

To the RISD illustration administration and fine arts department,

We are a group of RISD illustration students holding the department accountable for RISD's written commitment to "affect real, systemic change within our institution" in relation to the department's complicity in perpetuating anti-blackness and systems of harm against BIPOC students and educators. Speaking on behalf of current and past students of illustration, we ask that you actively listen to our grievances, implement our list of demands and work out structural changes within the department with the help of student input.

We ask that you respond with a new plan by Friday 7/10, before the leave of absence deadline. We patiently await your answers addressing how we can build a better education environment together.

Introduction

Though course evaluation has been done every semester (except for Spring 2020), the data has never been released to the students, and we have not seen any visible changes from the feedback. There is also no system in place for general feedback and requests on the department level. We feel it is important that we have access to our collective opinions and experiences, and believe in our collective power to affect changes within the department. Thus, we have organized a survey reporting illustration faculty incompetence and misconduct as well as general demands for the department. The findings will be publicized to past, current, and incoming RISD students as well as the public. The data will also be used in this document to justify and support our demands.

It cannot be more apparent than now that the continued protection afforded to professors that abuse their positions to perpetuate harm comes at the cost of qualified professors, eager-to-learn students and the reputation of RISD as a whole. The journeys of BIPOC students and educators in academia are filled with difficulties posed by the system and by the individuals they encounter. Racism and other prejudices are systemic, and we see the need for everyone in every step of the ladder to actively strive

to be anti-racist. We need to point out the skewed standards imposed

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against non-white professors and students, and ask for RISD illustration to listen and respond to the voices you regularly ignore and sideline.

Based on student input, we have organized a list of demands specific to RISD illustration. We hope that this can be the beginning of a series of changes to the department that will help us move forward.

1. Immediate removal of David Porter and Chris Buzelli
2. Mandatory department-wide comprehensive anti-prejudice group and individual training by outside professional; installation of professional in RISD as educational resource for faculty
3. Unsatisfactory professors replaced by POC or marginalized gender active-in-industry professors; actionable plan for attracting and retaining POC and marginalized gender working professors
4. Restructuring of sophomore foundation year and History of Illustration 5. Establishment of student input in new courses/faculty acquired; public platform for unionized student voices; acknowledgement of past administration mishandling of reports

1. Immediate removal of David Porter and Chris Buzelli

We demand the immediate removal of David Porter for his offensive, inappropriate behavior in class and his failure to properly engage in academic or social discussions.

from our survey sent to illustration students at RISD 2019-20, we have received 62 reports of his misconduct in various classes. We are aware that he plans on retiring next year. We refuse to grant him an easy retirement with all the benefits when he has caused so much pain for almost every student unfortunate enough to be enrolled in his class. His antagonism has always been active, and the continued leniency granted to him by the administration is also an active attack on the student body, especially the underrepresented voices of BIPOC, women, LGBT+ and of other minority groups.

There have been many reports of his misconduct throughout his years at RISD, and many more attempts from students to confront and correct his inexcusable behavior. All student reports were met with adamant, aggressive defensiveness from him and apathy from the admins. We wonder why RISD and the illustration administration have continued to cover for and allow this individual to keep teaching, when he has made pedophilic, anti-semitic, racist, misogynistic, sexist, transphobic comments, jokes, and verbal attacks on students during class. His inability to tolerate the slightest amount of dissent as shown by his constant ranting, victim blaming, and targeted mockery makes it impossible to engage in any class critique, even without bringing up any of the aforementioned issues.

These are just a fraction of the corrosive actions he has exhibited at RISD: making sexual comments about children, going as far as bringing in lingerie for children to show the class; referring to a dark-skinned person in a students' work as animal and monster, questioning belligerently why students would depict POCs in their homework instead of white people, and saying the n-word in class; downplaying the horrors of the Holocaust, saying that Nazis were not so bad, he would not mind killing Jews explicitly; actively searching for work on gender issues and attacking students on their identities and expressions of them in their works; making light of and cracking jokes about anorexia and suicide on many occasions; sexualizing and objectifying any women depicted in illustrations, wax poetry and joke about sexual assault; belittling, mocking and antagonizing students when they voice their disagreement about his conduct and

teaching methods; and giving unsolicited

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comments on students' appearances. The continual protection by the department has even led him to openly taunt students to report him in multiple years, saying that his tenure prevents any consequences befalling him regardless of his actions, which has unfortunately proven true.

