



Victoria College of Art president Pat Martin Bates and University Canada West president David Strong sign the papers for a new partnership that will end years of art instruction at the college's old and crumbling Bank Street facility.

Art college merges *Bank St* with private university

BY GRANIA LITWIN
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The 30-year-old Victoria College of Art and yearling University Canada West have been courting each other quietly for several months, and on Thursday announced a marriage.

"It's a very important step in expanding our range of programs to include an academy of fine arts," said university president David Strong, after signing the memorandum of understanding.

He noted the non-profit art school will continue operating at the Bank Street campus for some months — "this will be a transitional period" — but there is plenty of space for new facilities at the Kings Road campus, where he launched the private university last October.

He anticipates a full faculty of fine arts soon, and predicts more partnerships with other "excellent organizations" in this city. Strong said there will be no immediate fee hikes, contracts will continue for the 27 full — and part-time art teachers, and the non-profit Victoria College of Art Society will go on, raising funds for scholarships and more.

The agreement, which takes effect in 30 days, was also signed by art college president Pat Martin Bates, who views the twinning as "wonderful." The college will not lose sight of its mandate of offering intimate classes, gifted teachers and a diverse program based on studio courses, she said.

"This is the way universities are going," said Bates, referring to Simon Fraser University's announced creation of an art school in Vancouver's historic Woodward's building.

"The old college [building] is falling apart; we don't have enough room, so we are dreaming a dream of going forward."

The university has an enrolment of several dozen students, but Strong expects 1,500 will flow through annually in five years. By comparison, the college has 130 full-time students, 800 part-timers, and an international alumni base of 5,000.

The fledgling university — which offers undergrad degrees, an MBA program and academies of design (interior, fashion and media), language, business, film and animation — will benefit from the three-decade history and reputation of the art college, Strong said. He also has

big ideas for the 1.5-hectare Kings Road site, saying it would be ideal for a performing arts centre, with an opera or symphony hall, theatre and art gallery.

Art college director John Harris will head the University Canada West Victoria College of Art. He said its potential is unlimited.

"The college operated very close to the bone before, but will now be financially strengthened by increased enrolment and by coming under the auspices of a corporation. Our college will grow enormously because of this university's international recruiting team, and we will continue to deliver a superb three-year program." Within 18 months he hopes students can also earn a bachelor of fine arts degree. He added that the lease on the Bank Street campus runs out in June 2007.

"It's pretty exciting," agreed college teacher and graduate Nancy Slaght. "Conditions were deteriorating at the college because it's a very old building and there's no way we could fix the plumbing and wiring. The furnace was dying; we were bursting at the seams. We had to do something, and with this we're still who we are."