



Dear Alumni/ae of the Institute:

Below is an email from Rensselaer Professor Chris Bystroff, Ph.D. to all Rensselaer faculty, in response to the recent *Times Union* article. A faculty member since 1999, Dr. Bystroff is a professor in the School of Science. Because you are all ambassadors of the Institute, I wanted to make sure you received a copy of his email.

Graig R. Eastin
Vice President, Institute Advancement

From: Bystroff, Chris
Sent: Monday, January 22, 2018
Subject: A letter in response to the front-page TU article of Jan 2, by Bethany Bump

OK, I'll say it.

Shame on you.

I am talking to the alumni who have withdrawn their support for RPI over the last 18 years since Prof. Shirley Jackson has taken the helm.

Do you abandon your family when they disappoint you?

This whole thing stinks. I could shut up and look for work elsewhere, but I choose to speak out here instead. After all, my lab just got a grant! I am feeling good about this place! It pains me to read in the *Times Union* what I never saw in the *Poly*. Are we really in a death spiral as the article suggests?

The situation needs to be analyzed from all sides. Has this happened elsewhere? Are we the only major university to see a 50% drop in alumni participation? In fact, a widespread trend towards "a disproportionate reliance on a handful of wealthy donors" (<https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2017/4/10/mega-gifts-universities-fundraising>) has been visible for years.

And what about this blame-game. Dr. Jackson is being called an "autocrat." Really?

Did you notice that the downturn in alumni donations began immediately after Dr. Jackson's installation? Not a sign of a well-reasoned response. Did she become an autocrat on day one? How long does it take to establish a reputation as a non-transparent autocrat?

What she did become on day one was the first woman of color who was elevated to the presidency of a major university. I can't help thinking that if she were white, male (and maybe a bit taller!), she would not be so quickly dismissed as an autocrat. After all, are we to believe that 200 years of institutionalized racism and sexism were suddenly erased when Shirley Jackson was installed? If so, then RPI would be truly an exceptional place. Could it be that the residual racism and sexism (no to mention heightism) that sits in the backs of the minds of the white male majority of our alumni makes it just a bit easier to see Dr Jackson as outside of her league, ... out of her place? Are we to fantasize that Martin Luther King successfully

erased all traces of racism and there is nothing left to fight? Could it be that the microaggressions that happen when we fail to stop them aren't still happening between some of our alumni and the figurehead of our school? And aren't those microaggressions made "macro" by the quantity of their donations? I'm talking about the Patroon level folks.

Is there a faculty/administration rift and who is responsible for that? We faculty need to fix it, because alumni are citing it as the reason for not donating. As Chair of the Faculty Senate a few years ago, I thought up a solution. I suggested we apologize! A good apology goes a long way towards healing divisions, I said. We all must own up to our part in the rift. After all, the Faculty Senate some years before had put out a skewed questionnaire and a vote of no confidence in the President (which failed). That was terrible and needlessly aggressive act, in my opinion, and we would have been doing the adult thing by writing a formal letter of apology. Guess what. I was shouted down! There was bile in the room. I had been Chair for just a few hours and was suddenly exposed to a level of group think I naively thought impossible on a college campus. Yes, wounds need time to heal (I am talking about the dissolution of the Faculty Senate shortly after the failure of the vote of no confidence), but for how long?

Folks, the whole planet is falling into tough times. Who are we to think we can wall off the sea? Just like bridges, institutions survive in a time of crisis to the extent that they hold together under stress.

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