

December 2, 2020

We began this new academic year in the middle of what is—by almost every measure—the most challenging era in RISD’s history. As all of you know, we have no special claim on this status. The intersections of a global pandemic, severe economic insecurity, continued unacceptable violence and racism against Black Americans and people of color, escalating instability in our climate, and an alarmingly divisive US presidential election season are all affecting people everywhere.

In the face of all this suffering and uncertainty, I want to greet you today with words of hope and pride—hope that despite the obstacles, we have found a way to come together again, and to test our institutional assumptions and foster change. Pride, because of how the RISD community has stepped up to these inordinate challenges together. This year’s version of togetherness may be through the screen of a device or socially distanced and wearing masks, but we remain united in our shared and enduring commitment to seek and build knowledge and to hone practices that will help each one of us make a difference in the world.

It is a fitting moment, in other words, for us to gather, and for you to hear from me about the State of the Institution at RISD. We launched this event last year as an annual discussion with our leading advocates and supporters. Just think for a minute about how much was different then—in the “before-time.” But RISD remains resilient and determined. I’m grateful to each of you for making the time (especially those of you in distant time zones) and for your continued commitment to RISD.

I like to pay attention to a range of metrics when assessing the current state of RISD. The unique recent challenges of course inform how we make our assessments, and also introduce a whole new range of variables. But the fundamentals of what make RISD a unique institution are enduring. In fact, keeping our assessments focused on the RISD we know we love is a way of measuring our resilience in the face of these new challenges. We want to measure how we have remained intact and weathered the storm, not merely gauge our responses to these crises. And we also want to measure the ways in which we must, and are, changing.

My plan today is to walk through most of our key indicators and offer you a bird’s-eye view of our resilience, determination and successes; and to outline some of our challenges moving ahead.



STUDENTS

My first area of focus is, of course, RISD's student population.

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- 4,724 individuals applied for admission this year, a nearly identical number from the previous year.

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- We admitted 1,085, or about 23 percent of applicants, making us among the top 100 most selective institutions in the United States in all categories.

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- 413 first-year students matriculated this year—a decline of 64 from last year, but with 123 deferring their offers to next year.
- 491 students are enrolled in our graduate programs this year—only one fewer than we had last year.

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- Highlighting the class are the first members of the Society of Presidential Fellows, a new program focused on attracting the best graduate students by providing full tuition, mentoring and professional development. In the last 18 months we've raised \$15 million in support of this initiative and our ambition is to grow this program to 10 percent of the graduate student population.

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- COVID has had an undeniable impact on our enrollment figures—360 returning students are taking leaves of absence for a semester or a year, bringing our total enrollment down to 2,227 from 2,500 last year—but these effects are less significant than earlier predictions we made in scenario planning.
- In addition, half of the processed leaves were from international students who did not want to study remotely but were not allowed to return to the US due to COVID travel restrictions.

Our students are as talented and dedicated as ever, and they are more diverse than ever before. Our students' bravery in the face of COVID—their dedication to their work and their development as artists and designers—is deeply inspiring to all of us as we imagine their future contributions in the world.

Next week RISD students will be going through critiques of work that has been created this semester. As much we want to congratulate ourselves as an institution for how we have managed COVID—and I'll get to some of those details shortly—our students really deserve special credit. They have persisted. We are exceptionally proud of them, and we hope to match their dedication.

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FACULTY

My second area of focus is the RISD faculty. Nothing expresses the institutional health of a university like the quality of its faculty. Today, I want to talk about RISD's faculty in three dimensions. First, I want to feature those who are new this year, then acknowledge how all faculty have made tremendous contributions to teaching in the face of COVID, and finally inform you of an exciting new initiative that has just gotten underway.

Under the leadership of Provost Kent Kleinman, this year we have recruited seven stellar faculty, totaling a full-time complement of 183, a record high, and our diversity also reached a record with 17 percent of faculty self-identifying as people of color. RISD has newly appointed 40 percent of the full-time faculty during the time of my presidency. I committed to growing the size of the faculty at a time when many institutions are trending toward the opposite, but I believe this helps to secure our collective future and advance our leadership in art and design education along with the evolution of creative practice.

