



S T U D E N T
SENATE

Rensselaer Union Report

Prepared by the Ad-Hoc Committee of
the Rensselaer Union 47th Student Senate

Approved by the
Rensselaer Union 47th Student Senate
on January 30, 2017 by a vote of 18-2-3

Introduction

History of the Union

Founded in 1890, the Rensselaer Union remains a central and integral part to student life at RPI. For 125 years, the students of RPI have called the Union a home away from home. Functioning as both a building and the center of student activities, the Union is completely student-run with three branches of student government: the Student Senate, Executive Board and Judicial Board.

When it was founded, the Union used the school's gymnasium for student activities. In 1908, a student clubhouse was built at the end of the '86 Field. This building featured a lounge, dining room, kitchen, billiards, and lockers. Eventually, what is now the Lally Building replaced the clubhouse. This new building contained many of the same amenities, including a lounge, ballroom, and card and game rooms. In 1956, as students outgrew the capacity of the existing building, they tasked Union Director Frank McNeil to investigate the possibility of better accommodations.

Funded by self-imposed student taxation—what is now the Student Activity Fee—the current building was completed in 1967. This building included extensive accommodations for the growing campus population, including meeting rooms, offices, dining facilities, social areas, and lounge spaces. It also included a bookstore, bank, and hair salon. The building has undergone several renovations over the years, but its foundation as a hub for student life has on campus has remained.

The Union has grown to include more than 200 student organizations overseen by a Senate and Executive Board composed entirely of students. The Student Senate enacts policy and the Executive Board manages an approximately four-million-dollar budget with funds from the aforementioned Activity Fee.

History of recent tension

In February 2016, Vice President for Student Life Frank Ross announced that funding for Intercollegiate Athletics budgets would be removed from Union oversight. Conflicts with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) policy were cited as the primary reason for this change. Representatives of RPI's Division of Student Life stated their changes were necessary to satisfy the re-accreditation policies and ultimately continue to participate in NCAA athletics.

A job posting for the new position of “Executive Director of Student Activities” was discovered during the week of March 14. The posting stated that the position would “provide leadership for a broad portfolio of co-curricular programs including the Student Union, Student Government, and Campus Recreation.” It also stated that the position would report to the “Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students,” another new position that was clearly an update to the original role of “Dean of Students”. Student leaders reached out to the RPI administration, particularly Dr. Ross, to schedule meetings in order to gather more information on the position and apparent restructuring.

On March 24, information about the job posting and description for the newly created “Executive Director” position was disseminated to the student body by concerned students. While plans to restructure the Division of Student Life were known, the posting suggested that administrative oversight of the Union would be given to the new “Executive Director,” thereby significantly eroding the powers of the Union Executive Board, a body composed entirely of students.

On March 25, Dr. Ross presented to a joint session of the Student Senate and Executive Board. He discussed his plans for restructuring the Division of Student Life, including a statement that he envisioned the Executive Director position as a way to introduce new opportunities and potentially expand services that the Union cannot offer, rather than a way of removing programs or overruling decisions made by the Union. Additionally, Dr. Ross mentioned his hope that the new position would improve communication between the administration and student body and result in the addition of other positions, such as a Dean of Student Veterans’ Affairs and Dean of Multicultural Affairs. Furthermore, Dr. Ross discussed changes to other areas of the Union, such as the Archer Center and Mueller Center.

On March 29, an information session was held with Dr. Ross and several other campus administrators. Members of the student body attended this forum to voice their concerns regarding the recent changes.

The Senate and Executive Board began drafting a letter to the RPI Board of Trustees, Dr. Jackson, and Dr. Ross. This letter addressed the unilateral creation of the Executive Director position and its purview, in addition to reaffirming support for maintaining the current state of Union’s self-management by student members. It also stated the intent of the Executive Board to nominate an Interim Director of the Union and the Student Senate to hold referenda during student elections to gather data on student opinion.

On March 28, a petition was created on the Senate’s RPI Petitions website. “Preserve the Student Union” surpassed the 250 signature threshold in less than 48 hours. This petition supported the

addition of recent graduates to the Board of Trustees, increased and proper communication between the administration and student body, and the recognition of the Rensselaer Union as a true auxiliary service.

