

May 26, 2017

Dear RISD Students,

We wish you well as the academic year—and for some of you, your time as a RISD student but hopefully not as a member of the RISD community—reaches its end.

It's very easy to become engrossed and sometimes overwhelmed by our work and many commitments at RISD, especially towards the end of the semester, and we often need to decrease our attention to the external world and daily events to get things done. This has been a particularly difficult year to tune out the news and noise, as upheavals in American politics and the “established order” in other regions of the world have occurred at an extremely rapid pace, with real consequences that force us to reexamine our previous perceptions of society and that also make day-to-day existence for many individuals far more difficult, if not perilous.

We are also keenly aware that for many students, RISD presents its own daily set of challenges that interfere with one's ability to feel acknowledged and respected as equals, both in the classroom and the community, and in turn create a frustrating, unsatisfactory college experience. Please know that we recognize the problems as well as what you are experiencing and we continue to look for ways to enact effective change.

Two summers ago, at the invitation of Provost Pradeep Sharma, several faculty members gathered and were involved in identifying and discussing what we considered to be the key issues at RISD that the faculty and administration could take on through existing committees and governance structures. One issue we examined was the feeling that RISD as an institution needs to do more to publicly engage and lead on social issues--to “take a position” on key concerns, but to also take a lead in public debates on art and design.

At our March Faculty Congress, the faculty revisited the idea of social engagement, and started the discussion with the following prompts:

The Archives recently received an inquiry from members of a RISD student organization seeking historic materials related to student protests: “Given the current US political climate and increased student interest in learning about our government and creating work that is civically active, we are interested in looking at student work that is politically active.”

The Faculty Steering Committee requests that you, the Faculty, consider a related set of questions and come to the Faculty Congress ready to share and discuss your thoughts on these matters.

Given the current US political climate:

1) Does the RISD Faculty, as a collective body of artists, designers, scholars, and teachers, wish to express any thoughts or sentiments regarding US government policies (recent, pending, predicted, or promised) or recent events?

2) If so, what forms would the expression of a collective statement(s) take?

3) Who is the intended audience for any statement or expression? What are the appropriate forums for dissemination?

4) Does the RISD Faculty have a unique platform or any particular influence that should be considered and employed when it comes to matters of civics and politics? Is this a “teaching (and learning) moment”?

The faculty were greatly in favor of public engagement and for ***assuring our students that we are supportive of them during this time of political and social turmoil***. We agreed to draft a statement of values for wider dissemination, an idea that was subsequently endorsed by President Somerson and Provost Sharma. We intend that this statement will remain relevant beyond the current political moment. We will be distributing it to a wider audience—both at RISD and beyond (see the attached document).

Please know that the RISD Faculty passionately supports you and values you as artists, designers and most of all, as creative and contributing members of our RISD community. We wish you a productive and relaxing summer, and look forward to engaging with you in the coming year(s).

For the RISD Faculty,

Andrew Martinez  
Faculty Steering Committee Chair, 2016-17