All attempts at questioning his behavior by the students have been met with aggression, condescension and retaliation from him. All attempts at reporting him to the illustration administration and the fine arts department head have been brushed off as individual misunderstandings from the students. We have been asked to "calm down," to "let it go," to "give him time" and a certain admin even suggested visiting psychological counseling for our continual "misunderstanding" and unwillingness to let the issue go. We will not passively wait for his leave and allow him to enjoy the benefits of an easy retirement when students not only stagnated academically during his class, but also suffered unwarranted personal attacks. His continued presence at RISD illustration is an offense to not only those who he personally traumatized, but also to the entire student body promised an inclusive, productive learning environment.

The department head and dean of fine arts must provide an explanation on why David Porter was allowed to teach at RISD despite yearly student efforts to remove him. The administration must also answer as to why they refused requests to transfer class from those who are personally traumatized by him. The refusal to accommodate has forced students to leave the classroom or drop the class to protect their wellbeing, resulting in permanent marks on their transcripts and mandatory make up classes. The department must be held accountable. Structures that continue to value his voice above students' wellbeing, especially that of BIPOC students, are harmful and racist and must be fixed immediately.

We also demand the removal of Chris Buzelli for his abuse of power inside and outside the classroom, loaded threats against speaking out, and his perpetration of the elitist, exclusionary system of the editorial industry and of RISD. 15 RISD illustration students reported his misconduct, as well as many others at SVA echoing the same

issues.

Within RISD, his teaching methods have built up an intensely unhealthy, destructive environment inside the classroom. His usage of the numerical ranking/voting system which assigns everyone value based on the work produced this week promotes students basing their self-worth on

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their success and others' "failure" as well as unnecessary competition. His contract prank where he tricks students into signing a contract and then mocks them for signing a professionally horrible deal is not only belittling and cruel, but also an abuse of his power as a teacher and as a fellow illustrator. There are also accounts of him publicizing private student emails excusing oneself due to health issues as a "teaching moment" against being "lazy" and "not driven."

To those he does not approve of, he is apathetic and rude, often giving them minimum feedback and assistance. Past students reported that his classes were discouraging and damaging, with his public verbal attacks on self-worth leaving traumatic effects on students' mental health even well into their careers after RISD. There is little concern for student improvement outside of the selected few he favors, which is an undeniably horrible quality for a teacher. Though he provides guidance and feedback to those who he favors, he constantly reminds them of his power over them as an established industry veteran.

There have been reports of him speaking to and about students of different cultures in ignorant and condescending ways. In one instance, when students questioned his approach to accepting work meant for members of underrepresented communities, he quickly became extremely defensive and unapproachable and ended the discussion. He has also warned students against portraying too many POC in their work, saying it makes a piece "political" and that one must watch how much "diversity one puts in an image."

Despite Chris's wife SooJin Buzelli not teaching at RISD, they have amassed an unimaginable amount of control due to the influence of their outside work. Due to SooJin's position as an art director, Chris casually reiterates that their approval is necessary to succeed in the editorial industry and grooms students to follow their every

word. Instead of using their social power to help students grow in their careers, they have used it to threaten students against speaking about their negative experiences in Chris's class and opinions on the pair. Multiple students and alumni have provided accounts of being scared into silence by the Buzellis' implied threats of ruin for the careers of aspiring editorial illustrators. The exploitation often continued post graduation, and in fear of being blacklisted to the entire editorial community, even established alumni did not speak up at all to the underclassmen or outside RISD to their colleagues. (Specific exchanges have been provided by alumni, though we will not detail the encounters to protect their safety and livelihood.) Until the

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recent anonymous instagram post from @blackatsva where a Black SVA alum spoke out about her traumatic experiences in Chris Buzelli's class there, little had been publicly said about the severity of his misconduct. While the accounts by RISD alumni who suffered under him do not all carry the extra dimension of anti-blackness described in the post from @blackatsva, all speak to the extreme abuse of power by the Buzellis inside and outside the classroom.

The Buzellis' response to the @blackatsva account, though not directly related to RISD, is equally indicative of their inclination to abuse their power and positions of privilege. SooJin Buzelli admitted to abusing her professional relationship as art director with several former students of Christo to influence them to defend Chris Buzelli's wrongdoings and invalidate the experiences of a Black artist at all costs. Previous student JooHee Yoon who was asked by SooJin to defend Chris spoke about feeling "indebted" and "[having] little choice or time" to come to Chris Buzelli's defense when asked. Chris Buzelli's apology following the ensuing backlash was centered on the friendships he lost due to SooJin's misuse of influence and his own teaching methods, not on the students he harmed in the process. His statement does not address the root of the problem, which is their active upholding of elitist, gatekeeping ways in the editorial industry that disproportionately affect the BIPOC artists and his abuse of social power to threaten, invalidate and silence students. Regardless of the intent behind his apology, his past behavior is severely damaging and warrants serious consequences.