On March 30, students, faculty, staff, and alumni gathered outside of the President's Spring Town Meeting to protest the Executive Director position and continued lack of communication from the Administration. The group also advocated for the addition of recent alumni to the Board of Trustees. In the days following the protest, Dr. Jackson announced that the search for an Executive Director of Student Activities would be suspended pending a Board of Trustees' review of the *Union Constitution*. She also stated that in an effort to improve communication, she would ask trustees to meet with current students to discuss their opinions and ideas regarding the issue at hand.

On April 1, the Faculty Senate held an emergency meeting to gain information from students and the administration. Dr. Ross, Chief Financial Officer Virginia Gregg, and student leaders were present for this meeting. It was decided that a motion would be brought forward at the next scheduled meeting. On April 13, the Faculty Senate unilaterally passed a motion strongly urging the administration and Board of Trustees "...to uphold the *Rensselaer Union Constitution* in its current form; to not move forward with the creating and hiring of an 'Executive Director of Student Activities.'"

On April 2, a small group of students and faculty met with members of the Board of Trustees to discuss the preceding events. This discourse covered many topics, namely concerns about the Executive Director position, Summer Arch, and the "culture of fear" that exists as a result of poor communication between the administration and student body, as well as the administration and faculty. The Board of Trustees decided that no changes to the *Union Constitution* were warranted, and any future changes were to be enacted through the current amendment process.

On April 24, Dr. Jackson announced via a campus-wide email that the Executive Director of Student Activities title would be removed from the Student Life portfolio. Students, alumni, and faculty members rejoiced and assumed the administration had understood and resolved their grievances. However, this was not the case as the Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students position still remains. This person has oversight of the Union's staff members and is listed as the Director of the Union's supervisor in human resources documents. While upset students, faculty, staff, and alumni had vigorously campaigned to protect the student-run nature of the Union by condemning the creation of the Executive Director of Student Activities and its duties, the administration ultimately ignored the crux of the issue. To date, despite the Grand Marshal and President of the Union working tirelessly with Dr. Ross to resolve the issue, the administration has chosen to move forward with the updated Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students and

Director of the Union reporting structure. An Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students has already been appointed.

On November 29, students discovered a posting for the position of Director of the Union. This posting contained language contradictory to the *Rensselaer Union Constitution* and ideals beholden by participating members of the Union's student-run model. After an outcry of the student body and intervention by the Grand Marshal and President of the Union, the posting received several edits.

On December 5, in response to the job posting, the Student Senate unanimously passed a motion affirming the student body's commitment to upholding the *Constitution* and addressing several concerns relating to the ongoing search.

WHEREAS the Rensselaer Union, since its establishment over 126 years ago, has been widely hallmarked for its unique, student-run structure and continues to serve as a source of pride, spirit, and admiration for students, faculty, alumni, administration, and the greater Rensselaer community; and

WHEREAS the Rensselaer Union remains one of the last student-run student unions in the country; and WHEREAS the Rensselaer Union Constitution is empowered by the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Board of Trustees;

and WHEREAS the student body has expressed concerns regarding the changes in organizational structure of the Division of Student Life, as they pertain to the Rensselaer Union, the Director of the Union position, and the potential for the planned changes to impact the Rensselaer Union's student-run structure; and

WHEREAS the student petition "Preserve the Student Union" received over 450 signatures—the highest signature count found on an online student petition to date— and focused on these concerns; and

WHEREAS Article V of the Union Constitution specifies that "the Director of the Union shall be employed by the Union" and that "the Vice President for Student Life shall act as adviser to the Director"; and

WHEREAS three job postings found on the William Spelman Executive Search website asserted duties of—and a reporting structure for—the Director of the Union that contrasts the Union Constitution; and

WHEREAS the Rensselaer Union Student Senate recognizes the value in, and the importance of, maintaining open dialogue with the Rensselaer administration;

THE RENSSELAER UNION 47TH STUDENT SENATE HEREBY RESOLVES:

