

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Student Protesters Receive Notifications of Judicial Action

Student protesters formally accused of RPI policy violations by Dean of Students.

TROY, N.Y. - November 8, 2017 - [PRLog](#) — Nearly a month after an on-campus protest drew close to one-thousand students, faculty, staff, and alumni during Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Reunion & Homecoming weekend outside of an event that marked the launch of RPI's new capital campaign, students involved in the peaceful demonstration have been [formally accused](#) of *Student Handbook* violations and have received notifications of judicial action on behalf of the Institute. Other students have reportedly received [informal inquiries](#).

The majority of these notifications began to arrive in students' inboxes on Wednesday, with the informal inquires ominously stating, "As you are aware, a demonstration occurred on our campus last month. You were identified at this demonstration." Administrators sending the emails, varying from Assistant Dean of Student Living and Learning Kris Nolan-Parker to Associate Dean of Residential Commons Michael Sitterley, also mentioned that they "would like to meet with you to discuss your experience at this demonstration" but to "please know that you are not in any trouble, but it is important that we meet." Notably, the administration employed similar tactics a few short weeks ago with students who were allegedly distributing [Save the Union information](#) to peers. Insisting that they were in no trouble, the administration interrogated them without the proper safeguards guaranteed by the *Student Handbook*—such as informing the students of their rights and the charges levied against them. When eventually forced to proceed in accordance with the *Handbook* and cite actual policy violations, they chose to cite a policy prohibiting [operating businesses on campus](#). Ultimately, the administration was unable to prove their ridiculous claims and were therefore unsuccessful in squashing that particular instance of free speech.

The more serious accusations bizarrely appear to result from Dean of Students Travis Apgar, reporting the incident to his own office, as described in one of Sitterley's emails: "I am writing to inform you that Dean of Students [sic] reported your involvement in an incident that occurred on October 13, 2017 to the Dean of Students Office." The correspondence went on to outline the charges levied against these students as trespassing, violation of a published Rensselaer/student government policy or regulation, and failure to comply. As October 13, 2017 was both the date of the protest and capital campaign launch, the latter of which was spearheaded by RPI president Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, the motives behind the disciplinary action must seriously be analyzed.

Jackson's style of corporate management and 'top-down' leadership are [frequently lamented by campus faculty and staff](#), and there has been a pervasive '[culture of fear](#)' on campus ever since she took the helm as president in 1999. Moreover, Jackson not only created, but embraces the

culture of fear as a [method of silencing any and all in opposition to her](#). This reputation is well-known both on-campus and off-campus as the Jackson Administration has been criticized many times and by multiple, reputable sources to this end. For instance, the publication *Inside Higher Ed* investigated the [shocking case of the Faculty Senate suspension](#) in 2007 and then covered the [suspension of a critical faculty member's email privileges](#) in 2008. The American Association of University Professors' *Journal of Academic Freedom* published an [extensive and scathing report on the demise of shared governance at RPI](#) and went as far as to sanction the university for its “violations of shared-governance principles,” [as reported by the Chronicle of Higher Education](#). A former employee has even gone as far as to call herself a “post-traumatic stress survivor,” no doubt due in large part to the toxic environment cultivated by the Jackson Administration.

What's especially disingenuous about recent administrative actions is [Apgar stated prior to the protest](#) that “participants must be peaceful, abide by Institute policy and law, and respect instructions of event personnel”—and in doing so “there would be no issues.” In commenting as such at the time, Apgar not only acknowledged the impending protest, but led student protesters to believe that if they were peaceful and followed instructions of event personnel, they would not be sanctioned. The protesters complied with all facets of that statement. The fence was opened up, and the protesters simply walked through. There were no instructions from any event personnel at that time and during the later occasions that instructions were given by event personnel, such as when former Vice President for Student Life Eddie Knowles spoke to protesters saying, “Come a little closer, you can join us, it's okay,” as he encouraged protesters to move nearer to the walkway and when the Troy Police Department communicated instructions and input to protesters—like reminding people to stay off of the sidewalks and keep pathways clear—protesters fully complied and expressed no malevolence, even garnering praise from countless police officers, RPI Public Safety officers, and other Institute officials following the conclusion of the peaceful demonstration. Save the Union did not receive a single complaint about the protest, only compliments, which included praise about the conduct and behavior of the protesters.

This latest move by the Jackson Administration is just another in a series of maneuvers aimed at trampling students' rights and censoring the student voice by wielding fear as an effective weapon. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an organization dedicated to defending civil liberties on college campuses, has [repeatedly condemned](#) RPI's deplorable treatment of free speech. [FIRE released another letter to the RPI administration today](#) castigating the university's failure to adhere to and abuse of their own policies “to suppress speech critical of the Institute,” and boldly stating, in part, “Rensselaer's policies are inconsistent with a commitment to freedom of expression, granting administrators almost limitless discretion to bar speech critical of the Institute.” The notices of judicial action and informal inquiries students are

receiving for peacefully expressing a dissenting opinion are proof enough that the culture of fear continues to thrive at RPI, and FIRE is spot-on about student rights going up in smoke.

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For more information about the Union and student governance issues, please visit <http://www.savetheunion.xyz>.