



President Somerson Announces Actions to Advance Social Equity at RISD

PROVIDENCE, RI (July 15, 2020) – Today, [Rhode Island School of Design](#) President Rosanne Somerson announced actions to advance social equity at RISD through [a letter](#) addressed to the RISD Community. The letter reads as follows:

Dear RISD Community,

Over recent weeks BIPOC students, faculty, staff and alumni have voiced outrage about RISD's multiple racist issues centered around deeply embedded practices and structures as well as how white voices and Western perspectives dominate our curricula. Unfortunately, these issues are not new; they have pervaded systems and structures at RISD for decades, largely unchanged.

Artists and designers are vital contributors to local and global communities, and as such it is our responsibility to be fully committed to building more democratic and equitable practices. Those practices must first be amended in our own institution. As the leader of RISD, I take responsibility for having allowed a culture to continue to exist that does not fully live up to our values.

This plan is a commitment to action, and its initiatives are in response to the student-led RISD Anti-Racism Coalition ([risdARC](#)) and the group of BIPOC faculty that has been working passionately to instigate much-needed change at RISD. Together, their demands have deeply informed our planning.

Today we are committing to a new set of actions to inspire a better RISD—a RISD where students, faculty and staff of all races, ethnicities and cultures are supported, nourished and honored without the impediments of systemic racism. RISD must reflect the complexity of the world and demonstrate the critical role of artists and designers in advancing change.

Each action outlined here will lead us on a progressive path forward. Yet this set of initiatives is just a beginning. We must and will take many more steps to fundamentally advance change. To that end, I am fully empowering Senior Advisor to the President and Associate Provost Matthew Shenoda with additional, meaningful authority to oversee this transformation. We will work closely together in partnership with Provost Kent Kleinman, the deans, the full Cabinet and our faculty, students and staff to ensure that SEI's work impacts every aspect of RISD.

We repeatedly heard from our community that the most definitive transformation we could make would be to increase the diversity of our faculty and that of their scholarship and pedagogy. I am pleased to announce that through the support of one of the largest gifts in our history, RISD will launch a cluster-hire initiative—the hiring of multiple scholars based on shared, interdisciplinary scholarship and research interests. This will bring 10 new faculty members to RISD in academic year 2021/22 with expertise in issues of race and decoloniality in the arts

and design. This initiative will launch a fundamental transformation toward diversifying and expanding our curricula. Additional details regarding the gift and the cluster hire will be announced soon.

We are committed to consequential, scaled change. Evolving our college, museum and community is not just about eliminating racism; it is about being proactively anti-racist. These next steps for moving RISD forward are just that: critical next commitments. They should not and cannot be viewed as a simple checklist with a near-term endpoint. In the past few weeks we have heard from numerous voices that make clear the complexity and interrelationships of these issues. These will require ongoing, full-on efforts to make substantive, meaningful and durable change. This is the beginning of that change.

Sincerely,
Rosanne Somerson

RISD WILL CULTIVATE AN EVER-MORE-DIVERSE COMMUNITY

We will launch a new, multiyear cluster-hire initiative

Through generous donor support, this fall RISD will launch searches for a cohort of 10 new faculty members to build a network of scholars and practitioners committed to teaching and conducting research and practice on issues of decoloniality, race, racism and ethnicity in art and design and in their diverse fields of specialization. The program will be overseen and led by Senior Advisor to the President and Associate Provost Matthew Shenoda in conjunction with the Provost. In addition to the cluster hires, RISD commits to continuing to further build the diversity of our faculty and their expertise, including expectations for inclusive pedagogy and cultural competency in every search description.

We will transform our search and hiring processes

Hiring at all levels will be focused on the goal of increasing diversity across the institution. At the leadership level, we acknowledge that appointments outside of an open search can undermine our commitment to diversity. Therefore, with the full endorsement of department heads and other institutional leaders, all searches going forward at the level of director and above will be conducted through an open search process. The search process will be supported by Talent Acquisitions Partners in Human Resources, which will leverage its networks and specialized knowledge to expand outreach and applicant pools.

We will increase the number of students of color

Beginning in the next enrollment cycle, we commit to admitting more applicants of color by increasing recruitment efforts and partnerships in neighborhoods, schools and communities of color. Mindful that it is essential to bring students of color into a supportive and inclusive environment, we will simultaneously build the diversity of our faculty and curriculum in addition to increasing Project Thrive programming, academic advising and peer and faculty mentorship.

The Board of Trustees will increase its diversity and create a new SEI-focused committee

The chair of the Board of Trustees fully commits to supporting this transformation of RISD. By July 30, 2020, the Board will transition its current working group into a formal SEI Committee of the Board. The Board is also committed to increasing its diversity to more closely mirror the diversity in RISD's student population by 2025.

We will repatriate objects with problematic histories and prioritize new acquisitions by underrepresented artists

The RISD Museum is now working on an ongoing basis to repatriate (return to rightful owner or country of origin) objects with problematic histories. In a critical first step, the museum is repatriating the *Head of an Oba* by the end of 2020. The museum is also intentionally continuing the America's Research Initiative to research and repatriate Native American grave artifacts, overseen by a new Native American Curator who will

begin this fall and is funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. Additionally, the RISD Museum is committing 75 percent of its annual acquisition budget to prioritizing the acquisition of works by underrepresented artists.

RISD WILL EXPAND AND DIVERSIFY ITS CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

We have created a faculty-led SEI Steering Committee

A newly-formed committee of faculty with varied expertise in SEI and chaired by the Associate Provost for SEI will work with the Provost and the deans to help shape, inform and implement strategic SEI goals in academics.