- 1. TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE to the Division of Student Life in their swift action regarding an unintended posting from November 2016 for the Director of the Union position and to the Vice President for Student Life, Dr. Frank E. Ross, III, for continuing to listen to the ideas, suggestions, and concerns of the student body,*
- 2. TO REAFFIRM the Student Senate's commitment to representing the interests and concerns expressed by the student body and relaying these student opinions to the administration,*
- 3. TO REAFFIRM the importance of the advisory role of the Director of the Union in a student-run Rensselaer Union,*
- 4. TO EMPHASIZE the importance of preserving the responsibilities and reporting structure for the Director as stipulated in the Union Constitution, and*
- 5. TO RECOMMEND to the President of the Union and the Rensselaer Union Executive Board the initiation of an open call to gather students that are interested in participating in the hiring process for a new Director of the Union.*

Areas of improvement

Active voice in Board of Trustees

Conversations between students and administration, students and faculty, and students and the Board of Trustees have identified a core problem of misunderstanding the administration's goals in developing the Institute. There are often instances where the administration has censored student discourse at meetings of the Board's Student Life Committee. Students have recommended a system, similar to those utilized at several market basket schools, where recent graduates serve as cycling junior members on the Board, free of the financial contribution requirements. This system is considered a "best practice" by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The recommended system is comparable to that of the one at Princeton University, where representatives from the junior and senior classes, as well as the

two most recent graduating classes, serve on the Board as Alumni Trustees. Similarly, Cooper Union’s Board contains two Student Trustees.

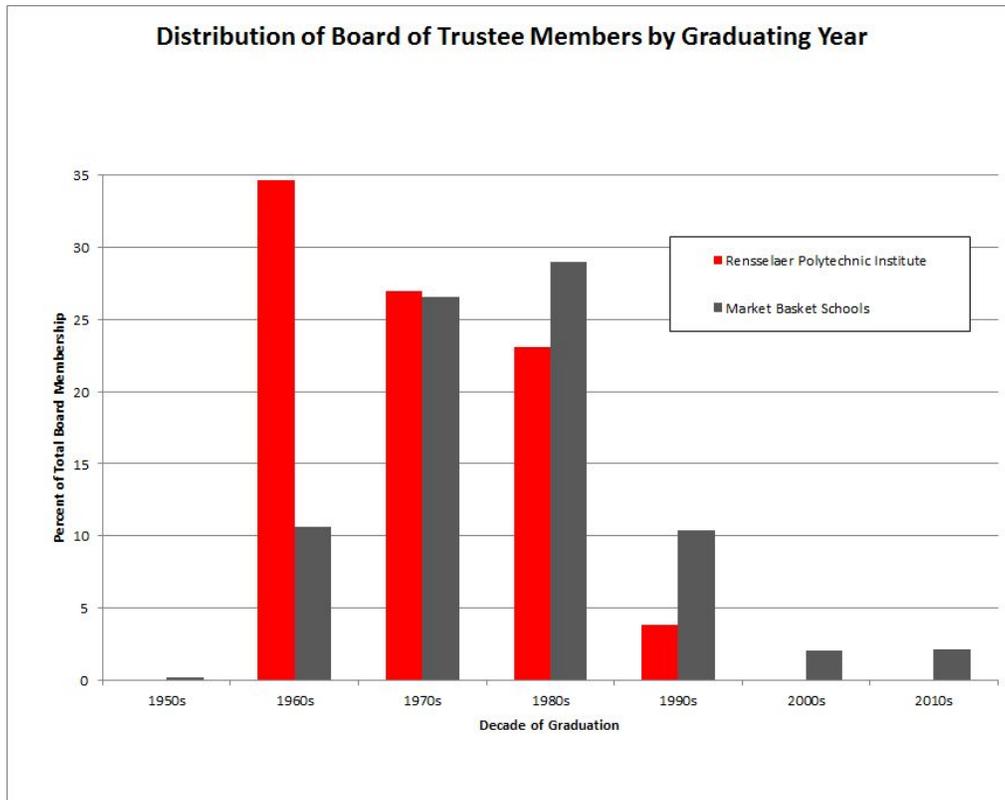


Chart 1: Distribution of governing board members by graduating year at RPI and market basket schools (Boston University Drexel University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Northeastern University, Princeton University, Lehigh University, Rice University, Harvard University, Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Case Western Reserve University, Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and Yale University)

In comparison to RPI’s market basket schools, its Board membership is composed of fewer members from class years after 1980 than the average of all 13 of its peers. The proposed system is meant to provide the Trustees with a current perspective of the campus environment, as well as a perspective on students’ preparedness for post-undergraduate experiences. While voting rights for Junior Trustees is preferred, the key element is their attendance and participation in conversation.

