

Winter 2021 Report to the Board of Trustees

submitted by Charlie Cannon on behalf of the Faculty Steering Committee

January 27, 2021

Happy New Year. Campus is quiet this WinterSession with less than 800 students, faculty, and staff on campus.

Looking back at the Fall, it goes without saying that faculty, students, and staff helped each other to navigate very challenging times. Students were remarkably careful with only six students on campus testing positive since August. With the longer lead time that summer afforded, faculty developed new and innovative ways of teaching – like Teresa Cervantes' and Matt King's [research studio](#) in Sculpture or John Caserta's [Typography 1](#) class in Graphic Design. And while it goes without saying, it must be recognized that RISD staff have been real heroes.

In our October report, the Faculty Steering Committee noted efforts to strengthen lines of communication between the Administration and the Faculty. As the day-to-day work settled for faculty, we were able to widen our focus to creating opportunities for faculty participation and discussion with various governing bodies. We are currently working with Provost Kleinman to place FSC members on the Dean's Council and with President Somerson to place faculty in the monthly Cabinet meeting with the Deans.

This past week we began collaborating closely with the Board Co-Chairs of the President Search Committee to secure direct faculty participation in the search process and to facilitate faculty solicitation throughout the process. As an aside, it is important to note that faculty were surprised and concerned about the transition to a new President during this complicated time.

These important College Service opportunities, along with the heavier work of teaching during COVID, have reiterated the importance of re-examining Faculty Roles and Responsibilities. This effort, identified in the Strategic Plan as a necessary key to our institutional success, was paused last March. The FSC is currently working to restart that committee as a faculty-led initiative.

Finally, we are preparing a proposal to present our June faculty report at the summer Board Meeting. We look forward to seeing you then.

Student Alliance Report

Dear RISD Trustees,

As we approach the halfway mark of the academic year, the Alliance Executive Committee would like to share the work we have been engaged in so far along with our plans and concerns for the upcoming months.

Town Halls

We hosted two town halls in the Fall. At our first Introductory Town Hall, we [gathered](#) and [recorded](#) students' feedback about issues most important to them. At our US Presidential Elections Town Hall, we hosted a range of speakers who advised students on how they may engage with US elections and what their engagement signifies with regards to our political systems. Unfortunately, at this event we were verbally attacked by non-RISD-affiliated individuals over Zoom who issued targeted slurs and comments. We have worked to ensure that Zoom settings at our future events will provide a safe environment for our speakers and attendees.

Open Studios

With our dedicated Department Representatives, we hosted RISD's first ever virtual Open Studios along with sign-up-only socially distanced tours for departments who opted for an additional in-person element. While this was not the same as our usual bustling campus event, our 2020 Open Studios allowed students to spend more time face-to-face with Department Representatives and allowed us to record and distribute the event to EFS students across the globe for whom Open Studios is an important informative event in their decision-making process for major-selection.

Student Representation on RISD's Committees

In the pursuit of our goal to foster more equitable student representation in the decision-making processes at RISD, we have been working with the Cabinet to open up committee participation to all students (not just those on the Alliance or with positions already related to the committee in question). By the end of WinterSession, all committee heads should receive a list of students who have indicated their respective interests. As we facilitate this process of bringing students into these important institutional spaces, we would like to stress the importance of:

1. Committee chairs actively creating an environment that allows for full student participation instead of tokenizing students.
2. Maintaining accessibility in terms of scheduling and information-sharing so students may feel adequately prepared to fully engage and represent other students.
3. Committee members recognizing the power dynamics inherent in students engaging with high-level institutional administration, especially being considerate of BIPOC and marginalized students.

We hope to have your support with these goals in mind as we move forward in the process with greater student representation.

Student Alliance Compensation Plan

Also in line with this goal, we have realized that the uncompensated nature of our leadership positions on the Undergraduate Student Alliance excludes students who are financially unable to pursue such commitments over other work-study positions or jobs. To amend this disparity, we have been working with our Advisor, Erika Paradis, to formulate a compensation structure for Alliance positions beginning in Fall, 2021.

Amendments to Alliance Constitution and Elections in Spring

Given the subsequent need for structural changes to Alliance operations, we plan to amend our constitution in the Spring to incorporate said changes along with some clarifications. These amendments will be voted on in tandem with our annual Alliance Executive Committee and Department Representative elections in the Spring.

Safely Returning to Campus

We continue to emphasize the safety of students returning to campus for the Spring semester along with the safety of the RISD and wider Providence community as a major concern. While we celebrate the overall success in ensuring our community's health and in avoiding major disruptions this past Fall semester, we still intend to work with the Administration in order to ensure that students' varying circumstances and needs are still being considered and taken care of. We stress the importance of clearly communicating with students and of respecting student feedback as to the effectiveness and inclusivity of policies regarding our community's health and wellbeing during this ongoing pandemic.

Pedagogical and Fiscal Sustainability

Many students are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of attending RISD and of the institution itself. Given the effects of this pandemic on our learning which we have observed so far, students feel uncertain about the value of current learning structures, whether virtual or in-person, and feel a lack of preparedness for the career world beyond. Rising tuition, pressured by RISD's financial situation, also continues to be a major point of anxiety especially as students are financially pressured by the COVID-19 pandemic which has further stressed already present social inequities.

