachelor of Architecture and Master of Architecture – are also accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB).

## **B. Description of Team's Review Process**

The special visit took place in person at the NewSchool San Diego campus over a three-day period. The team reviewed all the documents and supplemental materials submitted by the institution, including the special visit report, the appendices, and additional required documents (i.e., board meeting agenda and minutes, student success data, the enrollment representative success guide, an updated marketing plan, revised brand guidelines, an updated organizational chart, and a career services packet). The team members thoroughly discussed these materials in advance of the visit, sought additional information from the institution, and completed worksheets that summarized a preliminary evaluation of the institution's report. In parallel, the team worked with the NewSchool ALO to finalize the visit schedule.

Prior to the visit, the team chair met with the NewSchool president on November 13, 2023 to learn updates since the special visit report submission, address questions about the special visit, and identify additional topics of exploration during the visit. The team convened on the day before the three-day visit to narrow down the foci of the various meetings during the visit. The visit began with meetings with the NewSchool president, the Ambow president, the WSCUC steering committee, and the academic and operational leadership teams. These meetings helped the team establish a high-level understanding of the institutional progress, challenges, and opportunities.

During the remainder of the visit, the team met – as a whole group or in sub-groups – with a wide range of constituents who are responsible for the key areas discussed in the report, ranging from enrollment and marketing to board operations.

Open forums with faculty, staff, and students were held as well. The confidential email account yielded no additional information.

At the conclusion of the visit, the team chair met with the president in the morning of December 1, 2023 to inform her of the team's commendations and recommendations. The same information was shared with the academic and administrative leadership of the NewSchool community at the public exit meeting that followed. Ambow's president and the board chair of NewSchool also attended.

The entire visit process ran smoothly, and the meetings were informative. The team is thankful to the NewSchool team for all their help in making the visit a success, including setting up the visit and logistics, responding to the team's requests, and providing requested information to help the team gain a thorough understanding of the institution.

### **C. Institution's Special Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence**

According to the NewSchool the special visit institutional report was developed by a writing team which included members (e.g. Chief Financial Officer, Senior Director of Enrollment and Marketing) who have responsibilities and/or divisional areas of expertise that align with the areas identified in 2023 WSCUC institutional warning notification. The NewSchool leadership including the president and the chief academic officer (who also serves as the accreditation liaison officer) oversaw the coordination of the report development. The report preparation process provided opportunities for the NewSchool community to review internal processes and make adjustments to ensure continued stability and growth of the institution.

The institution's special visit report is structured to address the required issues – financial viability (CFR 3.4), enrollment and marketing (CFR 3.4, 3.6), president search (CFR 3.8), board of director expansion (CFR 3.9), and operational and student support services (CFR 3.1). The report provided a detailed account of the progress made and the efforts implemented in these areas. The discussions made clear NewSchool's commitment to enhancing student recruitment and success, as well as ensuring the institution's financial and leadership stability. The report demonstrated that NewSchool effectively used this review for reflection and improvement. The team concluded that it adequately showed how the institution tackled the WSCUC Commission's identified issues, laying a solid groundwork for the visit.

## **SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS**

### **A. Financial Viability**

To examine NewSchool's financial condition, the team carefully reviewed several financial reports and enrollment data, including: (1) NewSchool's audited financial statements for FY22, (2) financial projections for FY23, (3) 2023 monthly cash flow projections, and (4) 2024 enrollment targets by term. During the visit, the team discussed enrollment and financial conditions with NewSchool administrators and members of the board.

Enrollment at NewSchool has been declining for several years. Student headcount fell from 554 in fall 2017 to 294 in fall 2022. The pandemic was clearly a major contributor to the enrollment decline. However, NewSchool faces broader challenges in raising enrollment to a level consistent with financial sustainability. New



student recruitment for the fall 2023 term fell short of the institution's ambitious target. The student headcount currently stands at 280. As an institution highly dependent on tuition, low enrollment is a serious concern.