In working with the student body, the Student Senate has developed a proposed election process for Junior Trustees.

Junior Trustees on the Board of Trustees shall be elected by their respective graduating classes. The elections shall occur at a time and place determined by the Student Senate and coincide with the election of Alumni Class Officers. The conclusion of the election is defined at the time at which its results are released. The results of an election may be released no later than the end of the semester in which the election is held. Voting shall be by secret ballot. Only students who are eligible to run for the alumni offices of their class shall be eligible to run for Junior Trustee positions. Each class shall elect one Junior Trustee. The term of the Junior Trustee shall be equal, in years, to the number of Junior Trustee seats on the Board.

Open communication between student leaders and administration

After the events of last semester, the administration and Board of Trustees have made commitments to improve communication with the student body. Notably, Dr. Jackson announced her plans to meet with the Grand Marshal and President of the Union on a semesterly basis. She also announced plans to include additional student leaders at meetings of the Board of Trustees' Student Life Committee. Board of Trustees Chairman Art Gajarsa met with students, while Dr. Ross announced plans to hold regular "office hours" to better communicate with students. Institute Bylaws and minutes from Student Life Committee meetings were made available to the campus community. Finally, Dr. Jackson announced that "the search for the Director of the Union will resume, with more student involvement."

Students, alumni, and members of the faculty have commended the ideas and promises made by the administration and Board of Trustees. Several of these commitments have begun and the effects have already been seen and greatly appreciated by the student body. It is clear that the relationship between all interest groups of the community will continue to grow nearer as these efforts continue. The student body wishes to continue these strides with increased participation in Student Life decisions. The Student Senate believes that student participation will provide useful feedback as well as transformative experiences to those student leaders involved.

Future of the Union

Tension began when changes to the Union were announced and concerns were raised that the Division of Student Life's new structure would violate the *Union Constitution*, notably Article V which states that "the Vice President for Student Life shall act as advisor to the Director and shall inform him or her of Trustee policy." Adding an Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students position between the Vice President for Student Life and the Director have concerned a large portion of the community. As the Union is a fully staffed, mostly self-sustaining entity,

constant contact with an Assistant Vice President does little other than undermine the role of students. More important is less frequent and direct communication with the Vice President for Student Life. The powers of the Assistant Vice President cause the same issues as the addition of an Executive Director of Student Activities. An important role of the Director of the Union is to advocate for students, a role which would prove difficult should the position have a direct supervisor outside the walls of the Union. The Student Senate believes the solution to these issues is the recognition of the Rensselaer Union as an auxiliary service of the Division of Student Life.

Now that the hiring of the Director of the Union will proceed, students believe it is necessary to transparently outline the hiring process and ensure that process fully complies with the *Union Constitution*. As the Director position is a Union employee responsible for the administration of Union activities and funds, it is only fitting that the hiring process be student driven. While it is recognized that the Division of Human Resources will play a part, student involvement in both the early stages of the interview process and selection is key. Finally, as Article VII, Section 2(f) of the *Constitution* mandates that the Executive Board “approve the hiring and continuance of all administrative personnel of the Union,” the hiring may only be finalized after an affirmative vote of the Board. Ideally, members of Student Government and leaders of student organizations will be involved in the process.

Conclusion

The Rensselaer Union provides invaluable experiences, challenges, and opportunities for RPI students that are only learned outside of the classroom. One of the few student-run unions in the nation, the Union is completely funded by the Student Activity Fee, a self-imposed tax, and acts as the center of student life on RPI’s campus. In an effort to advance the ideals of the Institute while preserving the rich tradition and promising future of the Union, students have developed three main areas of improvement--as outlined earlier--with regards to recent events. In summary, students believe the involvement of recent graduates on the Board of Trustees will provide the Board with a unique perspective as well as a stronger line of communication with the RPI community on a whole. Improved pathways of communication between current students and administrators will increase student involvement and input in key decisions while providing valuable insight for all parties. Recognizing the Rensselaer Union as a true auxiliary service to the Institute will reaffirm its place within the RPI campus and community. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, students firmly believe the sanctity of the *Union Constitution* should be protected and upheld, particularly when it comes to the selection of the next Director of the Union.