

A Reply to Dr. Jackson's April 26 Statement on the Union

On April 26, 2016, Dr. Jackson released a candid email committing to an increase in communication channels, and the preservation of the student-run Rensselaer Union. We share in a fundamental belief that shared governance, communication, and collegiality are hallmarks of a successful institution, and encourage all steps to further these ideals.

The many voices raised this past month share a collective vision, a positive dream of a collaborative future for Rensselaer. We applaud the tremendous efforts of our fellow students, our campus and local press, our dedicated faculty, and our passionate alumni for opening a discussion on these critical issues. In light of Dr. Jackson's statement, we further applaud the pledge of our president and members of Rensselaer's Board of Trustees to address these issues openly. The president's commitments—to meet with student leaders regularly, to publish minutes from Student Life Committee meetings, to return student involvement to Union staff searches, and to engage in inclusive campus governance—are a heartening step forward.

We look forward to working with Dr. Jackson and the RPI Administration, and we encourage the growth of all channels of communication. Through an additional email on April 27th discussing topics of the Town Hall, and a third on April 28th congratulating our new Grand Marshal and President of the Union for their recent elections, Dr. Jackson has demonstrated a desire to be collaborative and candid in pursuit of an open, two-way dialog. We support these priorities and we are excited to begin the restoration of shared governance as we work together in addressing the many concerns of the RPI community.

These moves are merely a beginning, a first step on the path toward open communication, collaboration, and trust among all campus constituents. This is a path we must walk together, as students, alumni, faculty, and administration alike. Our Union cannot fulfill its role as a student-run enterprise without honest dialog and respect by all.

In order to build this crucial dialog, to continue down this path, we believe the RPI Administration must actively support the Union system provided by the current, student-enacted *Constitution*. Recognition of the rules and processes established by the student body is important for building trust and confidence among all constituencies. We believe that, rather than reviewing the *Constitution* to ensure it reflects the operations of the Union, the Union itself should be supported in its efforts to fulfill the structure detailed in its student-voted, trustee-approved defining document.

Our path requires more than a respect for policy: we must encourage a practice of inclusion and trust by all parties. Restoration of historical practices—such as seeking Student Senate votes on changes to the *Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities*, and including student leaders in the formation of new programs and ideas—will be defining actions in the months ahead. Students, in turn, will do their part to honor and engage the channels of collaboration now opened by the president. We encourage all students to share their great ideas and thoughtful concerns with elected leaders, who will continue to engage administration professionally and respectfully. This positive dialog and critical relationship will allow us to tackle the challenges of the future with mutual pride, understanding, and respect.

The search for a new Director of the Union, emphasized by Dr. Jackson in her April 26th statement, will be a pivotal next step towards building such a relationship, necessitating a student-driven process in collaboration with the Institute. We expect and understand the need for staff in Student Life and Human Resources to play their role in commencing such a search. But we believe it necessary, per rules and precedent, that the ultimate selection be student determined, and the decision of the search committee be final only upon ratification by the student Executive Board.

Those who spoke out over the past few weeks—students, alumni, faculty, and staff—voiced their concerns out of a hope and dream for a collaborative university. Many challenges lie ahead, and there is much work to be done, but we are encouraged by Dr. Jackson's forthright willingness to work with student leaders. Together, we will ensure the growth of our vibrant Student Union as a cornerstone of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.