NewSchool currently projects that 201 newly-admitted students will enroll during the 2024 terms, resulting in a student body of 330 students in fall 2024. Reaching this enrollment level would improve its condition, but additional enrollment growth in subsequent years will be needed for NewSchool to achieve financial sustainability. The Commission's letter of March 17, 2023 asked NewSchool to "Develop a short-term plan that focuses on revenue generation and financial viability. (CFR 3.4)." In 2023, the institution expanded its marketing and recruiting teams, developed a marketing plan, and began to implement a number of marketing tactics to expand enrollment. While the team believes that the institution has built a foundation for growth, evidence from several more recruiting cycles is needed to accurately evaluate the impact of NewSchool's enrollment growth plans.

For FY22, operating expenses exceeded operating revenues by 18%. For FY23, operating expenses are projected to exceed operating revenues by 15%. In both FY22 and FY23, rental income from Ambow Holdings, the parent organization, helped offset operating losses. If financial projections are achieved, net income will improve from being modestly negative in FY22 to being slightly positive in FY23. Capital contributions by Ambow made in FY22 and early FY23 also enhanced NewSchool's financial position. NewSchool projects net income will be modestly positive in 2024.

Ambow Education Incorporated (AEI), a subsidiary of Ambow, was providing shared services to NewSchool and another Ambow-owned institution, Bay State

College. This shared services approach, and the potential operational efficiencies derived from cost sharing, ended with the closure of Bay State College in 2023. Providing all student services with NewSchool staff will be more expensive than under the shared services model. Moreover, as noted in the team report for the fall 2022 special visit, a portion of the fee for shared services was to be waived for 2022 and 2023. However, during that fall 2022 special visit, administrators and staff reported that the quality and timeliness of assistance provided through the shared services unit were inadequate. NewSchool provided an estimate of the increase in operating expenses resulting from the switch to an onsite student services model. Based on this estimate, the change will have a relatively modest impact on the financial condition of NewSchool and the expectation is that the quality of the services will improve.

NewSchool's administrators reported that the institution was able to achieve cost efficiencies without diminishing the quality of instruction or student services in 2023. For example, vendor agreements were systematically reviewed. Agreements for which vendor services were no longer being used were terminated while others were modified to align with current needs. Pricing policy in the printer center was changed to discourage excessive use of the printing resources by students.

In 2022, NewSchool began to sublease space in its East Village building to its parent organization. As a new and significant revenue source for the institution, this is a notable development. For FY 2023, revenue from subleasing space will constitute 14% of NewSchool's total revenue. The long-term location of NewSchool is an area of uncertainty. The rental lease agreement for its current location ends in February 2026. NewSchool is exploring both entering a new lease with the current landlord, preferably

at a reduced rate, and moving to a different location. Options under consideration include leasing space at a different location from an unaffiliated landlord. Another option is for an affiliated entity to purchase a building and lease space in that facility to NewSchool. Until this decision is made, the rental expense for classroom and design space will be a source of uncertainty impacting NewSchool's financial situation.

Several additional factors are impacting NewSchool's financial viability. NewSchool was placed in Heightened Cash Monitoring (HCM2) in November 2022. The institution developed a report to monitor cash flows; however, HCM2 status increases its exposure to potential cash shortages. NewSchool's administrators reported that the institution has shortened the reimbursement time due to its improved understanding of reimbursement processes.

The current standby letter of credit required by ED expires in February 2024. If this requirement is not extended, NewSchool would gain some flexibility as it would no longer need to maintain a collateral cash account.

In April 2023, Ambow Education Holding Ltd released its FY22 annual report on Form 20-F. The company reported that net revenues from continuing operations was \$14.8M and operating loss from continuing operations was \$9.5M. Ambow's president indicated a willingness to support NewSchool financially for 10 years.

The institution has responded to the Commission's requirement to develop a short-term rebuilding plan by assembling new enrollment management and marketing teams, creating a marketing plan with clear actionable initiatives, and improving the student life experience. The team commends NewSchool's leadership for taking these important steps toward moving the institution to a state of financial viability. However,

insufficient time has passed for these plans to have an impact on enrollment and revenues. If NewSchool achieves a slightly positive net income for FY23, as it anticipates, it will be due to the revenue generated from subleasing space to its parent organization and carefully managing operating expenses. Enrollment growth remains crucial for revenue growth and long-term financial viability. Revenue growth is necessary not only to cover current levels of operating expenses, but to provide the resources to invest in the institution in future years. Given the uncertainty around the pace of enrollment growth, it is also advisable to engage in contingency planning should actual revenue and expense flows differ from projections.

