



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

June 1, 2020

Dear Members of the RISD Community,

I write today stepping aside from my usual COVID-19 updates that I send each week. Over the weekend we witnessed an outpouring of anger and hurt that rippled across the country over the continued embedded role that racism occupies in our society. While the recent catalyst was the tragic murder of George Floyd by police, the widespread outrage results from the blatant truth that his death is part of an unbridled continuum of racism deep in systems that define our society. The many recent murders are evidence of systems that lack accountability and that cannot continue.

This weekend, individuals risked their own health and safety to express their rage and resistance in cities and towns across the nation. This anger took forms of both peaceful protest and violent acts, some directed at the protestors. The results included injury to individuals, damage to property and even loss of life. I do not condone the violence that is increasing across the country though I understand the outrage at the heart of it.

The ongoing oppression and fear that many of our citizens live with every day is unacceptable. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed inequities of every sort. These clear exposures are contributing to the growing number of voices calling for massive, ongoing and permanent change. The unbearably long list of unnecessary recent violent deaths is each outrageous. But so are the unequal, untenable conditions of incarcerated individuals, many of whom experience a completely different system of justice that is more like "injustice." And now, those individuals face a second threat to their safety as COVID-19 takes hold in congregate places such as prisons. In the past, we have run courses and engaged in projects around incarceration inequity and the need for reform. These take on a new urgency, one that I hope we will address in the upcoming academic year.

I know how many of you are angry and in pain over these events. I share both emotions. We are an institution that is clear about not accepting discrimination or racism of any kind. My first RISD initiative as president was the implementation of a Social Equity and Inclusion plan. We continue to build on our commitment to advance a truly inclusive community on our campus. An inclusive campus by definition is a place where difference is celebrated and where diversity helps define the very essence of our community. I acknowledge that we still have far to go to truly be a place where there is no question about the character of our campus. In our new strategic plan, a plan that directs our priorities for our next seven years, "Just Societies" is our first pillar. That commitment works both inwardly, in how we exist within our campus, and outwardly, in how we impact the world beyond our walls. We are building on that commitment in our curricula, our programming, our hiring and our policies. This work is at the core of how we are evolving our institution.

I ask each of us to think about what we can do individually to use our abilities and talents not to mollify, but rather to amplify change. We are engaged in many projects in our courses that commit to contributing to positive change. But we can all do more. I am channeling my anger into reflecting deeply about the way inequality perpetuates inside our own institution. There is much work to do, but also an incredible team taking this on. We are working on programming with our Center for Social Equity and Inclusion (SEI) to bring action and understanding to the forefront next fall. I have asked our Associate Provost for SEI

Matthew Shenoda to provide us with a brief statement of how he envisions the Center in this moment, to which he responded:

The Center for SEI recognizes that the issues underpinning the current moment (like so many moments before) run through the core of our nation and indeed our institutions of higher education, and as a space dedicated to education, art and design, ours is a very specific call to action. RISD has upheld SEI as a central pillar of our institution and this is why, in the past year, in conjunction with our Center we have welcomed to our campus people like Bryan Stevenson, Michelle Alexander, and Dread Scott; artists, activists, and thinkers who give us a more nuanced understanding of how necessary it is for us to consider the full and total context of the protests and insurrections we are currently witnessing. In this vein we must focus our work on uplifting the values of SEI and take to heart the narratives of decoloniality and anti-racism currently circulating in society, the art world and on our own campus. But we must also be committed not just to the principles and values inherent in these ideas, but to moving beyond the rhetorical and into realized action. This fall, the Center for SEI will be expanding its SEI Research Fellows program to bring new and deliberate energy to these issues by welcoming two new Fellows with focused expertise on the historical and contemporary iterations of systemic racism and how it intersects with the various disciplines we teach. These fellows, like our current SEI Research Fellow Dr. Chris Roberts, will be in the classroom, in critiques and studios, and found across campus (whether physical or virtual) engaging our community on these issues. The Center will also continue its Decolonial Teaching in Action course, a course specifically aimed at giving faculty the space and resources to dive deeper into the way racism, xenophobia, and colonialism inform their work and teaching, and provide them with some tools to begin decolonizing their own teaching and course content. The Center will also continue its expansive programming through our Teaching and Learning Lab workshops and in partnership with many academic departments as well as essential student support entities such as the Intercultural Student Engagement office. We will continue to engage renowned artists and scholars, as well as many of our own incredible faculty, students and staff to help us expand how we can integrate our work as a reflective practice that can speak to moments like the one we are currently experiencing. We engage this work with a desire for transforming the spaces we work, study and create in to become spaces that can undo and resist the recurring subjugation we continue to witness and live through. As the great Paul Robeson once said, 'The Battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear.'

I invite each of you to spend time at the Center for SEI's new website which provides many artistic and intellectual resources to help anchor our community in a depth and understanding of these issues and galvanize collective conversations and actions. As an institution of higher education this must remain one of our central missions. We will never break the cycles of oppression until we fully understand their manifestations in every facet of our society and our lives. Finally, I want to express on behalf of the Center for SEI that we stand in uncompromising solidarity with those who struggle for justice and face unwavering resistance to their humanity. We affirm that Black lives have mattered in the past, that Black lives matter in the present, and that Black lives will always matter.

Along with Associate Provost Shenoda, I encourage you please to use the power of your civic voice to let your representatives know that we cannot endorse these injustices. I encourage you to use your artist's voice to help shape the conversation about resistance and rebuilding. As an art and design higher education institution, freedom of expression is a right that we must protect. As a leader in our field we can guide how to do so productively, and with dignity.

I encourage you to care for yourself and your community and to check in with each other in this incredibly painful time. We have increased our ways to communicate with one another across the globe and as these issues are not isolated to this country, if you are an international community member your voice matters as well on these issues, because you, too, can influence and express your beliefs through your work and your actions.

As we navigate these very harsh times in our present history, let us take the extra steps to express our care and concern for one another as we simultaneously use our unique capabilities and voices to make significant, sustainable change. I remind you that we have added additional paths for support, so that students may access CAPS through tele-counseling by calling 401-454-6637 or emailing counserv@risd.edu. In addition, we offer after hours counseling, and this can be accessed by calling Public Safety at 401-454-6666. For staff and faculty, our 24/7 confidential employee assistance program (EAP) is available to you, your dependents and members of your household through our partner, AllOne Health (1-800-451-1834).

I also want to assure you that at RISD we work closely with our Public Safety team to provide a safe environment for our students, faculty and staff. In line with our SEI commitment, our officers receive particular training.

1. All new officers are assigned to a trained Field Training Officer and they work together for eight weeks where they receive training in:

- Ethics in policing
- Biased-based policing
- Cultural competency
- Mental health for first responders
- Communication skills

2. All officers receive annual training in:

- Biased-based policing
- Cultural competency

All the Field Training Officers have attended an 80-hour training program at Roger Williams University. We do not have the power of arrest at this time as we designated our officers as peace officers.

I am thinking of all of you, I have faith in each of you, and I am more confident about the future knowing the incredible creativity and heart you all will bring to it.

With best wishes for your health and safety,



Rosanne Somerson
President