We demand the immediate removal of Chris Buzelli for the wellbeing of RISD

students and for the health of the educational environment. We demand an investigation of potential misconduct on Chris' part while at RISD independent of his influence. Meanwhile, illustration must hire one more working editorial illustrator/educator with similar standing and the passion and ability to treat all students with respect. In order to get rid of the situation where a single professor could wield and abuse this much power, we demand more department-sponsored speakers and visitors from the editorial, entertainment, gaming, and other sectors of the illustration industry. We demand a department-wide zero-tolerance policy, effective immediately, with respect to industry-based intimidation and threats against students. We hope Chris Buzelli will read, reflect and respond to this letter and readings on power imbalances and systemic prejudice. We will not stand for the exploitation of students, nor the administration's coddling of teachers who engage in such practices.

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2. Mandatory department-wide comprehensive anti-prejudice group and individual training by outside professional(s); installation of said professional(s) as an educational resource for faculty

We demand mandatory department-wide anti-racist, anti-prejudice training by a hired professional(s), to be repeated every year. Multiple students reported that teachers usually apologized when confronted about behaving disrespectfully, but continued to make similar mistakes in the future. Some have also reported faculty letting inappropriate comments and depictions by other students slide. Though the classroom is an environment for good faith discussions, it is not the students' responsibility to hold lengthy explanations on proper conduct. The purpose of this training would be to help teachers with good intentions to understand perspectives they are not familiar with in a productive, educational environment, so they can have the knowledge and awareness to better hold themselves and their students accountable in the future. We ask for teachers to learn, ask questions and facilitate discussions amongst themselves without the pressure of being correct. We think this will not only build a better learning environment for students, but also help teachers become better critical thinkers and educators on contemporary issues, which are inseparable from any kind of illustration.

With knowledge and awareness, we ask the teachers to hold students responsible as well. Educators are moderators in classroom discussions, thus they must point out and correct instances of prejudice and bigotry in students' works and comments to uphold a positive learning environment for all.

Students have expressed desires for faculty training on the following fields: race, ethnicity and why certain terms, depictions or imitations are charged and unacceptable; awareness of non-western perspectives in beliefs, artmaking, history and culture and ways to speak about them without condescension, fetishization and superiority; active attempt at pronouncing students' names correctly and telling them apart; knowledge of gender minority identities and issues; respecting the mental and physical health of students, giving accommodations for the purpose of helping students succeed, not of pushing students to the standards of their peers who may not need accommodations; mindfulness and conscious effort to confront internal biases and give everyone the help they need; ability to receive feedback and criticisms without unnecessary defensiveness.

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We also demand the administration and hired professionals to speak with professors individually about past student reports with regards to proper conduct. A healthier, more transparent and effective system of giving faculty feedback is necessary, which will be detailed in Part 5. The comments will be used to structure the training sessions and be a source of guidance to personal reflection by the faculty themselves. The hired professional must be the link between students and faculty when conflicts are unable to be resolved, because the administration has failed consistently in the past to address conduct issues.

3. Replacement of professors who fail to meet student expectations with qualified BIPOC and marginalized gender professors; actionable plan for attracting and retaining BIPOC and marginalized gender working professors

We reject the department's pledge to "proactively find and hire BIPoC faculty to teach when courses are open due to sabbaticals or faculty attrition" in its response to risdARC. Waiting for openings (while rejecting student demands of new classes relevant to the industry) is never proactive. In fact, it's active in its upholding of racism and prejudice, and has led to stagnancy on both sides of the classroom. The department has been complicit in gatekeeping the "quality" of academia at the cost of students, faculty and RISD as an institution. Illustration must actively acknowledge its part in upholding systems of inequality and take an active role in ridding itself of problematic elements.

We ask for the replacement of professors who struggle to meet student learning expectations, especially in technical program classes. These are professors failing in holding engaging discussions, teaching technical skills, assigning relevant and stimulating homework and updating the course to meet current academic and industry standards. It is not enough that a teacher is merely "nice and well-meaning," and the class content includes the bare minimum of technical tutorials. The mediocrity of the curriculum is an insult to driven students as well as other working professionals, especially the qualified BIPOC candidates who had to watch their less-than-qualified white counterparts be coddled by the administration with opportunities they were never considered for.

In multiple classes, students have been consistently shown outdated Youtube tutorials and how-to Adobe help pages in place of tailored in person instruction. There are also reports of short, unfulfilling "critiques" that are barely pertinent to the class or individual student improvement. In some cases, though the professor had a long history with the program, a lack of current practice has rendered the class to endless excuses about the speed of software updates and explanations for why the instructor cannot find certain functions. In one case, students have had to remind the professor on how to navigate the program on the very first day of class because he had not worked in the program in so long.

