



1 message

Tue, Apr 7, 2020 at 11:47 AM

To: [REDACTED] an

Thank you for your thoughtful message. I understand and acknowledge your concerns, and I particularly applaud your efforts to assist your fellow students and the broader Providence community.

In the meantime, please accept as our response the following message that I recently sent to a group of undergraduate students who raised a similar set of issues. I invite you to engage in the same dialogue with the administration and your Student Alliance that we described there.

Michael Spalter
Chair, RISD Board of Trustees

Thank you for your thoughtful message. As Chair of the RISD Board of Trustees, I fully acknowledge your concerns and together with Board leadership have reviewed your letter with the deliberation it deserves. I also appreciate your recognition that the future wake of this virus is uncertain, and that you want to be part of a productive, ongoing conversation.

The RISD Board is composed of individuals with expertise in art, design, finance, creative management, crisis mitigation, and communications in both the public and private sectors, but most importantly, of people with a deep and abiding love of the institution. We connect to RISD as alumni, parents, artists and designers, and admirers. We understand how important the RISD experience is, and we all feel the peril of this moment. Many of us on the Board are experiencing this first-hand with our own children at every level. While a Board of Trustees might seem like a faceless entity, know that we are sincere when we say we are all in this together.

As to your specific points:

1. Compensation for lost studio access

Though the studio is an important component at the heart of the usual RISD experience, the constraints of the moment demand that we find new ways to fulfill learning objectives typically fostered there. Using all the expertise and ingenuity they are known for, our faculty have, in a very short time, risen to that challenge in remarkable fashion. They are implementing rigorous new learning methods, and using the remote tools that will define future ways of working to ensure that students can succeed in the reality of our current circumstances. The administration is also investigating whether it may be possible to allow studio access for graduating students at a later time. But with all the uncertainty that we face, they cannot yet make concrete plans to do so.

In the meantime, I ask you to consider that *different* is not necessarily *lesser*, and that, with classes just having resumed, it may be too early to fully understand how your courses have meaningfully evolved, and remain meaningful. In addition to your faculty, the Museum, Library, Nature Lab, Center for Arts and Language, Co-Works, and many other departments and offices are [actively recreating themselves as virtual resources](#) to facilitate your learning, and academic leaders are facilitating access to materials, equipment, and fabricators. The work that you will be making over the next several weeks will still unquestionably be different, and harder, but that does not mean that you will not learn every bit as much from its making or that it cannot be great. This process has not been easy, but we are committed to your success under unprecedented world circumstances.

As for the financial implications of these changes, some of the requests for refunds suggest that closing studios is saving RISD money. In fact, the reality is quite the opposite. In normal years, RISD operates on a carefully balanced budget. This year, as a result of the changes necessitated by the global pandemic, we anticipate that RISD will instead end with a deficit of several million dollars. Among the major expenditures contributing to that loss are the more than \$1,500,000 in direct aid that RISD is providing its students, including more than \$700,000 that RISD will continue to pay student employees even though most of them are not able to perform their work; an investment of over \$500,000 in new software, computers, and materials being provided to students and faculty for the new remote-learning environment; \$125,000 to assist low-income students in moving from campus; and considerable additional emergency funds RISD is making available to all students in need.

RISD chose to incur these expenses, and not simply to cut its losses, precisely to enable all our students to obtain an outstanding education in an alternative way and to allow seniors to graduate with the credits they need and on time. Fortunately, RISD has managed its finances conservatively and prudently, so as to be able to weather these kinds of storms, but it must continue to do so in order to continue to thrive and to remain vital into the future.

2. Senior Shows and Commencement

As President Somerson noted in her communication to the RISD community last Wednesday, we all fully understand the importance of senior shows and commencement. She and her administration are working actively to identify and support meaningful alternatives, including physical, on-campus shows if at all possible. They also are actively involving the Student Alliance and other groups in these discussions. As frustrated as we all are, this is the current reality in much of the world. Your work is important and deserves both celebration and exposure. The administration is committed to find ways to acknowledge and celebrate every student's work, and we support that.

