Preface to the RISD Community: While unusual, I have decided to share the three most recent exchanges between my office and members of RISD Students for Justice in Palestine. I will not continue to share email exchanges (on various subjects) this broadly in the future. However, given how information has travelled at RISD, I feel it may be useful for everyone to understand the fullness of these particular exchanges, especially in relation to this week’s culminating event. I have removed the names of the student authors but kept the date stamps. Below is my final communication with members of RSJP this year. If outcomes at Commencement suggest a pathway forward, we will proceed accordingly in the Fall.

Crystal Williams (she/her)
President

On Tues, May 28, 2024 at 11:00 AM RISD President <president@risd.edu> wrote:

Dear REDACTED,

Given your recent letter, I am afraid we are at an impasse. Our disagreement about reasonable and responsible pathways forward seems irreconcilable. Where I have seen fruitful potential, my office will proceed. That includes:

- Scheduling an annual budget and investment meeting and conversation with Senior Vice President David Rosati, open to enrolled students.

- Early this Fall, inviting a broadly cast group of enrolled students to discuss ideas about substantive student involvement with the Board. A process for this conversation will be determined in early Fall and in collaboration with RISD’s Board of Trustees, who approve RISD Board of Trustee Meeting agendas.

- And, we will hold time for a group of students to speak with the Investment Committee of the Board to understand and think about the parameters that guide our institutional investments. Such a conversation, however, may only occur if the conditions regarding disruption at this year’s Commencement are met. Indeed, individuals have the right to freedom of speech and expression, a right we have repeatedly affirmed. They also have the right to choose forms of activism or expression that do not fundamentally disrupt such a celebratory event for everyone. The latter point is especially salient for this group of graduating seniors and their families who largely did not experience high school graduation and for whom this graduation ceremony is all the more meaningful.
If additional reasonable and responsible opportunities arise, we will also pursue those.

Where I see no fruitful pathway forward is in:

- The creation of a spreadsheet listing each institutional investment for student perusal, oversight, or use. The fiduciary responsibilities of the Board and the expertise residing therein are consequential. The request for such a list offers multiple proof points against non-financial experts (a) determining which investment vehicles RISD should be in, (b) defining institutional investment policy without informed, measured, and thoughtful consideration that incorporates and is responsive to a long-term and holistic view of RISD’s investment principles (which requires a solid understanding of those principles), and (c) attempting to do either outside of a clearly defined institutional structure, which RISD does not have.

- Accepting a quickly created divestment proposal modeled after a 2020 endeavor at Brown University (that was vetoed), which does have institutional structures in place that allow for the measured, thoughtful, and informed consideration that takes a long-term, holistic view.

- Presuming that any work, proposal, or activism on behalf of students or any others (if persistent enough) sans deep engagement with the Investment Committee will result in an affirmative response. Hence, I recommend that dialog is a first and crucial step—and one that must take place well before any proposal is conceived or developed, any collaborative work undertaken, or outcomes discussed.

My sincere hope is that a few members of your group—in addition to other non-RSJP—students are able to meet with the Board’s Investment Committee in October. Again, I can not promise an ultimate outcome that students would find agreeable. However, as suggested in the final bullet point above, a great deal of discussion and thinking about RISD-specific issues, including structure, culture and values, and financial goals (both long-term and immediate needs) needs to occur.

In the meantime, I wish you and your peers a wonderful summer. And, for those of you who are graduating, I hope for you a wonderful, warm, and deeply celebratory graduation weekend.

Best regards,
President Williams (she/her)

On Thurs, May 23, 2024 at 3:17 PM REDACTED wrote:

Hello President Williams,

Thank you for your response. We understand that the May Board of Trustees meeting agenda has been set in advance. We continue to advocate for this 1 hour to be allocated by the Investment Committee to meet with RISD SJP students next week because students are still on campus, can meet in person, and begin an open and collaborative discussion on divestment. The Student Alliance
President, who represents the entire RISD student body, can also be present at the Board meetings in May in an ex-officio position.

If not in May, we hope to meet with the Investment Committee during the summer over Zoom. The timing of this presentation and meeting with the Investment Committee is crucial for students to understand where our institution is invested in and for Board members to understand the importance of divesting from companies supporting the genocide in Palestine. We cannot wait for the meeting to be in October with no guaranteed vote on the divestment proposal by the entire Board. If the Board votes in their February 2025 meeting, it will have been 16 months since the genocide began and countless Palestinian lives lost as RISD remains complicit.

By beginning this dialogue during the summer, the Committee, students, and any necessary involved parties can collaborate to solidify a holistic and researched divestment proposal that will be ready for the October board meeting. This timeline allows for three months of working time and a month for additional discussion as the 2024-2025 school year begins with the wider student body and RISD community for a cohesive proposal to be voted on by the Trustees in the fall.