The faculty and courses (beyond sophomore year foundation classes, which will be detailed below) that students receive insufficient teachings are the following: Intro to Digital Illustration with Richard Gann and Paul Olson, Pen and Ink with Nick Jainschigg, 3D Illustration for Illustrators with Nick Jainschigg, Advanced Digital Painting with Richard Gann. (We have reached out to past students to ensure that these methods of “teaching” are not purely because of the limitations COVID-19 has put on learning.)

There are doubtlessly many educators active in the industry who are capable of taking over these classes. With the current RISD hybrid teaching plan in response to COVID, there are even more possibilities, as there are no limits to the location of the instructor. We ask for professors who have current knowledge and passion on the subjects, experience and connections in the industry, and drive and commitment that matches those of the students in order to make the classes productive and worthwhile. We demand the department bringing in BIPOC and marginalized gender professors as promised by the administration.

Beyond the 2020-21 school year, we ask for a concrete, actionable plan on attracting and retaining BIPOC and marginalized gender professors over the next 5 years, until 2025. This can include support for commuting professors, who are more likely to be actively working in applicable industries. New hires must also be provided with a clear outline on the process of becoming full time faculty, which must be extended to current adjuncts with the intention of becoming full time as well. It is public knowledge that RISD does not treat its adjunct professors well. The department must start valuing its adjunct professors, whose classes are more popular with the students for their proximity to their respective industries. This is also a step forward for the students, who consistently demand more career-oriented classes.

4. Sophomore year foundation changes: better faculty, more stable curriculum, and HOI restructuring

We demand changes in the sophomore year foundation curriculum to make it more consistent, cohesive and productive across varying teachers. As of now, illustration's foundation year fails to meet the expectations of many students who seek to strengthen their technical skills and conceptual thinking skills, which are both necessary for their artistic and personal growth. Curriculum is dependent on the professor assigned, therefore the quality and scope of education received is dependent on pure luck. We want to respect the different teaching styles and emphasis of different teachers, while making sure that all students are able to receive the same basis of instruction. The teacher's failure to accommodate different students' skill levels and knowledge in an intro class affects students with lesser resources disproportionately, and must be fixed immediately.

Students reported that some professors choose not to teach the foundation principles that could and should be taught, instead opt for "student explorations." The department insists on the importance of central skills like color theory, perspective, anatomy and conceptual thinking, while giving barely any guidelines or regulations for how those should be taught, resulting in certain mandatory classes being unproductive to student learning. As a result, certain students who have not been taught these fundamentals not only have to learn on their own outside of class despite the same amount of tuition paid, but also struggle in future classes that assume previous knowledge. One responder from the survey noted that they were ill-prepared to take Lenny Long's intensive course in spring due to their previous drawing professor Bill Drew's "loose" method of teaching. Additionally, unfulfilling courses go under-reported because many students transfer out of the class or even the department due to the poorness of instruction. For teachers like Bill Drew and David Porter, it is not uncommon to have a quarter to a third of the class gone by the end of the semester. This issue disproportionately affects students with lesser resources, as they are less likely to have prior knowledge or have time and effort to make up for the progress lost.

We demand a 6-week set lecture/homework plan for the technical classes (as the basis, teachers are free to add on more but the basics should be guaranteed) with the other weeks left for

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the instructors to decide. For concept classes, we ask for a list of conceptual ideas and skills to go over in class and practice in homework assignments. Specifically, students have requested instruction on social awareness and responsibility of illustration regarding their imagery and its associated meanings. While we agree to the proposal of concept professors introducing us to more BIPOC illustrators, illustration must also stress the critical thinking aspect of image reading and production in concept classes. Students have asked for analysis and discussions on caricatures and other charged imagery and tropes, what to avoid, why avoid it, and ways to explore charged topics respectfully.

The faculty and courses that students reported receiving insufficient instruction are the following: Drawing: Perspective with Bill Drew, Drawing: Figure with Trent Burleson, Painting with Trent Burleson and Tony Janello, Visual Strategies and Concepts with David Porter, and Visual Strategies with Polly Becker.

Again, as stated above, the continued coddling and protection of barely-satisfactory to failing professors is an active attack on other competent, available candidates. We reject the passive waiting but demand active replacement of professors who fail students consistently.