The team recommends that NewSchool demonstrates financial viability through positive net income achieved by increased enrollment, continued thoughtful expense management, and contingency planning for scenarios where results fall short of projections. (CFR 3.4)

## **B. Marketing, Enrollment and Retention**

In its action letter of February 23, 2023, the Commission required NewSchool to respond to the following issue: “Accelerate the development of a strategic marketing, enrollment, and retention plan with adequate resources, clear measurable targets, and metrics to monitor success. (CFRs 3.4, 3.6).” The Commission further noted that: “NSAD’s enrollment has shown a significant downward trend over the last six years falling short of overly optimistic projections. NewSchool needs to become more effective at marketing and recruiting to grow its enrollment, given the critical role enrollment and tuition play in the financial stability of the institution. The Commission finds that NewSchool is out of compliance with CFR 3.4.”

As discussed previously, NewSchool's fall 2023 special visit institutional report indicated work conducted by the institution in several areas to increase enrollment, the most obvious being the development of an Enrollment and Marketing Plan (dated February 23, 2023). While the plan contained data on historical and projected enrollment, marketing spendings, and plans for recruitment and outreach, it did not contain detailed information on how the plan was to be operationalized, who the responsible parties would be, or how the institution would track key indicators of success around enrollment.

In addition to developing a plan, the institution hired a new marketing and enrollment team, consisting of a Senior Director and an Associate Director of Enrollment, two enrollment representatives, an international enrollment representative, an admissions officer, and a marketing manager. The institution has increased its marketing budget, with \$870k allocated to marketing for 2024.

During the visit, the WSCUC team met with the marketing and enrollment teams. It was evident that the team members bring the appropriate backgrounds and expertise to the institution. The marketing and enrollment staff created actionable goals with targets for the current and following cycles. They analyzed metrics around web, social, and keyword campaigns and made changes based on results.

Marketing and enrollment staff have also analyzed historical data to create personas for the typical NewSchool student. By geofencing ads, they have achieved a higher conversion rate with their recent ad campaigns. The institution has also re-launched outreach efforts with alumni and are expanding their on-site efforts at high

schools and community colleges. They have re-designed their website and are in the testing stage before launch.

Despite implementing the above measures and resources, enrollment still fell short of expectations in fall 2023, in which the institution projected a target of 130 new students, but were able to enroll 80 new students, all of whom remained enrolled at the time of the visit. The institution has set a target of 330 total students (50 more than the 280 enrollment at the time of the visit) for fall 2024, and the president has stated that she will create and adjust the 2024 budget according to actual enrollment. To the team, this target of 330 students appears to be a reachable goal.

The team recommends that the institution grow enrollment through recruitment and retention strategies embedded in the 2023 enrollment and marketing plan with an emphasis on allocating resources to the most effective tactics identified by comprehensive analyses of relevant data. (CFR 3.4)

### **C. Institutional Leadership**

In its action letter of February 23, 2023, the Commission required NewSchool to respond to the following issue: “Continue the search process for the new president, with careful consideration of the necessary qualifications and skill set to lead NSAD in addressing its current challenges and attaining its long-term strategic goals. (CFR 3.8).” The team report in the fall 2022 had noted significant instability in the institution’s key leadership roles, including four presidents in a six-month period. Since September 2022, a former board member has been serving as the interim.

NewSchool’s special report stated that the board of directors was fully supportive of her work as interim president and noted her success in increasing operational

efficiencies and building a strong enrollment team, including a new marketing manager. At the same time, the institution launched a search for a permanent president utilizing the services of BBG Executive Search. That firm presented a number of possible finalists to the board, but they found the candidates lacked the requisite financial experience. In addition, in the meeting with senior academic leadership during the team visit, they asserted that the current president has exhibited a clear understanding of the institution's strengths and challenges and an ability to meet the community where it is while raising its performance to required higher levels.