We also continue to advocate for disclosure of the current ESG criteria and companies that GEM invests the RISD endowment in. Without this data, the RISD community is unable to understand the full picture of RISD’s endowment and the precise companies that RISD must divest from. The data can be acquired by the Investment Committee and formatted into a legible document for RISD SJP students to read and research before their presentation. Again, this is why collaboration must begin as soon as possible – a comprehensive divestment proposal ultimately relies on financial transparency and full collaboration.

Establishing a student advisory and recommendation committee would also build a connection of trust and transparency that is dire currently. At Brown, the Advisory Committee for Corporate Responsibility in Investment Practices (ACCRIP) was established in 1978. For decades, students, faculty, and alumni have sat on the board and helped the institution build and proposals on divestment from South African Apartheid, the Darfur genocide, HEI Hotels, tobacco, etc. In 2020, they issued a proposal “To Recommend Divestment from Companies that Facilitate the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Territory” to which President Paxson vetoed, but now, she has agreed for the Corporation to vote on it in October. I commend RISD trustees for establishing ESG criteria to divest from fossil fuels in 2014, but the information about the divestment process remains opaque. There has been a growing lack of trust in the trustees and administration because of this opacity. Establishing an Advisory Committee for Corporate Responsibility in Investment Practices with students is crucial to mending the lack of trust and listening to the democratic demands of the RISD community as a whole.

Our ask for you to condemn the genocide continues to stand. We do not believe it is “unnecessary” to continue asking you to condemn the Israel occupation, apartheid, and genocide of Palestinians.

We, RISD SJP, urge you and your board to consider how other universities have agreed to demands for divestment and how RISD can join other institutions in the symbolic and fiscal act of divesting from genocide. At California State University of Sacramento, President Wood has agreed to edit the Policy on Socially Responsible Investments, grant amnesty to all protesting students, and work with
philanthropists to sponsor 20 Gazan students. Trinity College will undergo a complete divestment from companies operating in occupied Palestine and on the UN Blacklist and sponsor 6 postgraduate and 2 undergraduate Gazan scholars. At the New School, trustees will vote on a divestment proposal by June 14; if the board votes in favor, the school will divest within one investment quarter and continue to monitor investments on a quarterly basis. Just up the hill, at Brown University, 5 students today presented the divestment proposal in front of Corporation members and are preparing for a vote on the proposal in October.

We appreciate your response to our email with offering conversations on an ex-officio student on the Board, an annual conversation with David Rosati, and a presentation by 5 RISD SJP members in front of the Investment Committee in October. We urge you to reconsider the timeline for divestment and the current actionables that you and the Investment Committee can take today by disclosing the current endowment, continuing conversations on building a student advisory committee, meeting with 5 RISD SJP students in May or on zoom over the summer, collaborating with RISD SJP students on a divestment proposal, and agreeing to vote on the proposal in October.

Finally, on the note of disruption to Commencement, we cannot be held responsible for any disruption to commencement. Every person has the right to exert their first amendment right to free speech and protest. RISD SJP cannot control autonomous actions of individuals. We communicate with you in good faith and are working towards meaningful and actionable steps; however, it is unfair to RISD SJP, our goals, and our graduating peers to believe that we could prevent them from exercising their freedom of expression.

Thank you for your continued conversation with us. We look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Thank you,
RISD Students for Justice in Palestine

On Wed, May 22, 2024 at 9:22 AM RISD President <president@risd.edu> wrote:

Dear (REDACTED),

I write in response to your email (below and attached) dated May 16, 2024.

First, let me begin by stating that we share the desire to see the violence, death, and destruction happening in Gaza to stop. Where we diverge is in the most responsible means of making a meaningful, substantive impact.

Your document reiterates the demands we have discussed over many hours—first via Provost Ghadessi, VP Carreon Bradley, and VP Quirolgico, then with myself and Provost Ghadessi, later with Provost Ghadessi and Professor Tejada, and finally with Trustee Strachan. Your document also adds to those demands a new demand that the students who occupied the 2nd floor of 20 Washington Place—negatively impacting the education of other students, precluding them from getting their work
and materials, and causing tens of thousands of dollars in damage due to vandalism—should not be held accountable for their actions.

Every action has a consequence: the fact that students chose to stay on the 2nd floor of 20 Washington Place implied they knew repercussions existed or their action would have no meaning. The demand to receive amnesty without acknowledging the stress, emotional, psychological, and financial impact the occupier’s actions had on other students is troubling. Student occupiers are free to not participate in the restorative processes being discussed and designed, to which they agreed in writing via email. However, the student code of conduct breach was significant. It cannot be ignored. If occupiers decide not to engage in the restorative process, the code of conduct process is the next alternative, as stated in my email on May 7, 2024, and will be initiated.

