

Brief for the board on the recent motion passed by the student senate

Recently, the Student Senate created a report on the current state of the institute and the challenges we face. This report is attached along with the motion passed by the duly elected members of the Student Senate for review.

Below one will find a breakdown of the motion which was passed along with the justification and background of each section. This is provided for context and perspective in to the motivations of this action in hopes that it will serve as the starting point for further discussion amongst the board.

***Whereas** the Student Senate is the chief representative body for Rensselaer students, thus giving it a vested interest in the present and future conditions for the Student Experience at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute;*

The RPI Student Senate is an elected body and part of our role is to represent student concerns to the administration and Board of Trustees. We have the long term interest of the institute in mind and at the core of this and all of our actions.

Some concerns have been raised about our ability, as a representative body to raise such important issues without first demonstrating that they are the concerns of the broad majority of our constituency. We discussed this point in detail while choosing our course of action and came to several conclusions:

1. The amount of knowledge needed to make an informed decision on this point is not reasonable to expect our constituency to study. That is not why they came to RPI and should not be their focus while here.
2. Much of the knowledge which this decision was based on comes from confidential sources and, while it is very concerning, we did not feel it prudent, at this time, to conduct a campus wide educational campaign to air these problems.
3. The decision of what further action is needed lies with the Board of Trustees, not the student body. We therefore elected to direct our questions and concerns appropriately.
4. In spite of all of this, individual senators were expected to (and did) talk to many of their constituents on a one-on-one basis in order to ensure their understanding of the situation and gauge their opinion. Whether based in her actions or other factors, there is deeply rooted of opposition to President Jackson amongst the campus community.

***Whereas** the Student Senate has conducted a thorough review and compiled a report of the current state and direction of the Institute based on data available to the public, as well as interviews with members of the RPI Community (including members of the President's Cabinet, faculty, students, staff, and alumni);*

Please see the attached report for full details, however, we are not taking this action lightly. Our recommendations come on the heels of hundreds of hours of research and discussions. Particularly concerning are the findings, not all of which have been able to be included in the formal written report, from our confidential interviews with members of the President's cabinet, Faculty, and Staff.

Whereas the long term vision of the Institute as well as many of the steps that have been taken over the past 10 years to transform the shape and direction of the Institute are commendable;

This point is simple, but bears emphasizing. Our criticism is not with the past actions or direction of the institute. Even the actions by President Jackson, while perhaps not always the most delicate, may well have been exactly what was needed and certainly have greatly transformed the shape and direction of the institute. This resolution is not intended to be seen as a rejection of any part of the vision or direction of the institute as outlined in the *Rensselaer Plan*, but rather as a way to start the conversation about what is needed moving forward.

Quite often, the visionary entrepreneur who sets a company's course is not the individual best suited towards leading the fulfillment of that vision.

Whereas, based on the findings of the report, the Student Senate is concerned with the current state of the Institute and our ability to meet the goals set out in the vision of the *Rensselaer Plan* as well as the ability to meet immediate fundraising and faculty hiring goals;

In the current economic climate, fundraising is harder than ever. While we are in no place to make evaluations about the success of capital campaigns, the patterns we have seen are concerning. The current goal of raising \$150M-170M represents a large increase over current fundraising and we haven't seen the increase in Institute Advancement Staffing needed to make this happen. Additionally, in the next phase of the *Rensselaer Plan*, the kind of funding that is needed is increasingly for basic operations and endowment rather than major projects. This kind of fundraising requires a more united front and in particular, needs a large alumni base who feel inspired and empowered as stakeholders.

Whereas the Student Senate is particularly concerned with the broad sense of dissatisfaction and low morale among students, faculty, staff, and alumni, particularly the opposition to the direction of the Institute and President Jackson's leadership;

In our research over the past several months, the low morale amongst all stakeholders has been tangible. While there seems to be very low opposition overall to the *Rensselaer Plan* itself, implementation of it has left people feeling disengaged and disenfranchised.

Students have a very broad negative impression of President Jackson, largely due to lack of accessibility as well as some negative attitudes which are passed on from Faculty and Staff.

Faculty members, in interviews, seemed resigned to the issues and seemed to have very little motivation left to try to fix them. It is not uncommon for professors to express a sense that they don't feel like a valued member of the community, or that they do not feel as if they are empowered to really do their jobs. The overall negative opinion from faculty is very contagious as they are often willing to discuss issues they have with students or even their whole classes.

While it is far more difficult to get Staff to discuss any problems, out of fear for their jobs, the staff certainly similarly had issues of low-morale. As discussed in the report, many of the residence life staff have been left very confused by the CLASS initiative and do not feel empowered by the management structure to make the changes they see as necessary. Additionally, and perhaps even more concerning, was the amount of anonymous descent we received from the Cabinet Level.

