



# Honorary Degree Program Policy

---

## Summary

An honorary degree is one of higher education's most significant accolades. Rhode Island School of Design awards honorary degrees at the College's annual Commencement ceremony on a selective basis to distinguished individuals who merit special recognition by meeting the criteria and eligibility requirements specified below. The President and the Board of Trustees intend for nominations to reflect the Institution's absolute commitment to diversity as expressed in myriad forms, including race and ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, language, culture, national origin, religious commitments, age, (dis)ability status, as well as diversity in the spectrum of thoughts and ideas.

## Criteria

The honorary doctorate of fine arts is granted by Rhode Island School of Design to individuals who:

- Have made outstanding contributions to and/or are leaders in the fields of visual art and design;
- Have outstanding contributions in scholarly advancement in the fields of visual art and design;
- Have made other significant, meritorious achievements that reflect the core values and standards of the Institution.

An association or connection with Rhode Island School of Design is welcome, but in no way necessary for this recognition.

## Eligibility

Current faculty, staff, and students are not eligible to receive an honorary degree. Past honorary degree recipients are not eligible to receive additional honorary degrees. Self-nominations will not be accepted. Except under special circumstances when the President, in consultation with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, determines otherwise, current members of the Board of Trustees are not eligible to receive an honorary degree.



## Submitting Nominations

All members of the RISD Community, including but not limited to Trustees, Museum Board of Governors, faculty, staff, students, and alumni, may nominate individuals for honorary degrees.

Nominations are received throughout the year by the Office of the President. To nominate an individual, any member of the RISD community should complete the online honorary degree nomination form. The quality of the supporting materials is very important, since the individuals reviewing nominations cannot be assumed to have independent knowledge of each candidate's achievements.

The Board of Trustees will be consulted at various stages throughout the calendar year via electronic communications in order to incorporate their expertise, guidance, recommendations, and input in the nomination process.

All nominations received within any given calendar year will be considered for honorary degrees awarded at Commencement the following academic year. For example, all nominations received from January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020 will be considered for honorary degrees at Commencement 2022. Nominees will not be carried over between calendar years, but individuals may be re-nominated in subsequent calendar years. Please review the list of past honorary degree recipients before submitting a nomination.

## Speakers at Commencement + Graduate Hooding Ceremonies

Typically, both the Commencement speaker and the Graduate Hooding speaker receive honorary degrees. Individuals submitting nominations for honorary degrees are asked to specifically identify candidates who would be powerful speakers and to provide sufficient supplemental information highlighting their strengths as a speaker.

## Confidentiality

In accordance with standard practice at other institutions of higher learning, care is taken to ensure strict confidentiality at all stages of the honorary degree process. A nominee should not be informed that their name has been put forward for consideration. Not all excellent candidates can be recognized, and knowledge of a failed nomination can be embarrassing and harmful. Official notification of RISD's wish to confer an honorary degree upon an individual is made by the President on behalf of the Board of Trustees.



In keeping with confidentiality surrounding the honorary degree process, nominators will not receive any notifications regarding the status of their recommendations. Typically, confirmed honorary degree recipients will be announced publicly in the March/April before Commencement.

## Review of Nominees

To facilitate efficiency and ensure the highest standards of distinction and achievement for honorary degree recipients, the following process will be followed:

In early January, the Office of the President conducts a strategic internal review to vet all nominations received in the previous calendar year and offers its top recommendations and supporting rationale, along with the complete slate of nominees, to the Honorary Degree Committee.

The Honorary Degree committee will be comprised of the following:

- Lead Commencement Planner (co-chair)
- Dean, Department Head, or Graduate Program Director (co-chair)
- Student Representative
- Faculty Representative
- Trustee Representative (can be an *Emeriti* Trustee)
- President's Office Representative Managing Honorary Degree Process (administrative support)

In late January, the Honorary Degree Committee reviews, deliberates, evaluates, and selects approximately 15 honorary doctorate of fine arts degree candidates to recommend to the Board of Trustees, including recommendations for a Commencement speaker and a Graduate Hooding speaker. The Committee will prepare a succinct written report providing the rationale for each candidate it recommends. Typically, these recommendations are due to the President by early February for presentation, review, and approval at the February Board of Trustees meeting.

## Selection of Honorary Degree Recipients

The President will consider the recommendations approved by the Board of Trustees and extend invitations to selected individuals from the approved slate to receive an honorary degree at Commencement of the following academic year (i.e., candidates for an honorary degree at Commencement 2022 will be nominated during the 2020 calendar year, approved by the Board of Trustees in February 2021, and then extended an invitation to attend Commencement 2022).



The President, on behalf of the Board of Trustees, is the only person authorized to invite a person to receive an honorary degree. If the President determines that a different candidate or candidates should be offered the degree for strategic or other reasons of institutional benefit, or in circumstances that might compromise the Commencement event, the President, in conjunction with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, has discretion to withdraw invitations, replace them with others on the approved list, and, if deemed appropriate, extend invitations to others not on the approved list.

While there is no required number of honorary degree recipients each year, it is expected that normally a minimum of two degree recipient would be honored per year with a maximum of four per year unless recipients are part of a collaborative group.

Each and every nomination is thoughtfully considered. Nominators are asked to please keep in mind that there are many factors that play into a nominee not being awarded a honorary degree, including scheduling conflicts, denial of acceptance, etc. Given the confidentiality of the process, the Office of the President is unable to disclose information about any nominee(s) or their status.

### Prohibition on Fees and Honoraria

Except under special circumstances when the President, in consultation with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, determines otherwise, an honorary degree recipient shall not receive a speaker's fee or honorarium for accepting an honorary degree or delivering a Graduate Hooding or Commencement address. The Institution does, of course, cover travel, accommodations, and related expenses.



## Presence at Commencement

Except under special circumstances when the President, in consultation with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, determines otherwise, an honorary degree recipient must be present at the Commencement ceremony. Honorary degrees will not be awarded in absentia or posthumously.

## Continuing Relationship with Honorary Degree Recipients

Every effort is made to deepen and strengthen the interaction between honorary degree recipients and the RISD community. When possible, recipients are invited to participate in other activities around Commencement that allow broader engagement with students and faculty. Recipients are also often invited to return to campus on other occasions and encouraged to develop a fruitful ongoing relationship with the Institution.

## Rescinding of Honorary Degree

Rhode Island School of Design is committed to upholding to the College's mission and values. To protect RISD's integrity, autonomy, and academic freedoms, the President, in consultation with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, reserves the right to rescind the honorary degree of any individual who may compromise these fundamental institutional principles or otherwise impede RISD's interests.



## Process Timeline

*Note: Nominations can be submitted online year-round.*

Mid-September	First reminder call to entire RISD community for nominations for following year's Commencement
Mid-November	Second and final reminder call to entire RISD community for nominations for following year's Commencement
Early January	Strategic internal review of all nominations received during prior calendar year for following year's Commencement
Late January	Honorary Degree Committee convenes to conduct its review
Early February	Honorary Degree Committee submits recommendations to the President for following year's Commencement
Late February	Recommendations for following year's Commencement presented to the Board of Trustees for approval
March	Offer letters for following year's Commencement sent by President to individuals selected from approved slate of recommendations
March/April	Public notified of honorary degree recipients for current year's Commencement

The criteria for granting the honorary doctorate of fine arts are described in the Honorary Degree Program Policy above, approved by the Board of Trustees' Executive Committee on Monday, April 15, 2019. The above is intended to serve as a guide for the implementation of the program and is to be available online to the public.