



June 3, 2021

Ms. Rosanne Somerson
President
Rhode Island School of Design
Two College Street
Providence, RI 02903

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 22, 2021, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island School of Design and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island School of Design be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2026 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2026 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) continuing to effectively implement its revised governance systems;
- 2) implementing its strategic plan, with a particular focus on addressing deferred maintenance and ADA compliance;
- 3) continuing to address student debt issues;
- 4) assessing student learning in the liberal arts, the majors, and in graduate programs.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island School of Design was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of February 2, 2017 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) for its clear and detailed interim report. We understand that, since its 2016 comprehensive evaluation, RISD made "several significant organizational changes" including appointing new academic leaders, relocating the Division of Student Affairs under the vice president for enrollment management, and

moving the Office of Institutional Resources into the Office of the Provost. We note with favor the founding of the Center for Social Equity and Inclusion (SEI) and the hiring of an associate provost for social equity and inclusion. Particularly noteworthy is the hiring of 18 female faculty of color since 2016. The Commission is also pleased to learn that, after a “comprehensive assessment” of its structure and practices, the Board “made modifications to its bylaws and committee charters to delineate roles and responsibilities with greater clarity.” Lastly, the Commission is gratified to learn that the shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic helped RISD “centralize key areas of decision-making...create new means of sharing equipment and space, and... open up the faculty’s sense of possibility in realizing learning objectives.”

The Commission appreciates the progress RISD has made in assessing student learning. A framework of nine institutional value propositions was developed which serve as “markers” of the “broad and expansive thinking/making that is central to a RISD education.” We note favorably that learning outcomes assessment is integrated into the academic program review process and understand that this process, in its initial implementation, has resulted in a “reflective and constructive assessment of student achievement in context.” The Commission is gratified to learn that “RISD has made major strides in implementing a culture of assessment at the College.”

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2026 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *Organization and Governance, Planning and Evaluation, Institutional Resources, and Educational Effectiveness*.

In addition to the progress made by the Board noted above, the Commission also acknowledges the Board’s effort to focus “on high-level oversight” of the School. We concur that having new hires in key leadership positions presents a “unique opportunity for recalibrating roles and responsibilities and providing fresh perspectives on longstanding issues of shared governance” and share RISD’s assessment that “additional work is warranted.” The self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2026 comprehensive evaluation will provide RISD an opportunity to apprise the Commission on its continued efforts to effectively implement its revised governance systems. We are guided here by our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

The authority, responsibilities, and relationships among the governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and sponsoring entity (if any) are clearly described in the institution’s by-laws, or an equivalent document, and in a table of organization that displays the working order of the institution. The board, administration, staff, faculty, and sponsoring entity understand and fulfill their respective roles as set forth in the institution’s official documents and are provided with the appropriate information to undertake their respective roles (3.1).

The institution’s organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness. The institution’s system of governance involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them (3.2).

We understand that RISD’s Strategic Plan, *NEXT: RISD 2020-2027*, “prioritizes renovations” that address areas of “significant deferred maintenance.” The Commission also understands that there are “many” academic buildings that do not meet ADA standards. We are gratified to learn, therefore, that the School has established a new process and committee structure to “align all capital requests and investments with key academic and strategic priorities.” We look forward to learning, through the Spring 2026 self-study, of Rhode Island School of Design’s “success in

implementing the results of its planning” (2.5). Our standard on *Institutional Resources* provides additional guidance here:

The institution’s financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

Facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, security, and a healthy environment with consideration for environmental and ecological concerns (7.23).

The Commission notes with favor that RISD has been able to reduce average undergraduate student loan debt by close to 16.6% since 2011 and has reduced average graduate student debt to \$72,000, from a high of \$92,000 in 2015. We are also pleased to learn that the institution has made a “significant effort to keep the annual rate of tuition and fees increases as low as possible,” and we appreciate the range of new programs it has introduced to provide financial support to students including the RISD Promise and Student Success Program, as well as its plans to commit an additional \$9.6 million in financial aid by FY2025. We understand that, given the pandemic, it may take longer to achieve that goal and welcome further information, as part of the Spring 2026 comprehensive evaluation, of Rhode Island School of Design’s continued progress in addressing student debt issues, as informed by our standard on *Institutional Resources*:

The institution and its governing board regularly and systematically review the effectiveness of the institution’s financial aid policy and practices in advancing the institution’s mission and helping to ensure that the institution enrolls and supports the student body it seeks to serve (7.10).

Rhode Island School of Design, as noted above, has made substantial progress in the area of assessment. We appreciate the School’s candid assessment that “there is still considerable work to be done” including assessing the new first-year curriculum, expanding the annual assessment of student work to all programs, and ensuring that outcomes assessment “is happening-specifically and distinctly-at the graduate level.” In keeping with our standard on *Educational Effectiveness*, we anticipate being apprised, through the Spring 2026 self-study, of RISD’s progress in these matters:

The institution enrolling multiple student bodies, by degree level, location, modality, or other variables, develops and uses the data, evidence, and information below for each student body (8.1).

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution’s academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution’s efforts to improve the curriculum and learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

Ms. Rosanne Somerson
June 3, 2021
Page 4

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Rhode Island School of Design and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Michael Spalter . The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Tetler".

George W. Tetler

GWT/sjp

Enclosure - Policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions

cc: Michael Spalter