

Subject **An update on our Union**
From Justin Etzine <etzinj@rpi.edu>
Sender <union-membership-request@union.lists.rpi.edu>
To Members of the Union <union-membership@union.lists.rpi.edu>
Reply-To Justin Etzine <gm@rpi.edu>
Followup-To Justin Etzine <gm@rpi.edu>
Date 2017-10-06 12:35



Dear classmates,

On Monday, the Student Senate passed a resolution to uphold the integrity of the *Union Constitution*, in its current form, as fully compliant with both *the Bylaws of the Institute* and the resolution passed last week by the Board of Trustees' Executive Committee. Though I preside over the Senate, I cannot speak for the body as a whole; however, it appeared that the senators who voted in support aimed to comply with the Board's directive for appropriate action while maintaining that the Constitution conforms with both *the Bylaws* and last week's resolution.

I have outlined below how I believe the process for hiring a Director of the Union should proceed. The student interview committee may recommend a number of, one, or no candidates to the Rensselaer Union Executive Board for an approval vote. This approval by the Executive Board is only one step in an overall, collaborative effort—prerequisites are commonplace for hirings overall, not just within the Rensselaer Union. This approval process has previously served and must continue serving as a ratification of a candidate before they proceed to the Institute President for final appointment. Because this is an approval process, the failure of a candidate to pass any of the approval steps—including the vote of the Executive Board—should result in that candidate not proceeding to the following steps of the hiring process.

As I have shared with administrators since the Trustees' resolution was released, I believe that a significant level of student governance has been lost from our Union. Though our day-to-day operations are continuing as expected, especially from an external perspective, I fear that this loss has led to the end of our Union's status as one of the last-remaining student-run unions in the nation. This is the most common sentiment I have encountered from students with whom I have interacted—undergraduates, masters, and doctoral students alike.

The reasoning for this feeling of loss extends past recent changes to the hiring process. As outlined in declaration 2, the Board has granted the Institute President with the ability to change the reporting line for the director. The *Union Constitution* does not specify a reporting structure for the position, but the importance of both the Student Senate, the chief policymaking body of the Union, and the Executive Board, the chief financial and operational body of the Union, have historically set the expectation for how the Director of the Union oversees student-made decisions. The director had been advised by the Vice President for Student Life, per the *Union Constitution*, on matters of Trustee policy. I believe the student-run distinction of our Union simplifies to one guarantee: if the student body wants to pursue something that is legal, ethical, safe, and fiscally responsible, they are able to pursue it without limitation.

During our conversations with the Division of Human Resources in early September, student interviewers identified a number of concerns with the then-finalized versions of internal documents regarding the director position and the scope of its duties. The creation of these documents did not include any direct student input. The documents did not specify the role of the Student Senate or the Executive Board in Union decision-making, and they did not specify the importance of the *Union Constitution* in relation to the position. Though they provided student leaders the chance to suggest some changes to these documents after concerns were raised by the committee, the sentiment found previously exemplifies the concerns that students have expressed regarding the future of the position and its relationship to the Union.

In the spring of 2016, students and alumni strongly objected to the creation of a position titled "Executive Director of Student Activities" and its proposed responsibilities, which included oversight of the Union, student government, Greek life, and other areas of campus recreation. The administration ultimately abandoned the position after the 2016 peaceful demonstration. However, they shifted the controversial responsibilities to the revised Assistant Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students position, despite the strong concerns expressed by the student body, faculty, and alumni. Though a student vote is important, the Director of the Union must receive its direction and strategic guidance from the student body through their appointed representatives on the Executive Board. Of course, this direction must—again—be legal, ethical, safe, and fiscally responsible, as it has been. This divergence from 127 years of precedence is where the student-run designation of our Union is lost. The changes to the relationship between the Director and the Executive Board is where a level of student governance has vanished.

On a separate note, I continue to be impressed by the number of students sharing their voice on this topic. I ask that you all continue to maintain respect in your discourse so that we can continue to show the community and the public that we can stand by our beliefs rationally and respectfully.

Student government will be hosting a town hall meeting tomorrow, Saturday, at 12 pm in the McNeil Room to provide information about the recent developments in the Union and to answer any questions you may have. Additionally, if you have any questions or comments, you can reach me at gm@rpi.edu.

Finally, as the chief representative of the students, my top priority is ensuring that your opinions and interests are vocalized and relayed wherever possible. Understand that I am committed to advocating for you—the student body—as accurately, comprehensively, and respectfully as possible. I pledge to always represent the student body regardless of what I encounter—recently escalating to include

thinly-veiled threats of retaliation and expulsion from administrators from several departments. In the end, I am well aware of the responsibility I have pledged to uphold and of the power accompanying this hat, and I will continue to stand firm on your behalf.

Sincerely,

Justin Etzine
152nd Grand Marshal