We will support a curriculum that requires students to take courses on issues related to social equity and inclusion

Starting in fall 2020, the Provost will launch an initiative with the goal of building a multiyear curricular structure with required coursework in social equity and inclusion. The deans of Experimental & Foundation Studies and Liberal Arts commit to anchoring this structure in the first-year curriculum. The Center for SEI will create a rubric to tag courses that focus on social equity and inclusion in their curricula, and the Provost will charge the Faculty Curriculum Committee with developing a curricular mechanism to ensure that every undergraduate and graduate student takes at least one additional SEI-tagged course beyond the first year.

We will commit to engaging the non-Eurocentric world in all of our global activities

We will balance our engagement more fully and deliberately in all our global activities with other cultures—particularly the global south—in a way that we have not managed to do historically.

We will support faculty in creating a new, interdisciplinary pathway

The SEI Faculty Steering Committee, with the active support of the Provost, will develop a new interdisciplinary concentration focused on decoloniality and race in art and design for review by faculty in academic year 2020/21 with hopes of initiating the concentration by fall 2021.

We will expand faculty development around issues of social equity and inclusion

Effective immediately, we will expand support for faculty development of inclusive pedagogies and curricula through the Teaching & Learning Lab. Programming and resources will build proficiency on adapting pedagogies to student needs, and diversifying and expanding courses to directly address issues of systemic inequity.

RISD WILL IMPLEMENT RESEARCH ON ISSUES OF SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN ART AND DESIGN

We will increase grant support for research and creative practice related to SEI

Beginning this fall, the Center for SEI will create a pool of funds to support faculty and curators in addressing issues of social justice in their teaching, research and curatorial and creative work.

We will increase the number of SEI Research and Teaching Fellows for next academic year

Despite the current hiring pause, RISD will honor its prior commitment to bring in two new SEI Research and Teaching Fellows for academic year 2020/21—scholars, artists and designers who will teach across RISD's curriculum and focus on research projects that advance issues of social equity and inclusion in their respective fields.

RISD WILL EMBED ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATORY INFRASTRUCTURES ACROSS THE COLLEGE

We will create a new Office of Discrimination Reporting and Title IX

By this fall, a new centralized office will empower members of our community to access resources and support around all issues of bias and discrimination through a consistent and specialized civil rights process, with oversight from the Center for SEI and in partnership with Human Resources and Student Affairs. Quarterly reports will be submitted to the Board of Trustees Audit and SEI committees.

We will redirect funds within Public Safety to increase training

Effective immediately, RISD will suspend its transition to Peace Officer status and redirect funds toward additional training on cultural sensitivity, community policing and mental health, above and beyond the current annual training of our Public Safety staff.

We will work with faculty to address systemic discrimination and barriers within our structures

Effective immediately, the Provost will work with the faculty and their unions to identify and address issues related to academic processes and procedures that inhibit systemic and structural change, such as reappointment, critical review, senior-level hiring and promotion.

We will expand the Center for SEI to include student-facing support and programming

Beginning August 1, the Office of Intercultural Student Engagement will move to the Center for SEI in order to better align the vision of SEI under one umbrella as we build greater capacity for student retention and support throughout their years at RISD. Assistant Dean of Student Affairs Tony Johnson will also step into a new, senior, student-facing position in SEI that will oversee mentoring and student leadership development around social justice issues and community engagement.

We will expand mental and physical health support for BIPOC students

Recognizing the physical and mental stress that our culture—both within and beyond RISD’s walls—causes for our students of color, Health Services has expanded its team to 62.5 percent BIPOC staff and will commit to an investigative chart review looking specifically for care inequities for BIPOC patients. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) will continue utilizing culturally informed best practices for its work with BIPOC students and will maintain an awareness of clinical caseloads to support accessibility to our clinicians of color.

We will compensate students working on issues of SEI for the institution

By the fall semester, the Center for SEI will employ students through work/study who will be paid to participate in planning and implementation committees throughout the institution.

We will document, honor and acknowledge the various histories of RISD

Effective immediately, we will develop a process to support and fund research on the prehistory of RISD—uses of the land that it sits on, sources of the wealth on which it was built, and an investigation of any possible connections to enslaved labor. These findings will be assembled, framed and collected for public access and will help build a foundation from which to consider restorative actions. In addition, SEI Fellow Christopher Roberts is completing a report by the start of fall semester on the history of Market House at RISD and Market Square in the city of Providence. Once his findings are published, RISD will work with the Center for SEI, faculty, students and the broader Providence community on how to best acknowledge and honor the history and use of the space. RISD is also proposing to rename its four Plantations Buildings on South Main Street, a change the Board of Trustees will consider at their July meeting in accordance with our Naming Policy.

We will support minority-owned businesses

Effective immediately, RISD will revise its purchasing and contracting policies to better ensure that minority-owned companies and contractors are given an equitable opportunity to provide services and products to RISD. RISD will continue to be an Anchor Institution in the Supply RI initiative, which aims to increase business opportunities for local and diverse suppliers. By September 30, RISD will begin tracking Minority and Women-

Owned Businesses (MWB) using the functionality in Workday and will develop a supplier diversity program by December 31.

We will acknowledge BIPOC student and faculty activism that—over a number of decades—has sought to further long-lasting institutional change

Ongoing now, RISD's Archives will collect, preserve and provide access to materials from RISD community protests, political response and general activism, including *Not Your Token*, *The Room of Silence* and *The Waiting Room*, adding digitized materials and content to RISD's Digital Commons repository as an aggregate collection that can be referenced across RISD's digital ecosystem.

We will support staff development around issues of social equity and inclusion

Immediately this fall, Human Resources will partner with the Center for SEI to offer new, ongoing programming for staff around implicit bias, social identity, power and privilege and other areas that support fostering an inclusive climate and working environment through 2020/21.

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