The board urged the interim president to go through the formal presidential search process. The search committee met in August 2023 and recommended to the board that interim president be offered the permanent position. They did so, and the interim president became the permanent president in October 2023. Her position as COO of Ambow ended in December, 2022.

The president's expertise is greatly valued by all institutional stakeholder groups. Her open-door policy, keen listening skills, and emphasis on operational efficiencies have resulted in increased confidence among all stakeholders. (CFR 3.9)

The president tracks relevant financial indicators each day with members of her team. She places a great deal of emphasis on enrollment numbers. She encourages the staff to aim high, even if they might fall short. She described how important it is to have multiple "touch points" with applicants and current students. She is determined to deliver a quality educational experience to students.

The president is in frequent contact with the board chair, who funnels board concerns to her. Individual board members also make themselves readily available to the president for consultation about their areas of expertise.

Additionally, the new position of Vice President of Academic Affairs has focused attention on and provided increased support for the academic enterprise. Many people who met with the team commented that the creation of an institutional leadership team with two dedicated professionals has led to greater stability for the NewSchool as well as greater confidence for future success. (CFR 3.9)

#### **D. Governing Board**

The Commission action letter of March 2023 asked the NewSchool to: “Prioritize the plans for future board expansion to ensure independence, competence, and appropriate membership composition to fulfill its responsibilities to the institution. (CFR 3.9, Governing Board Policy, Governing Board Policy Implementation Guide).” In response, the board has grown its membership, added expertise, and adopted structural and operational processes to fulfill its responsibilities.

The institution has made progress in expanding its board to eight members, including six independent members. The members of the board demonstrate a diverse skill set with expertise in higher education, accreditation, operations, finance, technology, marketing, and innovation. Several members of the board have served in leadership roles in higher education. The board appeared engaged and knowledgeable about the institution’s challenges and opportunities and demonstrated sufficient oversight of NewSchool’s operations and key performance indicators. (CFR 3.8)



The shareholder and the president comprise the remaining two members of the board. The board has identified the qualifications they are seeking in the addition of a ninth member of the board. They are in the process of identifying someone who will provide strong ties with the local community, particularly the professional communities represented in NewSchool's programs.

There is evidence that the board has engaged in self-assessment and training activities. Minutes from the past year reflect the establishment of board subcommittees, including finance, audit, governance, academic affairs, and marketing, enrollment, and student affairs. The board chair has remained consistent since the time of the last visit in fall 2022. He has expressed commitment to NewSchool to support stability in leadership and needed continuity of stewardship and oversight of strategy and operations. The president reported that the board serves as a valuable and accessible source of consultation, collaboration, and guidance. (CFR 4.7)

#### **E. Staffing Structure to Support Student Needs**

As mentioned earlier, following the ownership transition from Laureate to Ambow, NewSchool embarked on a migration of the shared services accordingly. The end goal was that Ambow Education Incorporated (AEI), a subsidiary of Ambow, would provide NewSchool with technology, accounting & finance, human resources, bursar, registrar, and financial aid services. In this model, NewSchool had limited campus-based support staff who reported directly to the president and interfaced with AEI on some of the shared services. While the shared services model was meant to be a budget friendly and effective way to provide student support, previous WSCUC teams recommended regular assessment as to how the model affected the efficacy and quality of the services

provided. The March 2023 Commission letter asked NewSchool to “Identify a sustainable staffing structure to ensure adequate support for the needs of students. (CFR 3.1).”

Since March 2023, NewSchool has made the significant change of replacing the shared services approach with campus-based student support services, including ensuring that services typically provided remotely also offer on-campus in-person options during critical times of the quarter. The intention is to create a more direct and smooth connection between staff and students. As stated in the institutional report (page 9), “by focusing on on-campus operations and fostering a competent staff team”, NewSchool aims to “create a supportive and engaging environment for our students, promoting their success and well-being.”