New faculty members at RISD this year are:

In Experimental and Foundation Studies:

- Michael Demps, whose work engages blackness, spirituality, and ritual in tandem with concepts of history and historicity.
- Katia Zolovtsky, who focuses on the intersection of science and design, particularly computational design and biology.

In the Illustration department:

- Jaleen Grove, an experienced freelance illustrator and designer with a deep knowledge of illustration history, research and publication in her field, and a considered teaching practice.
- Andrea Dezso, an internationally acclaimed artist and educator whose prolific practice embraces painting, printmaking, animation, installation, public art, murals, and glass. (Currently deferred.)

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In Film/ Animation/ Video

- Basam Kurdali brings twenty years of experimentation with the possibilities of animation to the department.

In Interior Architecture

- Francesca Liuni has robust experience in museum design, exhibition, and curatorial work, which will all benefit the department's academic and research programs.



- Stefano Corbo, who will make important contributions to the Department's adaptive reuse curriculum.

The COVID crisis in higher education is often framed around the student experience: how do we keep them safe, socially distant, frequently tested, and behind a face covering while they are in college to learn. There is another side of this equation—how, exactly, can we accomplish real learning in an environment centered on studio-based learning under these restrictions. This is where the faculty of RISD have truly excelled this year.

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Starting last spring, at the same time they were learning how to use Zoom, Google classroom, and all the other tools we now take for granted, our deans and faculty started meeting to plan for this year. They pulled apart their curricula course by course and studio by studio to figure out how they could be reassembled using different learning modalities.

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The Provost recently shared a few data points with me that show both the broad and department specific outcomes of all of this planning and preparation. For example, of all the classes being taught at RISD this semester, 42% are online, 53% are a hybrid of online and in-person, and 5% are all in-person.

More specifically, this chart shows a department-by-department breakdown of the learning modalities being employed across RISD. You'll notice that only three programs are doing more than 50% of their teaching online, and only one is doing more than 60%.

This chart tells you a lot about RISD. You see the evidence of a hands-on, in-person kind of school. It also demonstrates that we take learning very seriously at the granular level. Our faculty did not check out in the face of COVID, nor did they ask the administration for a plan to manage how their students would learn—they spent their summer planning and preparing to teach during a pandemic. They parsed the results of last spring, evaluated their methods and outcomes, and engaged in a class-by-class planning process to ensure the best outcome for this year. This is a remarkable achievement. Our faculty members—more than anyone—have kept the RISD experience alive, intact, meaningful, and grounded in our traditions.

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Lastly, I want to talk to you about the faculty of the future. In October, we launched a fundamental transformation in how we diversify and expand our faculty and curricula. Thanks to a remarkable gift, RISD posted openings for 10 new full-time faculty members



with expertise in the areas of race, colonization, decolonization, post-coloniality and cultural representation, as well as in material practices of resistance. Through this initiative, we will hire four faculty in the Liberal Arts and Experimental and Foundation Studies divisions, three in Architecture and Design and three in Fine Arts, with special consideration for candidates engaged in research, creative practice, or scholarship addressing the lives, experiences and cultural traditions of historically marginalized and/or underrepresented communities.

The “Race in Art + Design” cluster-hire initiative is one of the actions RISD has committed to in its plan to address systemic racism, and it was made possible through one of the largest gifts in the institution’s history. This commitment to increasing the diversity of our faculty will translate into broadened pedagogy, more informed creative practices, and an environment at RISD that mirrors our mission and values, educating tomorrow’s creative leaders. I am grateful to the student-led RISD Anti-Racism Coalition and the faculty who passionately led the efforts to instigate much-needed change at RISD.

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CAMPUS FACILITIES

A key area of focus to support our living and learning environments is campus facilities and infrastructure. Staff in Campus Services and Facilities have put in a remarkable year. Along with a number of important renovation projects, they had to inspect and make upgrades to every corner of our campus to ensure that students have safe, socially distanced, and secure environments for learning and living.

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From new windows and HVAC systems, to plexiglass barriers and floor-marking tape, to infrastructure for broad community testing, to educational outreach to the campus community, they have borne the labor and details of ensuring that RISD’s spaces can be occupied and used safely. And their diligence has helped us to achieve one of the lowest COVID-19 higher education positivity rate in the nation.