The Cabinet, of all institute stakeholders should feel empowered and free to do their jobs. In a strong situation, they should be united behind their President and

working as a team. Unfortunately, this was not the picture that was painted for us by members of the cabinet. Particularly after we started to gather information on the current state of the institute, a clear message went out amongst the cabinet that they were not to give any major information to the Senate. As we continued to get information from the cabinet level we started to hear reports of threats of firings and “loyalty meetings,” in which cabinet members felt threatened for their jobs if they did not show their loyalty to President Jackson (note that loyalty was to President Jackson, not the School). Despite these concerning actions, the senate continued to get reports of low morale from the cabinet and similar feelings of not being free to really do their jobs to the fullest.

Alumni, while certainly mixed on the issue of President Jackson do not, as a whole, feel invested in the Transformation taking place at Rensselaer and many expressed serious concerns about the direction of the institute. This is primarily concerning to us because we strongly support the overall vision of the *Rensselaer Plan*, and see the broad buy-in of alumni as an important step towards enabling this transformation.

Whereas, the Student Senate is concerned by personal accounts from students, faculty, staff, and administrators, of President Jackson’s leadership techniques, including top down leadership, abrasive style, existence of fear among staff and administrators, and lack of engagement on campus;

As discussed above, we have heard many accounts from all levels of fear surrounding any opposition to president Jackson and an overall management style that, while effective for Transformative change, does not seem well suited towards bringing people together around a shared vision.

It has been suggested to us that review of official HR citations may be helpful in understanding the way in which employees are improperly censured and often motivated to work out of fear for their jobs rather than vision of the institute. While we are in no place to conduct this review, the board may be able to.

Whereas, based on these findings and concerns, the Student Senate is not confident that even if the leadership challenges were overcome, President Jackson has the rapport needed to rally the necessary support from the broad campus community towards the next phase of the implementation of the Rensselaer Plan;

Unfortunately, even if the issues outlined above were to be overcome, regaining the respect of the many faculty, staff, students, and alumni will not be an easy task. Perhaps by necessity, in creating the Transformative Change that has come about in the past 10 years, many bridges have been burned and people have been left feeling dis-empowered and disengaged.

It will be particularly difficult for President Jackson to move forward into the next phase because the sense of mutual respect has been lost. Especially in the current economic climate, but also because of the phase of transformation we are in, a unity of vision and purpose is needed across the campus. Creation of this unity takes leadership, leadership which we are not confident that President Jackson will be able to provide.

The 42nd Student Senate hereby resolves:

To request a formal review of the current state of the Institute by the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Board of Trustees including confidential interviews with several constituencies, focusing on

review of the impact of President Jackson's leadership style on the unity of vision and productivity of faculty and staff towards that vision; and

This is our primary request. Over the course of our review, it has become clear that the depth and strength of the fear gripping many of the stakeholders may make it very difficult for anyone who has not spoken with them directly to understand. The cabinet, to their credit, is very good at making the best out of what they have to work with, but we believe that if the board were to conduct a formal review of the impact of President Jackson's continued leadership and create a mechanism by which honest testimony may be attained, serious problems would quickly reveal themselves.

To request *action be taken by the Board of Trustees to move Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute forward into the next phase of Rensselaer's transformation.*

The purpose of all of our requests is to aid and continue the transformation of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute into a top-tier university with global reach and global impact. We believe that the current management structure and style, while perhaps necessary in putting the pieces of the transformation together, are not best suited for the next phase of the transformation.

To request *consideration by the Board of Trustees of the following possible courses of action:*

a. *Significant changes be made to the governance structure such that a formal Chief Operating Officer or the like is empowered to make necessary on-the-ground decisions so that President Jackson can focus on fundraising, branding, and long-term visioning;*

While this would not deal with the issue of respect, a top-level manager focusing their full attention on gaining broad community buy-in and building community vision may help work around the issue.

b. *A shift in strategy be made, including a public recognition of past challenges and a redoubling of commitment to bringing the campus together around the vision of the Institute, likely including some shift in structure to empower the Vice Presidents to make more decisions and take more individual action as well as a budget commitment to hiring a temporary director to lead this culture shift from the highest levels.*

Similar to option a, this recommendation would help avoid some of the difficulties of empowerment currently created by the top-down leadership style. It would not address the issues directly related to respect for President Jackson, but it may mitigate some of the negative effects.

Finally, if the previous are determined to be ineffective in addressing the concerns outlined in this motion,

c. *The removal of Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson as President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.*

It should be noted that the Senate was fiercely divided on the inclusion of this option. It was ultimately included, not as a vote of no confidence, but as a recognition of reality. It may, unfortunately, be that we have come to a point in the course of the transformation where President Jackson's Leadership is no longer what is needed for the school.

This decision ultimately lies with the board, but based on our investigation, concerns run deep enough that there is, indeed, cause for serious consideration of all options.