

November 15, 2011

Dear Dr. Jackson,

About a month ago, the Student Senate created an ad-hoc committee with the purpose of investigating and reporting on the State of the Institute to the Student Senate. They delivered their findings to the Senate last night at our Senate meeting. There was much discussion on the official position statement of the Student Senate; the position statement, as well as the ad-hoc report, is set to be finalized and approved during our next meeting. Given the course of the discussion yesterday, I think that it's likely that the outcome will be a strong statement issued by Student Senate regarding several perceived core issues at Rensselaer, most prominently Senate concerns over the Presidential leadership style.

I'm writing this letter for a couple reasons. First, although the major concerns we'll likely discuss have already been brought up by Senators in recent public forums, I want to ensure that the university leadership is aware of likely actions by the students. It is not the intent of Senate to catch anyone by surprise or to make a decision based on emotion over reasoning. Second, more urgently, there were several common trends in the conversation last night that I expect will be prominently featured during next week's discussion as well. While most of these concerns have been brought up to the administration, senators speaking yesterday felt very strongly that either they had been dismissed, answered only superficially, or answered in a way that Senate strongly disagrees with. Because of this, here are some of the likely core issues that will be brought up tonight and addressed in the Senate position statement - I would like to give the opportunity to members of the administration, if they choose, have an opportunity to respond to them prior to the meeting and let us know if there are any key facts or components that we are missing. This email will be very direct, and I apologize sincerely if it's perceived as offensive. This is my attempt to characterize the views and concerns of many senators and other involved students so that they can be discussed frankly and honestly before they are put into an official Senate position.

1. **Collaboration goes beyond communication:** This concern was brought up Sunday at the President's Leadership Barbecue, during the President's address to the Student Senate, and previously very frequently. Despite the number of times this question has been brought up, it remains unanswered at its core in favor of more superficial questions such as "Why doesn't everyone meet with the President?" or "How do we impact the specific budgetary or investment decisions in the Institute?" Students, and, from our investigation, faculty and staff as well are as a whole not inspired or empowered by the vision of the Institute and the Rensselaer Plan, and this lack of inspiration or empowerment leads to many programs falling short of their intended goals. This lack of support is puzzling to Student Senate as the vast majority of members strongly believe in RPI's vision and goal of becoming a technological university with global reach and global

impact as well as many of the programs and initiatives put into place to try and take us there. Students feel that it is part the role of a leader, especially one focused on transforming a community, to seek and achieve a measure of buy-in from that community. From perceived hostile rhetoric at public and private meetings to the apparent lack of prioritization of reinstating the Faculty Senate, we have seen repeated evidence that this has not been the case.

2. **Over-Compartmentalization and Top-Down Leadership:** While the students appreciate that every individual in an organization should have their own role and that deviating from this model leads to a decrease in efficiency, students worry that it has been taken to an extreme at Rensselaer to the point that it impedes action and the ability of stakeholders in decision-making to have frank discussions about issues facing the institute. This is also a function of the apparent decision-making process, in which a large portion of initiatives (including some that should arguably be handled at lower levels) must pass by the President's desk for a thorough review before being approved. Due to the thoroughness of the review of these initiatives as well as the other constraints on the President's time, it's not unusual for a ready-for-action program or initiative to take six months to a year before even being discussed. Affecting change through the Performance Planning process is similarly slow and difficult. This strongly hampers action and progress originating from sources outside of the President. This sentiment is also stated by other stakeholders at the Institute up to the highest levels, although this is rarely discussed outside of private meetings.
3. **Culture of Fear:** When speaking to many faculty and staff members during the our investigation, the overwhelming response, beyond any specific information, was fear about retribution. Students have heard rumors of yelling matches, threats, and frequent firings and un-firings occurring within the Troy building. This has seemingly created a culture where a staff or non-tenured faculty member is more focused on pleasing the leadership than doing the best that they can at their job. From our extensive meetings with employees at all levels, it's clear that this culture is pervasive even at the highest levels of leadership. This feeling has trickled down to the students as well - Senate has heard many complaints about students fearing retribution for stating an opinion or joining a group like ARG, and that is very worrying to the Senate. We feel that it creates a non-optimal learning environment to have paranoid and apathetic students and angry faculty members as well as a non-optimal work environment for staff members who can't focus on doing their job.
4. **General Financial Concerns:** As stated during the Town Hall meeting, many of our perceived shortcomings--low faculty-student ratio, supporting current programs, adding new programs, etc.--can either be attributed to or solved with money. Most Senators agree fully with this - the Senate's financial findings show that in Universities with huge endowments and thus much larger revenue, there's much more freedom to operate and to take necessary risks without the associated fear of economic collapse. I would like to make clear that neither I, nor any other Senator that I have spoken to about this topic, believes that it is or should be the role of the students to co-govern