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They also made progress on the Campus Master Plan goal of developing facilities to support a 21st century outstanding art and design education. A highlight of this summer’s work was the completed renovations of Nickerson Hall. The residence provides 117 beds for students, and common spaces for socializing and making. Designed by NADAA led by RISD alumnus Nadir Tehrani along with the new North Hall, renovations were made to meet the highest standards of sustainability: new PVC windows, continuous insulation in all exterior walls and the attic floor, energy recovery ventilation attic units, an upgrade to the building’s exterior to improve thermal performance, and point-of-use heating and cooling with fan coils in each room for individual room control. Completing the revamp are a new 2,500-square foot open-floor workroom, a new 1,000-square foot entry lounge and kitchenette, upgraded



stairwells and laundry facilities, and a new elevator to make the building fully accessible for the first time.

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I'm delighted to announce that thanks to a generous gift by a parent, between March and September the Met Refectory was renovated to the great delight of all the students in nearby dorms.

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RISD MUSEUM

This has been a challenging year for the RISD Museum because they have had to limit public access. However, they have managed to find creative and engaging ways to stay relevant and engaged with the community. Like all large public facilities, the Museum closed its doors in March. When students returned, they created special programming and opportunities to make their collections available to the RISD community for teaching and learning. They continue to create special programs for public school children and for family engagement. The Museum's closed doors did not prevent them from offering a range of virtual events—including a well-attended virtual session during RISD Weekend about how curators decide to bring objects into the Museum's collection.

The Museum has also become an important partner in RISD's renewed commitment to social justice. The outgoing director, John W. Smith, has committed 75 percent of the Museum's annual acquisition budget to the purchase and accession of works by underrepresented artists and RISD alumni, and he has announced the launch of the Americas Research Initiative (ARI)—a partnered program supporting the multiyear study of Mesoamerican, Native American and First Nations art and design. The Museum has also deaccessioned the *Head of a King (Oba)*, a Beninese bronze sculpture, from its collection in order to return it to its rightful country.

After nearly 10 years of leading the RISD Museum, John will retire at the end of this year. As one of its longest-serving directors, he has truly transformed the museum, from renovations to record-breaking fundraising and pre-COVID attendance numbers, to a range of stellar internationally acclaimed exhibitions under his leadership, to the remarkable commitment to social equity and inclusion. RISD has recently retained a national search firm to find John's replacement, and we wish him well in his future endeavors which I have heard will include a lot of gardening. He will be greatly missed and we celebrate his decade of achievements.

We hope you will be able to view the work of alumna and trustee Shahzia Sikander this winter in an exhibition at the RISD Museum with work that the *New York Times* recently described: “moves fluidly across boundaries of geography, culture and time.”

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FUNDRAISING AND ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

Institutional Engagement manages all fundraising, alumni relations, family relations and government relations for RISD. Under O’Neil’s leadership, we are seeing remarkable progress and accomplishments in all of these domains. IE is continuing to diversify our sources of revenue and funding, engage alumni as advocates and donors and make us a healthier institution all around.

This past fundraising year, thanks in part to your leadership and support, has been truly remarkable. In the 12 months ending June 30, the college received a total of \$24.7 million from alumni, parents, students, friends and donors—its second-best fundraising year ever. Of this total, a record \$15.8 million will be directed to student financial aid. This is the highest level of support for student financial aid RISD has ever reached.

Some other highlights from the year include:

- \$12.6 million in cash.
- \$5.01 million raised in the RISD Fund—a new record, and a record for unrestricted cash
- \$2.4 million raised in response to the \$1 million RISD Together Challenge organized by the Board of Trustees.

The accomplishments are just as notable in RISD’s engagement with alumni and families. The most stunning growth has been with the explosion of volunteerism that has fueled our growth. In 2018 we had fewer than 100 volunteers. Today, that number is more than 3,500.

