

RPI Continues Its Crackdown On Student Dissent

Students issued warnings about violating nonexistent policies

TROY, N.Y. - Dec. 6, 2017 - [PRLog](#) -- On the heels of receiving national attention for retaliating against students who expressed a dissenting opinion, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) has escalated its campaign of stifling student speech by accusing, trying, and convicting students of violating nonexistent policies.

On December 5, 2017, RPI's Director of Judicial Affairs Michael Arno targeted students who were believed to have distributed informational fliers in support of a student-run Union or who participated in an October 13, 2017 peaceful demonstration on campus with official letters of warning. The letters sternly dictated that the students "have a responsibility to understand and comply with all Institute policies." These students were not previously made aware they were in violation of any rules, nor were they given the opportunity to defend themselves. Alarming, several of the cited policies do not even appear to exist.

Bryan Johns, a junior majoring in Computer Science and Business, was one such student who received a letter (<http://savetheunion.xyz/assets/ArnoLetter.pdf>) from Arno informing him he was "recently identified as being present at an incident that occurred." Arno described that Johns was reported as "being among a group of students that gained access" to a dorm on campus and "were distributing fliers without the authorization from the Office of Student Living and Learning." This incident happens to be the same as that reported several weeks (<https://www.thefire.org/rensselaer-polytechnic-institute-...>) ago in which graduate student Michael Gardner was infamously charged with "operating a business" (<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/454250/campus-free-speech-mandatory-government-should-enforce-it>) after the administration alleged to have identified him distributing fliers in the aforementioned dorm. Gardner later received a letter (<http://savetheunion.xyz/assets/SmithLetter.pdf>) on November 29 declaring that "no further judicial process necessary" in regards to the initial accusations and introducing new violations, similarly reminding him to comply with the same nonexistent policies listed in Johns' December 5 letter. Notably, the RPI administration eschewed charging Johns with running a business, and instead opted to charge him with disseminating information without RPI administration approval.

After extensive review of the *Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities* (<https://www.rpi.edu/dept/doso/resources/judicial/docs/2014-2016StudentHandbookrevOctober2015.pdf>) (*Student Handbook*), rules provided by Student Living and Learning, and elsewhere within Institute rules and regulations, students were unable to identify the policies that were cited in the November 29 and December 5 letters. This is unsurprising as Gardner's request for details regarding the location of these specific rules went unanswered. Additionally, no evidence or supporting documentation were provided to Johns that linked him to being present in the specified dorm on that date, or with the action of distributing fliers. According to processes outlined in the *Student Handbook*, students should be notified of any alleged violations of Institute policy, given the opportunity to consult with a student judicial advisor, and provided evidence as proof of the violation. The RPI administration sidestepped this process entirely and found Johns guilty, denying him his right to present a defense and clear his name.

These sanctions are the latest step in a crusade on campus against speech critical of the administration, particularly its hostile takeover of the formerly student-run Union, the egregious handling of student rights on campus, and the mismanagement of Institute finances. These Orwellian attempts, which include requiring student protesters to attend mandatory sessions deemed "educational conversations," seem designed to intimidate students from expressing their opposition to RPI President Shirley Ann Jackson's administration. These actions have reverberated across the RPI campus and beyond, resulting in widespread

media coverage and culminating with the Student Senate taking action (<https://savetheunion.xyz/assets/StudentSenateResolution.pdf>) this week against the Dean of Students Office for violating the *Student Handbook*.

Alex Norman, a senior majoring in Physics and Math, said, "I'd say that these latest letters sent to students are shocking, but to be quite frank, the only thing shocking me is how quickly the administration of this school is moving towards self-parody."

Gardner added, "I find the fact that RPI administrators are devaluing the judicial process with every action to be detestable. They are bypassing the very safeguards meant to prevent this trampling of student rights."

In addition, at least one other student has confirmed receipt of a similar message from Arno. Given the formality of the communication, recipients are in the process of determining if these are official letters of warning, which would become a part of a student's permanent academic record. Should this be the case, the administration's failure to follow any process outlined in the *Student Handbook* would be unconscionable.

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