

Fall 2020 Report to the Board of Trustees

submitted by Charlie Cannon on behalf of the Faculty Steering Committee

Sept 15, 2020

As we write this, our students enter their second week of quarantine. Preparations for safe reopening and efforts to ameliorate the financial challenges of the pandemic have demanded the attention of every member of our school for months on end. In parallel students, faculty, departments and offices have been working steadily to examine and begin to dismantle the forms of structural racism embedded in our institution.

The strain of these simultaneous crises have exposed ongoing problems with communication and dialogue that must be overcome if we are to address the fundamental challenges RISD faces. Over the summer, the Faculty Steering Committee (FSC) has worked steadily to facilitate and improve lines of communication across the institution: between faculty and leadership and among the faculty themselves.

Further work is necessary. The Faculty Steering Committee would like to work with the Board to take up the matter of more structured and substantial lines of communication between the trustees and the faculty. While the FSC Chair Charlie Cannon has been appointed to serve on the Academic and Student Affairs Subcommittee, we believe that formal channels for elected faculty representatives to meet with the Board (perhaps a once a year discussion as is standard practice at many institutions) are vital at this time.

The need for effective cross-institutional dialogue and communication has been especially evident this summer. In June heated debate amongst the faculty about salary and benefit cuts took place while the Fulltime Faculty Association negotiated the Memorandum of Agreement with the administration. Over 120 faculty members signed a letter calling for radical change to RISD's decision making framework and nearly 100 signed another aiming to resolve the immediate crisis. As the union negotiations came to a head, the FSC organized a Faculty Congress to better understand faculty perspectives and share them in dialogue with President Somerson. In July the FSC organized a similar Congress to bring faculty concerns to the various reopening Task Forces.

In both of these situations the FSC worked to strengthen lines of communication and promote dialogue to reveal different perspectives and help identify ways to move forward together. We know there are many paths of communication across our institution but as the elected body explicitly charged with connecting the faculty with Academic leadership we are dedicated to help make those paths richer and wider to inform and enable the deliberative and imaginative decision making that RISD needs right now. In that spirit we look forward to the opportunity to work with the Board to find ways for the FSC or other elected representatives to join discussions with the Board.

Dear RISD Trustees,

As we begin the academic year we are excited to introduce ourselves as this year's Executive Committee along with our team of Department Representatives who will be working with us in order to engage with and represent the undergraduate student community at RISD.

As this is an atypical year, the executive team has been operating at partial capacity over the summer in response to a myriad of issues including concerns about RISD's reopening and matters of communication and accessibility within the RISD community, advocacy against racial violence, and issues regarding visa security for international students. We are also looking forward to electing new Alliance members for the currently vacant positions on our team in the coming weeks, and hope to begin fully operating by the end of September.

The overarching theme which represents our advocacy goals for this year is framed by the word: ***"with"***.

We have chosen this word to emphasize the importance of collaboration between students, administration, and all members of the RISD community in communication, decision making, and upholding safety and a sense of community during this time of abnormality.

Communicating *with*

With regards to communication, we chose the word "with" for its contrast to "communicating *to*" or "communicating *at*". Over the past year and the summer, we have seen a commendable increase in efforts to communicate information to students, especially given our physical distance and remoteness. However, this current mode of communication often only notifies students - sometimes when information is long overdue - instead of creating an open dialogue. Hence, it is our goal to help establish processes for effective and ongoing communication concerning pertinent issues. We also wish to advocate for more transparency around issues relevant to students, and for the relevant information to be delivered concisely and promptly, in an accessible and equitable manner to all students, including those who are first years and those who study remotely.

Decision Making *with*

We also want to emphasize the importance of continued engagement and collaboration with students in the processes of decision making. We think that it is important for students to be involved in decisions that impact them, instead of being left to react to and cope with such decisions. The latter causes students to experience vulnerability and frustration and presents missed opportunities for the administration to garner student input and feedback. Hence, we will strive to make space for more communal and accessible decision making processes this year. We are currently in conversation with the administration to open up more space for committee participation, and hope to further develop such initiatives with your support.

Staying Safe and in Community *with*

Finally, we aim to help create and maintain a strong environment of safety and a sense of community among the RISD community. We talk about both safety and community together because a sense of solidarity, accountability, and empathy within our community is imperative to creating a safe environment - not only in terms of health and safety in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a safe environment in a larger sense for our BIPOC students, international students, disabled students, and students in vulnerable home and/or financial situations. As such, our goal is to ensure that these students remain involved, understood, and supported by our community. We will continue to advocate for institutional support for such students which, thus far, has been much needed but often not effectively received.

We hope that, by achieving these goals, we can bring our students and wider RISD community together to journey ***with*** one another through the coming year. We will continue to collaborate with the Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, Barbara LoMonano, as well as the Provost and other members of the administration on these goals.

Best regards,

Alliance Executive Committee

Amy Huang, President (ID, 21)

Andrew Wang, Vice President (IL, 22)

Mindy Kang, Secretary (Textiles, 22)

Victoria Lin, Communications Officer (IL, 23)

GSA Statement

Under the guidance of the Office of Graduate Studies, a Graduate Community Representative Group has been formed, consisting of one student from each of the 18 graduate departments. This group, scheduled to meet monthly for the fall and wintersession semesters, has the primary charge to consider the need for a representative graduate student organization at RISD (earlier/previously known as the "Graduate Student Alliance" or the GSA), to create the conceptual framework for the future of a graduate student group, and to decide upon its mission, scope, and responsibilities. This work will take place with the administrative support of our Graduate Assistant and the Office of Graduate Studies. We see this as an opportunity to build a stronger, more sustainable graduate student organization capable of listening to and working for and with the voices of the graduate community at large.