- Since March, Alumni + Family Relations has seen more than 4,000 registrations for its events—all of which, of course, have been virtual.
- There are now 12 affinity groups—including RISD READS, RISD Zero Waste Alumni, RISD Alumni for Social Impact, Black Architects, RISD RADE (RISD Art + Design Educators) and RISD Alumni in Fashion, which have all launched in the last year.
- There are also 25 new domestic alumni club chapters, including ones launched this year in Pittsburgh, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Michigan, Silicon Valley, Connecticut, New Jersey and Cleveland.
- The Fleet Library at RISD Alumni Collection is a new partnership between the Fleet Library and the RISD Alumni Association to expand its collection of alumni authors, illustrators, and creators.
- Expanding on our successful launch of our mentorship platform, the RISD Network, which now has more than 2,500 members, in September we launched Bridges—a program that uses the RISD Network to connect alumni and students with organizations or businesses to find paid, short-term projects.



- The RISD Families Association International Committee launched the Ambassadors Program to support new families, and more than 30 volunteers have joined the program.
- Now in its second year, the alumni website has been joined by a companion site for families—and both draw a strong following as they promote and facilitate all of the programming I just mentioned.
- And, I hope you are keeping connected through our New monthly email newsletters for alumni and families.

Sadly, I need to make note of another departure from the RISD family. Chris Hartley, a RISD alumna who has worked in alumni relations since 2000, will retire from RISD on March 31, 2021. She has played a key role in nearly every one of the accomplishments I just mentioned. Any alumnus who has come to feel more connected to RISD over the last two decades can almost certainly trace that connection to Chris' hard work, her care and her profound understanding of RISD. We wish her the very best.

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FINANCIALS

This year, gifts and endowment income have played an increasingly key role in the overall financial health of RISD. Given the college's dependence on tuition revenue, the early projections of lost revenue and escalating costs associated with the pandemic were keeping a lot of us awake at night.

It will take some time to understand the complete financial impact of COVID-19 on RISD. But so far:

- More than \$27M in lost tuition (tuition and CE)
- Nearly \$10.5M in other revenues (store, parking, etc.)
- More than \$3M in additional financial aid
- Direct expenditures related to adjusting to pandemic conditions have been more than \$9 million, including:
 - \$1 million for adaptations of our educational delivery models
 - \$4.1 million in changes to campus residential and dining facilities
 - \$3.9 million for inspections, facility upgrades, testing, and other costs.

All-in, that's a \$50 million hole that RISD has had to fill in its budget. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

As high as these costs are, our worst-case planning scenarios—the ones that seemed so inevitable last spring—have not yet become a reality. For last year and this year, we expect our revenues to fall slightly short of our total expenses, but we are showing strong accounts receivable activity related to tuition for both last year and this year, and we feel that with



continued success in fundraising, prudent management, and new revenue sources, we can continue to weather this storm and maintain a healthy financial picture for RISD.

We will continue to work diligently to enhance stewardship of our financial resources and reduce non-core expenses as we increase our strategic partnerships and non-student revenue initiatives.

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

RISD's leadership donors and volunteers—you—remains our greatest advocates, allies, and assets. Help us to recruit potential students, prospective donors and partners who will work with our academic and museum programs, and also help us tell our story.

I urge you all to get involved with the Alumni Association or the Families Association. Share personal and professional news, including upcoming gallery shows, installations and events in your communities. Join a regional alumni club or affinity group. Donate your book to the Fleet Library Alumni Collection. Become a member of the RISD Network and offer to mentor a young designer or a current fine arts student.

I believe that the impact of an art and design education resonates at this time like at no other time in our history. We are in the middle of a period of unprecedented rapid change that needs creativity and nimble thinkers who can reimagine existing structures, help find new solutions for telling the stories of many voices and to solve big global challenges. I believe that at RISD we are uniquely poised to take this on and to contribute through impact and action. Our alumni and our faculty continue to distinguish themselves in exhibitions, publications, competitions, and awards. And our commitment to advancing RISD with a platform of undoing long-seated structural injustices is paramount. I urge you to join us in our commitment to making a transformative difference across the globe.

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The State of RISD is strong and healthy because of your philanthropic support, for which I am so grateful. We look to your continued generosity to help us provide resources and financial support to our talented emerging artists and designers.