As of January 27th, 2021

We are currently organizing future town halls addressing the issues of finance and advising. I also personally look forward to further discussing these issues with you at the next Board of Trustees Academic and Student Affairs Committee meeting.

2021 RISD Presidential Search

With President Rosanne Somerson's announcement of her retirement, RISD's presidential search has become an issue of critical importance. We urge the Search Committee to actively invite students to participate, present their feedback and then honor their input in the selection process. We believe that students, staff, and faculty are key stakeholders in such a critical decision over RISD's future and deserve to have their voices heard, access to all relevant information, and the guaranteed full transparency and accountability of the Search Committee.

We would like to recommend specific actions for the Committee to adopt in order to help ensure an equitable process:

1. Include student representation on the final Search Committee which ensures the representation of BIPOC and marginalized student community voices, for example, by deferring seating to those we have heard during the June 2020 [RISD & Race Forum](#), have worked on the RISD AntiRacism Coalition ([risdARC](#)) or to students now actively working with Social Equity + Inclusion (SEI) to address ongoing institutional issues.
2. Create opportunities for students to meet or hear from candidate(s) through an accessible format such as a Town Hall or Panel Discussion. These events should be organized in conjunction with the selection of candidates and then clearly advertised to the student body so that they may adequately prepare and participate. If these are remote Zoom events, they should be recorded and then shared with all students.
3. The Committee should then allow students to provide feedback or their opinions on candidates (as expressed through voting, written statements, Google Form submissions, Involved, etc.) which should be supported by access to all appropriate information on the candidate's background, relevant work, professional experience, and leadership goals.

At minimum we want to strongly encourage the Search Committee to provide as soon as possible:

1. A clear and detailed timeline of the search process and any opportunities for student participation
2. Information on final Search Committee members and any relevant advising firms
3. Clear and detailed criteria regarding the Committee's evaluation of candidates which should reflect the input and concerns of the RISD community and its students, staff and faculty

We look forward to continuing our work in these areas and, as always, are appreciative of your attention and support.

Best regards,

Alliance Executive Committee

Amy Huang, President (ID, 21)

Andrew Wang, Vice President (IL, 22)

Mindy Kang, Secretary (Textiles, 22)

Blue Williger, Treasurer (Intar, 22)

Victoria Lin, Communications Officer (IL, 23)

Dylan Fan, Communications Officer (ID, 23)

The Graduate Community Representative Group-- a cohort consisting of graduate students from across all 18 graduate departments-- met throughout the Fall 2020 semester to consider the need for a representative graduate student organization at RISD (commonly known as the "Graduate Student Alliance" or the GSA), and to create the conceptual framework for the future iteration of the graduate student group. Using the input and feedback from members of this group, and information gathered from a survey of graduate students this fall, a mission statement, vision statement, and scope for the future GSA was successfully created and will take root in the Spring 2021 semester, forming a group that is both sustainable from year to year and steadfast in its efficacy in addressing the needs of the RISD graduate population.

We would like to share the mission and vision statements of the group with you here:

The Graduate Student Alliance seeks to be an agency and a voice for the graduate community across all departments of the school. The GSA works to facilitate community engagement, interdisciplinary collaborations, participation in social and advocacy initiatives, and inclusion of diverse perspectives into the discourse. The GSA serves to represent the graduate community in areas that impact the graduate student experience.

A group of 18 Graduate Community Representatives (one from each graduate department at RISD) forms the Graduate Student Alliance. Together this group is ready to take on issues of importance to the graduate community and to serve as a voice for the graduate student population in matters of policy and student engagement, and is able to expand its role as an emergency task force, should the need arise.

Supported administratively by the Office of Graduate Studies, the "new" Graduate Student Alliance will be an opportunity for all of us to continue to build a stronger graduate community. Through improved communications, innovative co-curricular events, and a structure that will provide for greater awareness of the pulse of the student body, the dedicated representatives of the Graduate Student Alliance will be available to take student suggestions, help address student concerns, and work to nourish the already-vibrant graduate community we have been charged with serving. The Office of Graduate Studies will be coordinating the appointment of new community representatives to the GSA as they happen in the Spring semester.

Hammad Abid, MFA 21 TX
Alexis Hill, MFA 21 PR
Aparna Sarkar, MFA 21 PT
Dara Benno, MID 22
Adam Fein, MFA 22 GD
Jackey Robinson, MArch 22
Ndivhuho Rasengani, MFA 21 SC
Holly Gaboriault, MA 21 GAC
Dennis Yang, MLA 21
Ashley Harris, MFA 21 GL
Ariel Wills, MA 21 NCSS

Justin Grubb, MFA 21 CR
Lauren Goodman, MFA 21 FD
SK O'Brien, MFA 20 CR, MAT 21 TLAD
Talya Kantro, MFA 21 JM
Hannah Garrett, MFA 21 DM
Megan Christiansen, MFA 21 PH
Mridula Swaminathan, MDes 21 IA
Chetan Dusane, MID 21, Graduate Assistant in the Office of Graduate Studies
Caroline Vasquez, Assistant Director, Office of Graduate Studies, Advisor to the GSA

as of January 21, 2021