The success of this change requires a robust team of student support services professionals. In 2023, NewSchool expanded its team with new enrollment and marketing personnel, financial aid counselors, and career services staff. These additions enhance the existing support structure, including the upcoming Director of Student Affairs, Student Solution Center, career services, disability services, academic advisors, Registrar, and Bursar. The student support staff reported that they work closely as one team, having weekly meetings and functioning under one “compliance umbrella” that is headed up by the Director of Financial Aid, an experienced long-time member of NewSchool. This new model of onsite student support seems to be received well by the NewSchool community. The staff reported that their roles and responsibilities are much clearer now, they are motivated by the approach of the new president (e.g., business mindset, open-door policy, accessibility, transparency), and

they are united by the shared goals of student success and institutional growth. The staff strive to give personal attention to the students and sustain the “sense of family” at NewSchool, which has helped improve student morale. Students in open meetings reported that while issues still arise often, they are now being resolved quickly and efficiently. (CFR 2.13)

While having student support services is a high-touch strategy to improve student experience and success, it is accompanied by increased expenses. The positive impact on staff and student morale is not to be discounted, but the “return-on-investment” in terms of enrollment growth has yet to be seen. NewSchool appears to be optimistic that it can sustain the cost in the short term before the projected enrollment increase is realized, though whether and how soon the increase takes place remains to be seen. The efficacy of these onsite services could also be contributing to the high retention this fall.

The new on-campus student services units that the institution has put into place appear to provide the appropriate support to promote student success. None of the student services units, however, have created procedures for assessment, program review, or other forms of quality assurance and evidence-based reflection. This appears to be an area NewSchool may wish to develop as these newly staffed departments move into their second year of operation under the new structure and management. These quality assurance methods would best be dovetailed with the institution’s overall strategic planning and efficacy measures. (CFR 2.14)

## **SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE**

### **Educational Infrastructure and Information Delivery**

Based on reporting of graduation rates, placement rates, and student satisfaction, it is apparent to the team that the curriculum and pedagogy of the NewSchool is of a high quality. Feedback obtained during the site visit, however, raised concerns over the amount and utility of educational information and materials. The issues of particular concern include: the lack of consistency of institutional messaging reaching all students in a timely manner or, at times, at all; the lack of availability of software licenses such that each classroom and lab has enough licenses for users without the need to take up class time to install licenses on machines from day to day; the lack of stable wifi connections; computers that need to be upgraded to run appropriate software; studio space that is not equitably apportioned across programs; and the lack of supplies and materials for student projects such as building models.

The team recommends that the institution allocate adequate resources to support information technology and other infrastructure needs that affect the student experience, including access to essential educational information, materials, software, equipment, and space. (CFR 3.5)

## **SECTION IV – COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Upon reviewing NewSchool's institutional report, meeting with the various stakeholders of the institution, and evaluating information regarding how the institution addressed the issues identified by the WSCUC Commission, the team offers the following commendations and recommendations to NewSchool.

## **Commendations**

The team commends the NewSchool of Architecture and Design for:

1. The establishment of institutional leadership with the appointment of a permanent president whose open-door policy, keen listening skills, and emphasis on operational efficiencies have resulted in increased confidence among all stakeholders; and the creation of a new position of Vice President of Academic Affairs whose appointment has focused attention on and provided support for the academic enterprise.
2. The Board's expansion to eight members representing a diverse set of backgrounds and expertise and a board committee structure through which members actively collaborate with, and provide guidance to, the president.
3. The addition of staff with appropriate professional backgrounds and expertise who are implementing new initiatives around enrollment, marketing, and student success.
4. The successful transition from a shared services model to an onsite student services model that better addresses the needs of students.
5. The faculty's continued dedication and commitment to academic quality and student success.

## **Recommendations**

The team recommends that the NewSchool of Architecture and Design:

1. Demonstrate financial viability by achieving positive net income through (1) further enrollment growth, (2) continued thoughtful expense management, and

(3) engagement in contingency planning for scenarios where results fall short of projections. (CFR 3.4)

2. Continue to execute the marketing plan to grow enrollments through recruitment and retention strategies with a focus on directing resources toward the most effective tactics supported by analysis of relevant data. (CFR 3.4)
3. Allocate adequate resources to support information technology and other infrastructure needs that affect the student experience, including access to essential educational information, materials, software, equipment, and space. (CFR 3.5).