March 11, 2013

Robert Gazzale
President
American Film Institute
2021 North Western Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90027

Dear President Gazzale:

At its meeting February 20-22, 2013, the Commission considered the report of the Special Visit team that conducted an on-site review of the American Film Institute Conservatory (AFI) September 19 – 21, 2012. The Commission also reviewed the Special Visit report submitted by AFI prior to the visit and your response to the Special Visit team report dated December 5, 2012. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with your colleagues Bob Mandel and Joe Petricca. Your observations were very helpful in informing the commission’s deliberations.

The Special Visit of 2012 is the latest in a series of steps that reflect concern about the level of AFI’s compliance with WASC Standards of Accreditation:

- In June 2009, the Commission deferred action on AFI’s Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) and a Special Visit was scheduled for November 2009.
- In February 2010, the Commission received the Special Visit Report, reaffirmed the Conservatory’s accreditation, and requested an Interim Report due in fall 2010, with a Special Visit scheduled for fall 2012.
- In January 2011, the Interim Report Committee accepted the Conservatory’s Interim Report, noting that commitment to the WASC accrediting process and institutional integrity had been addressed, but that issues related to financial sustainability, strategic planning, and assessment remained.

In response to the Interim Report Committee’s review, the Conservatory framed its fall 2012 Special Visit report around: 1) financial sustainability, 2) strategic planning, and 3) academic assessment and program review. An addendum to the report was submitted in response to the visiting team’s request, which provided further reflection and analysis of the themes of the visit.

The team conducting the Special Visit in September 2012 reviewed the steps that AFI had taken in response to the 2010 Commission letter and the findings of the Interim Report Committee in 2011. In its report, the team commended AFI for a number of major accomplishments:
Engaged Leadership and Governance. AFI leadership, including the president and board of directors, were commended for addressing fiscal stability, fund raising, deferred maintenance, and strategic planning. The board’s commitment to the Institute and its Conservatory, with particular focus on the fellows and alumni of AFI, was cited as especially noteworthy.

Financial Stability, Fund Raising and Deferred Maintenance. The Institute and Conservatory have operated with balanced budgets over multiple years and fund raising strategies are now integrated with fiscal planning. Major deferred maintenance needs of the campus have been addressed.

Strategic Planning. AFI developed the first strategic plan in its history in 2010, with broad input from all constituencies and with an update in 2012. This plan identified goals, objectives, and priorities for AFI, established a formal process for linking financial and budgetary planning, and identified future programs and activities for the Institute and its Conservatory.

Curriculum Maps. The Conservatory faculty have taken an important first step toward comprehensive learning outcomes assessment by developing curriculum maps which identify fellow learning outcomes for the disciplines.

The Commission acknowledges these changes and commends AFI for the progress it has made. In receiving the team report, the Commission endorsed the findings and recommendations of the team, and highlights the following issues for continued institutional focus and development:

Strategic Planning. The Commission concurs with the team that AFI and its Conservatory should continue to refine and expand the strategic plan and, in particular, consider preparing a supplemental strategic plan for the Conservatory that allows for continued alignment of purposes, core functions, and resources. As noted in the report, “AFI would do well to set realistic priorities, with dates and deadlines, budget goals, and assigned leadership responsibilities.” Future planning should “be informed by appropriately defined and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data, and include evidence of educational effectiveness, including Fellows’ learning.” While a good foundation has been laid, AFI will need to demonstrate significant progress so that these issues will no longer be a concern under Commission Standards. (CFRs 3.5, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Academic Assessment. The team found at the time of the visit that the Conservatory had not moved beyond initial steps in assessment of student learning, nor was it able to provide evidence of how data influenced decision-making and resource allocation. The Conservatory is expected to fully meet Commission Standards and expectations in these areas, and to demonstrate also that it has addressed the new and heightened expectations in the 2013 Standards of Accreditation. At the time of the next report it must be able to demonstrate that it has developed and implemented “academic assessment plans for each discipline that build on the assessment tools already in place,” collected student learning outcomes data at the course and program levels, and analyzed the results of assessment activities such that the
levels of performance established by these assessment methods reflect the standards of academic and professional achievement set by the faculty. (CFRs 2.4, 2.6, 2.11, 4.4)

**Program Review.** The Commission is concerned that the AFI leadership does not yet understand the distinction between ongoing learning outcomes assessment and periodic, comprehensive academic program review which evaluates the quality and currency of programs. Furthermore, despite a clear statement of Commission expectations, AFI had not taken necessary steps to educate itself regarding the nature of academic program review, adopted a policy, or conducted at least one review by the time of the Special Visit as requested in the last Commission action letter. By the time of the Interim Report, the AFI Conservatory must provide evidence of an adopted policy and process for conducting systematic program review and have completed at least one discipline review. Finally, evidence should be presented to demonstrate how AFI is utilizing the results of program review for program improvement, planning, and budgeting. AFI is strongly urged to consult with its WASC liaison to discuss resources available in accomplishing these tasks. (CFR 2.7)

**Culture of Evidence.** The Commission expects the AFI Conservatory to move quickly and in a focused manner beyond its initial stage of developing a culture of evidence, to incorporate the use of data and assessment results to inform systematic decision-making, planning, and budgeting. By the time of its next report and visit AFI should be able to document and demonstrate an increased understanding of the concept of a culture of evidence and the capacity to gather and analyze appropriate evidence of educational and institutional effectiveness. These steps are necessary to demonstrate compliance with WASC Standards. (CFRs 4.4, 4.5, 4.6,)

**Academic Leadership.** The Special Visit team report noted that the academic leadership’s lack of understanding of core expectations such as assessment, program review, and culture of evidence “is impeding the Conservatory from meeting important accreditation goals in some areas.” While not wishing to be prescriptive in how the needed expertise may be provided, the Commission urges AFI to consider seriously how it may assure itself and the Commission that it has the needed expertise and understanding of graduate education and areas of WASC expectations noted above to meet accreditation standards. (CFRs 1.3, 3.1)

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit report and continue the accreditation of the American Film Institute.

2. Request an Interim Report by November 1, 2014 documenting progress on the issues cited above.


As the AFI Conservatory works on the issues cited above, it should be mindful of the expectations that it will need to meet at the time of its next comprehensive review, which will
take place under the revised Standards of Accreditation and institutional review process in the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation. These expectations build on past practice and will include, for example, student success, quality improvement processes such as assessment and program review, planning, and financial sustainability. However, the 2013 Handbook also includes new foci: the meaning, quality, and integrity of degrees; student performance in core competencies at the time of graduation; and more visionary institutional planning for the “new ecology” of learning. AFI will need to familiarize itself with the 2013 Handbook and to address both old and new expectations.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of American Film Institute’s governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be posted in a readily accessible location on the AFI web site and widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement. The team report and the action letter also will be posted on the WASC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WASC will post a link to that response.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the AFI Conservatory undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WASC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of our process.

Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Ralph A. Wolff
President

RW/co

cc: Harold Hewitt, Commission Chair
    Joseph Petricca, ALO
    Howard Stringer, Board Chair
    Members of the Special Visit team
    Christopher Oberg, Vice President