We appreciate the lens of learning History of Illustration as “they speak to hegemonic constructs, the influences of eurocentrism and orientalism, and the effects of capitalism.” However, the critical analysis section is very limited, only appearing in Theme Boxes in the textbook and as possible research paper topics. Most classes are dedicated to lectures on historical accounts, and most of the tests are reliant on memorizing the artists, works, time of production and location. We ask for an expansion on the critical analysis of images and ideas and a condensation of the “hard memorizing” portion of the curriculum. We also demand an expanded explanation on charged and problematic imageries in their context, what to avoid and why.

We question the claim that the History of Illustration course “covers art practices and worldviews from every continent to introduce diverse traditions and to validate international students’ backgrounds” in the “what we’ve done” section of the response to risdARC. In reality, “every continent” besides North America and Europe has been limited to single chapters, and the time frames featured are often far from the entire scope of their respective history. 2+ million years

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of illustration in the African context have been stuffed into one chapter. 2+ million years of illustration in the Latin America context have been stuffed into one chapter. 700 years of illustration in the Muslim context (condensed) is stuffed into one chapter. 2100 years of illustration in the Indian context have been stuffed into one chapter. 300 years of Japanese illustration have been stuffed in one chapter. Note that even with this compression the book’s coverage of non-Western histories image-making still does not come close to being complete. The other 24 chapters of the book are devoted solely to the growth and change of Western illustration. While some of the global history of illustration is Western in "origin," pretending it is largely or even exclusively Western denies the global genealogy of Western methodologies. This is a Eurocentric trope. The course fails to adequately present the global view it claims to deliver and continues to perpetuate hegemonic constructs, eurocentrism, orientalism and global capitalism.

It is not merely enough to acknowledge the course’s shortcomings; we must take action to change it. We demand condensation of the Western sections and further expansion of the glossed-over non-Western sections. The non-Western world deserves equal weight. We demand guest professors from THAD to teach from their expertise and background, as there are plenty of faculty well versed in art histories relating to diverse global cultures and histories. They must be compensated for this labor if used, even if in consultation alone.

5. Establishment of student input in new courses/faculty acquired; public platform for unionized student voices; acknowledgement of past administration mishandling of reports

Students participating in the survey are overwhelmingly asking for more concepts courses (the limited number of concepts classes have rendered them almost exclusive to seniors), more career/industry-oriented classes in entertainment, animation, gaming, and business and speakers from different fields of illustration. Our demands have been ignored regularly because of the lack of an existing mechanism for collecting and unionizing voices. We must build it now.

We reject the department's proposal to create a workstudy position of "ongoing student peer mentorship for each grade level, to liaise with BIPOC students" for a number of reasons. The duties described overlap those of the department reps, the RAs and of the department administrative coordinator. We also find fault with the current setup that asks BIPOC students to "navigate" the department. The problem was never the disconnect from help and resources. It has always been the department's willful ignorance and downplay of our concerns and demands, as well as the system that allows for the constant erasure of our voices.

In its place, we demand the creation of a constructive communication system between the administration and the students that is committed to actualizing student suggestions. The department administration has a history of making light of student concerns as individual misunderstandings or singular occurrences. We demand our opinions to be listened to on decisions like new courses and hiring of faculty, and used in the decision making process. Illustration must work with its students, not just the department head, to deliver the inclusive learning environment it claims to have. We also ask for the numeric fields on Course Evaluation forms to be tallied and publicized each semester, so we can hold the professors accountable for quality of teaching and demand new teachers when they fail to deliver what is promised.

Closing Statement

This list of demands was created because we care deeply about our community of students, faculty, staff and department. There are elements destructive to building equity and inclusion that need to be acknowledged and rectified. We look forward to building a better education and living environment with you.

We ask that the illustration department respond to this letter with formal written statements and a timeline detailing the application of our demands by 7/10, before the leave of absence deadline. This letter will be available on the website of risdARC. We will also be posting data and individual testimonies collected by our student-led survey on the account @risdillusdata.

We must acknowledge those who paved the way for this conversation to happen, specifically the risd Anti-Racism Coalition. We thank all the courageous students and alumni who spoke up against injustices in the past and in our survey. We would like to close by reiterating risdARC's statement:

“Our demands as a collective hold RISD accountable for its proclaimed commitment to fostering a truly inclusive and socially equitable community on our campus. Efforts towards social, equity, and inclusion cannot be solely the responsibility of SEI but should be ingrained in the core of our institution. This means every department, administrative decision, faculty hiring process, and Public Safety development and course curriculum needs to acknowledge and work to combat racial-bias and the systemic injustices that are violently oppressing Black, Brown, Indigenous, and all people of color.”

Respectfully,

RISD illustration students, past and present

July 6, 2020