3. Financial transparency

A letter such as this is not an adequate venue in which to answer your specific financial questions, but RISD's [annual operating and capital budgets](#) and [financial statements](#) are all published on our website, and Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration Dave Proulx has presented the complex components of RISD's finances in detail to both Student Alliances in the past. I have conferred with him, and he is very willing to share with you a similarly detailed explanation of where RISD's money comes from and how and where it is spent. If you are interested in such a session, I suggest you reach out to him directly at dproulx@risd.edu. SVP Proulx is also providing regular updates about the current situation to the Board's Finance Committee, and we are in support of the administration's efforts to address the financial impact while maintaining RISD's core mission.

It also is important to acknowledge the role of the Board in this conversation. As fiduciaries, Trustees set the mission of the institution and monitor to see that it is fulfilled, with our most important obligation being to ensure the institution's long-

term health and existence. We do not administer the institution ourselves, but, rather, work in concert with the RISD administration, which is responsible for the development and execution of plans to address these terribly difficult problems.

Therefore, I am copying President Somerson, Provost Kleinman, SVP Proulx, and Vice President O'Hara on this response, as they (among many, many others) are the administrators who are working to navigate RISD through the difficult and unprecedented complexities that it currently faces. They have the Board's full support and admiration for their work in the face of incredible adversity. I also am copying the leadership of the Student Alliance, which has an important role as the voice of the student body as a whole. It is these people who must lead this conversation forward from here, while we as Trustees will continue to provide advice and support to and through the administration.

I close by expressing my sincere hope that you will find a way to get the most out of this time, one that I believe you will someday look back on with a new awareness of the fact that you navigated through tremendous challenges and came out stronger. RISD will help to get you there. As April 4th marked the 52nd anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., I am reminded of his wise words that: "Only in the darkness can you see the stars."

I wish you all a productive end to the semester, along with good health to you and those around you.

Michael Spalter
Chair, RISD Board of Trustees

[REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Apr 6, 2020 at 9:37 AM

Subject: RISD COVID-19 Grad Task Force: Letter to the Board

To: Michael Spalter <mspalter@risd.edu>

Dear Michael,

As the current global crisis continues to escalate, I hope this letter finds you and yours safe and well.

I am writing on behalf of the COVID-19 Grad Task Force, a self-organized coalition of graduate students from every department at RISD, formed to ensure that graduate student concerns are addressed as RISD administration responds to this global emergency.

We seek your support and intervention as a board member in our efforts to interface with the administration. Although we are in direct communication with President Rosanne Somerson and Provost Kent Kleinman, we feel that the RISD administration is not adequately addressing our concerns—please find our correspondence with them attached below.

On March 17th, RISD studios and facilities closed for the remainder of the semester, moving all courses online.

We believe that the strength of any graduate degree at RISD is predicated on shared access to its physical spaces. These spaces facilitate in-person critiques with professors and visiting artists, use of technical resources, studio work, exhibitions, and much more. Although we will continue to receive instruction online, we are losing integral aspects of our education for which we have already paid.

We look for your input on possible recompense for the immense damage our education will suffer. Here are some solutions we have proposed to the administration which allow for partial compensation:

- The creation of a graduate fellowship that would fund access to studios and facilities for a time equal to the amount lost during closure (this solution is detailed in Point #4 in the letter to RISD administration).
- Thesis deadline extensions for the new one-year MA programs that were significantly diminished by the closure (Global Arts + Cultures and Nature-Culture Sustainability Studies).

As a board member, you are in a unique position to advocate on our behalf. As a major digital art collector and spouse to a RISD alumna, you have intimate knowledge of the ways in which a computer-based education differs from an

embodied studio practice and understand the unique challenges presented to makers by RISD's closure.

We acknowledge that the health and safety of our community is of the utmost importance. Accordingly, we have created an independent care and resource network for graduate students in Providence to share tools and to provide mutual aid in case of sickness. We have also crafted an initiative to leverage the skills of RISD students to make PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) for medical personnel in Providence and the surrounding area.

Once again, we would truly appreciate your input at this time. We are available via video, phone, and email. Currently, many of us students are feeling lost, caught between the demands of the remaining half of the semester and the lack of resources available to us. We cannot understate the value of your support at this time. Thank you for reading our letter, and we wish you good health in the upcoming days.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

On behalf of the COVID-19 Grad Task Force:

[REDACTED]

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