As for the other demands: Again, given that occupiers are out of the building, I am willing to advocate for a small contingent of students (you listed 5, to which I am happy to agree) to meet with the Investment Committee of the Board in October 2024. That advocacy would happen if Commencement is not disrupted (the other conditions have already occurred). Please respond to this condition to let me know if I should again begin advocating for an audience with the Investment Committee of the Board. However, it would not be the case that any decision would be made at that meeting. Investment decisions and actions take time and deliberation. That meeting would be a conversation with members of our Investment Committee. Further, please note that board agendas, including consent items, are set well in advance and are crucial to the well-functioning of the college. It is, therefore, not feasible for such a conversation to occur next week.

Also, your email expresses an interest in having a student serve on the Board in an ex-officio capacity. I am open to hearing your ideas about this and how such a student representative would serve the entire student body, not simply a defined group serving a narrow goal (however noble it is believed to be).

Your letter also restates its original objectives in creating an "advisory and recommendation committee," whose work, as I read your email, would still be to oversee RISD's investment decisions. As I stated in my original email, "the Board's role as fiduciaries of the institution is to protect our principal assets, ensure RISD is structurally and financially sound now, and ensure the institution exists in perpetuity. Trustees with decades of experience and expertise in financial matters oversee RISD's complex $420 million endowment and how those funds are invested." Ceding oversight to students or any other person or group of people who do not have financial expertise would be woefully irresponsible.

However, we can promote an understanding of how our finances are invested, how our budget works, and how decisions get made. We can also instigate more conversations about issues of import to a broad range of students—not only SJP members. We welcome such discussions. Again, we propose an annual presentation for students followed by a substantive conversation with Senior Vice President David Rosati. SVP Rosati works closely with me and the Board's Investment Committee, overseeing the institution’s budget and financial planning process. There is no greater expert on our campus regarding how institutional resources are invested, allocated, or spent than SVP Rosati.

I remain open to exploring other helpful, meaningful, and actionable means of engagement with students.
I have repeatedly stated publicly and privately that no statement will be issued. Repeating this demand is unnecessary.

Please respond to the query as to whether or not your group agrees to the terms by which I would advocate for your audience with the Board’s Investment Committee in October. If you agree to those terms, I can respond by the end of this week to whether or not a small contingent of students will have an ok audience with the Investment Committee of the Board of Trustees in October. If we come to terms and the Board’s Investment Committee agrees, in service of extra clarity, I feel compelled to restate: any agreement regarding an audience with the Board would be reversed if disruption at Commencement happens.

Best regards,
President Crystal Williams

On Thu, May 16, 2024 at 12:58 PM REDACTED wrote:

Hello President Williams and Provost Ghadessi,

We hope you both are doing well. Thank you for being open and communicative during this stressful time as the genocide of Palestinian people continues to escalate. After our meeting with Provost Ghadessi and Professor Ramon Tejada, we now respond in hopes of working towards a path forward with you both and the Board of Trustees.

We would appreciate the opportunity for 5 RISD Students for Justice in Palestine representatives to present a 1-hour presentation along with additional time to answer questions and engage in discussion with the Board during the May 29/30 meetings. In this presentation, students will detail the history of Palestine, Israeli’s occupation and genocide of Palestine, RISD’s fiscal ties to Israel, and RSJP’s demands (disclosure, divestment, student advisory with the Board, and a condemnation of Israel’s occupation and the genocide.)

We also hope to set a firm date for the vote on this divestment proposal as soon as possible. We understand the Board of Trustees meets three times a year: October, February, and May. But divestment from this genocide is an urgent and extenuating circumstance that must be treated with the time sensitivity and severity it deserves. As we discuss divestment, over 35,000 people have been killed in Palestine, by the support of weapons manufacturers that our institution is in relationship with. At least 600,000 people, or a quarter of Gaza’s population, have been displaced from Rafah since May 6, the first day of our De-Occupation of Fathi Ghaben Place. We are adamant on moving towards a divestment vote before October.

After the May meeting, we would like RISD students to collaborate with the Board on building transparency regarding RISD’s investments and determining which specific companies to divest from, according to amended ESG Criteria. This transparency and disclosure will inform upon the final
divestment proposal to be voted on by the Board. We hope to establish a clear channel of communication (email) from RISD SJP to the Board of Trustees. Student advisory and communication can take the form of creating an advisory and recommendation committee or an ex-officio student representative on the Board. With the current transparency and information of the Textron/Rayon Little Fund, we also expect divestment from the fund to be also voted on along with divestment with other companies.

We demand full amnesty from all restorative justice processes and student conduct proceedings for the De-Occupier students. During and after the de-occupation, students have been harmed physically, emotionally, and mentally and deserve to finish their semesters with as little additional stress as possible. Finally, we continue to advocate for a written Presidential condemnation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the genocide in Gaza.

We appreciate your time and the conversations we’ve shared. We look forward to moving together.

Thank you,
RISD Students for Justice in Palestine