the University or help dictate very specific financial decisions; at the same time, as we recognize the impact money (and by extension our spending habits) have on the Student Experience, we feel that it is impossible to have a comprehensive view of the future without looking at the financial aspect. The discussion I heard yesterday focused on two main categories: the upcoming Capital Campaign and the Institute's current and future financial risk.

- a. **Upcoming Capital Campaigns:** As it was stated during the Alumni Weekend State of the Institute Address (and, to a lesser extent, during subsequent public meetings), money means a lot. Students are very concerned about hinging many of our absolutely needed actions--such as T/TT faculty hiring and moving from need-sensitive towards need-blind admissions--on what we, quite frankly, see as a fairly unrealistic campaign expectation. For our campaign lead-in in the next 2-3 years, by our calculations either revenue brought in by IA needs to double or all of it needs to be redirected from other areas of the University to this campaign (stressing the rest of the University). In the longer term, for the actual Capital Campaign, revenue would need to triple or quadruple in order to meet its goals. Furthermore, all of the revenue used towards at least the short-term campaign (as well as much of the long-term campaign) would need to be in cash as we can't realistically take out more debt; additionally, we're unsure if the hiring freeze affects IA - if it does, how can they see this increased revenue without more people? The Capital Campaign that ended several years ago was fantastic and we attribute its success largely to Dr. Jackson. However, from our understanding, the alumni culture in the 90s was very negative towards RPI, and many alumni saw Dr. Jackson as a "new hope" and a chance to get the school back on track - they were eager to donate. We're not convinced that this culture still exists today, and while I'm sure our IA operations will stay stronger than they have under previous regimes, students aren't convinced it'll be good enough. Normally, students aren't focused on IA operations; however, due to the number of absolutely critical programs to the Student Experience that hinge on it (as discussed previously), we are concerned. Right now, the general belief is that the Institute is trying to act like a top-10 university - we're trying to act like we have a lot more money than we have. By the numbers, we're a modestly endowed University with a fairly low alumni giving rate - while we should absolutely strive to improve ourselves, **students are very concerned about planning to pay for such crucial programs with money that we don't have.**
- b. **Financial Risk:** Our credit rating, by all major agencies cited by the Senate, is the equivalent of a Moody's A3 stable rating. While students don't think that the rating itself affects the Student Experience in any large way, the reasoning behind the rating is worrying. First, out of our 11 self-selected schools for comparison on IPEDS, only one other had an A3 rating (with one receiving "RW" - rating withdrawn) and none had a lower rating. The next score below ours on the Moody's scale, BBB, is considered to have some "speculative qualities" which

is a worrying phrase to be near as an institution of higher education. As we do aim high, the Senate also compared our credit rating to the thirty universities with most similar endowment values for a more fair look: the average score was Aa3, with only one other university receiving a A3 - this puts us two standard deviations worse than the average score among our similarly endowed peers. While this indicates, to some extent, that we're in the period of rapid growth as opposed to comfortable maintenance and that we took some strategic risk, Moody's was fairly clear that it was a comprehensive analysis that took into account qualitative as well as quantitative and that the Rensselaer Plan was factored into our rating. There were several cited reasons for our low rating, but many of them focused on the consistent practice of spending money we don't have on hand - heavy endowment draws, low liquid assets during certain points of the year, relying heavily on lines of credit (which our credit rating does impact), and needing to take out loans for anticipated expenditures such as the Defined Benefit Pension Plan. For students, this boils down to, again, **students are concerned about our trend of spending money we don't have.**

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We greatly appreciate your continued discussions with the student body regarding student concerns, and we hope to open an honest dialog among students, faculty, staff, and the administration that will lead us towards a positive future. Please feel free to contact me if you have any response or feedback on this letter.

Sincerely,

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