

Subject **Rensselaer Union Lab Safety Class**
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SAVE THE UNION

October 5, 2017

To: The RPI Community
From: Save the Union
Re: Rensselaer Union Lab Safety Class

On September 28, 2017, a request for a peaceful demonstration was made to Dean of Students Travis Apgar in keeping with Article V, Section B1 of the Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities which provides that “students and student groups shall be free to examine and discuss all questions of interest to them and to express opinions publicly and privately. They shall be free to support causes by orderly means, including peaceful assembly, which do not disrupt the normal operation of the Institute.”

As you may have heard, Dean of Students Travis Apgar has baselessly denied the student body its right to two essential academic freedoms: freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Apgar’s response contains two contentions concerning the denial; one as to a conflicting time/place with the launch of the capital campaign and the other as to exceeding the Institute’s capacity for providing safety and security. The first, aside from not being grounds for denial in the Handbook, is fallacious on its face. The inside of two sprawling facilities built into the campus hillside can hardly be construed as being in a conflicting location with a large adjacent field which comprises a large part of the campus greenspace. Certainly, previous peaceful demonstrations have occurred without disruption to events in nearby buildings. In fact, a modest demonstration in 2009 was held in the CII plaza, abutting countless classrooms, offices, and other in-use facilities. Additionally, a massive, peaceful demonstration in 2016 was peacefully held in the proposed location at the same time as the President’s Spring Town Meeting that year.

The Handbook reproduces the so-called “Henderson Rules” enshrined in New York State Education Law Sections 6430-6435, providing Rules for the Maintenance of Public Order. Those rules, among other things, provide that “no unauthorized person or persons shall take any sign or other demonstration impediments into the building where the speech is to take place.” But even in the context of those restrictions, Apgar’s response makes little sense. If no reasonably-defined form of demonstration can happen within an event (as the law provides) and none can happen reasonably proximate to it (as Apgar contends), no meaningful demonstration at any event is possible. This flies in the face of any reasonable interpretation of the Handbook’s guarantees of peaceful demonstration.

The second criteria, regarding the capacity for providing safety and security, lends little to no legitimacy to Apgar’s decision. For the past several years, RPI has contracted with Allied Universal for additional security in dorms and on weekends. They have also provided additional personnel during the recent visits of CIA Director John Brennan and Chief Justice John Roberts. It seems unlikely that this large security firm is unable to provide a few additional officers for a peaceful demonstration. Additionally, as early as the morning following the submission, Public Safety Associate Director David Schindler and Sergeant Peter Patti were seen on-location at the proposed location discussing where they would

place officers and how they would manage crowd control. One must ask why these officers were even present if Apgar's stated claims have any veracity whatsoever. RPI students have demonstrated on numerous occasions that they are more than capable of ensuring the health and safety of the Institute community. In the spirit of comity while planning this demonstration, organizers had even been in communication with RPI Ambulance and secured their presence for the duration of the event.

In Article VI, Section A, the Handbook states that "students shall enjoy the same freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, and right of petition that other citizens enjoy." This provision, while not immediately applicable, is worth restating because it makes clear the values behind the Handbook provisions under discussion. They are designed to facilitate the freedoms of students as citizens while they are on campus. They do not permit the arbitrary suspension of students' rights when the administration deems the time unripe for such freedom.

One can only conjecture that the reason for denying the application is protesters would be seen by attendees of the launch of the capital campaign and receive a message contrary to what they would hear inside. If such dissent cannot be tolerated on campus, then the words of the Handbook, of state law, and of the Board of Trustees have been nothing more than hollow words to the championing of student rights and freedom of student expression.

In an April 2016 letter to the RPI community, Dr. Jackson stated on behalf of the administration and Board of Trustees, "Both the Board of Trustees and the Administration encourage continued open communication among campus constituents. We want to hear from all the members of our community, to ensure that any decisions we make reflect their interests, and the greater good of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute." In spite of these now hollow words and without any student input or involvement in the matter, Chairman of the Board of Trustees Arthur Golden and the Board's Executive Committee opted forgo open communication and obliterate any future for student-run governance of the Union with their recent resolution in favor of replacing it with a paternalistic regime run from the President's office. The notions that our Union is nothing more than a rudimentary "lab course" and that students can't be trusted not to act in bigoted, illegal, and financially irresponsible ways are as odious as they are condescending. The Board, with its history of ugly personnel issues, financial irresponsibility, administrative opacity, and emotion-driven factless decision making, has much to learn from the Union's smooth, competent, and transparent functioning.

Despite the Trustees and administration's repeated failure to adhere to ethical standards or their own stated policies, we must continue our commitment to integrity and our adherence to the rules. That said, to our knowledge no Institute policy prohibits academic classes from meeting outdoors. Therefore, in the spirit of Chairman Golden's recent message to the campus community, Save the Union will be holding a lab safety class starting outside of EMPAC. Because this is a lab, all attendees are encouraged to wear safety goggles in addition to black clothing to mourn the end of our once student-run Rensselaer Union.

**Save the Union
Invites you to attend the
Rensselaer Union Lab Safety Class**

Friday, October 13, 2017, at 4:00 pm

Field outside of EMPAC

Visit www.savetheunion.xyz for more information.