

Dear Rensselaer Community members,

Over the past three months and beyond, there have been several developments within the Rensselaer Union and the Student Life portfolio that have greatly changed the landscape of student affairs. Student Life reaches broad aspects of the student experience here at Rensselaer and affects all members of the community. These changes will affect you in your remaining time here. As a shareholder in our alma mater, you have a right to be informed about the events that have transpired. The key point is that there has been a restructuring of the Student Life Portfolio. This document is intended to detail the events that have happened this semester, including a full transcript of the emergency meeting held between Student Government and representatives from the Student Life Department regarding the restructure.

This is an abridged version of events; full details follow.

- In late January, the Grand Marshal, President of the Union, and Union staff are informed that Director of the Union Joe Cassidy is no longer an employee of Rensselaer.
- In February, Student Life relieves the Rensselaer Union of the responsibility of funding its portion of RPI's Athletics budget.
- Later that week, Student Life requests that the Union Annual Report (UAR) be adjusted to reflect this change.
- During Spring Break, a member of the executive board uncovers a job listing posted by Student Life searching for an "[Executive Director of Student Activities](#)" with the following job description:
 - “The Executive Director of Student Activities is a new position resulting from a reorganization of the Division of Student Life, and will provide leadership for a broad portfolio of co-curricular programs including the Student Union, Student Government, and Campus Recreation. Reporting to the Assistant Vice President/Dean of Students, the Executive Director ensures high quality, out-of-class opportunities that advance CLASS.”
- Student leaders reached out to Student Life administrators to schedule meetings and initiate conversations in an effort to understand the change. After several attempts, a meeting was set for Friday March 25th, 2016.
 - The restructure was summarized as reorganizing the existing subsets of the Student Life Portfolio into five major clusters in an effort to support CLASS, and the hiring of senior administrators to organize and run these clusters.

I implore you to take the time and read through this document. You have a right to be informed, and you have a right to understand the changes that will be affecting you directly. If you have any questions, want to get involved, or just want to talk about these or any other issues, feel free to reach out to me at any time at pu@rpi.edu.

Best,
Nick Dvorak
126th President of the Union

A Summary of the Last Few Months

In late January, roughly a week before the Executive Board's second round of budgeting sessions were to occur, an urgent meeting was called between the Vice President for Student Life, Dr. Frank E. Ross III; the Grand Marshal, Marcus Flowers; and the President of the Union, Nick Dvorak. In this meeting, they were notified that Director of the Union, Joe Cassidy, was no longer an employee of Rensselaer. It was explained that it was a Human Resources issue and that details could not be shared. Concerns were raised by the GM and PU regarding the timing and the fact that several student leaders had interacted with him as early as the evening before, but no further information was provided. It was explained that Director of Student Activities Cameron McLean and Director of the Mueller Center Steve Allard would act as a leadership team while a new director was sought. The Union staff were confident in their abilities, as they had operated without a director in the past and had been prepared by former Director Rick Hartt before his retirement. Assistant Vice President for Student Life Lisa Trahan was placed as a liaison between the Union and Dr. Ross and was authorized to sign Institute paperwork on behalf of the Union in the absence of a Director.

Within three weeks, another urgent meeting was called by Dr. Ross with the discussion focusing on the budgeting items covered in December: Intercollegiate Athletics, Union Administrative, Mueller Center, Archer Center, and other Budgets. Those in attendance were Dr. Ross, Athletic Director Dr. Lee McElroy, Steve Allard, Union Business Administrator Martha McElligott, E-Board Representatives Nick Thompson and Nick Schlatz, Senate/E-Board Liaison Jen Church, and Nick Dvorak. In the meeting, it was conveyed that the Intercollegiate Athletics budgets needed to be removed from Union oversight and the Union Annual Report (UAR).

Dr. McElroy and Dr. Ross cited conflicts with NCAA policy as well as best practices from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The students present asked several questions in order to gain more information regarding the change and why student government was not approached previously. The student representatives wanted to know why student government was not included in these changes or the discussion of them, what it meant for the Union, the Activity Fee, and most importantly, how it would impact members of the Rensselaer Union. While Dr. Ross and Dr. McElroy emphasized the need to follow NCAA and Middle States reaccreditation policies, they provided no specific documentation at the time of the meeting. They offered to answer and provide relevant information within 24 hours of this meeting.

The following day, Dvorak, Thompson, Schlatz, and Church met to discuss briefing the Executive Board and further steps. There was no new information from Dr. Ross or Dr. McElroy at that time. Dvorak, Thompson, Schlatz and Church had found NCAA policies that supported the administrative decisions, but nothing further from Middle States. At the E-board meeting the following evening, Dr. McElroy and Dr. Ross presented the same information to the E-board. This meeting was closed and no new information was offered, even though it was several days after the initial meeting to discuss ICA budgeting.

The following day, some language was proposed by Student Life to explain ICA budgeting in the UAR. Because of the brevity of their statement, further clarification was requested and Dr. Ross obliged. The changes to ICA budgeting were then reflected in the UAR as discussed in previous

meetings. The same week, an ad-hoc committee was created by the Executive Board to address student concerns. This group, chaired by Charles “Chip” Kirchner, met briefly the following week and has continued to meet and discuss the depth of the changes to ICA budgeting at Rensselaer. Several questions regarding these changes were answered and the committee is awaiting answers to other questions before formalizing a report.

Meeting Recap | Ross – Trahan – Executive Board – 46th Student Senate | March 25th, 2016

This meeting was arranged by the President of the Union (PU) and Grand Marshall (GM) after a meeting between the Vice President for Student Life and Assistant Vice President in the morning of the same day. The following is written based on the minutes taken by the Executive Board Secretary. All discussion is paraphrased from collective notes, as the meeting was not able to be recorded at the request of Dr. Ross.

The meeting opened in a presentation format by Dr. Ross. It was requested that the meeting not be recorded, as a formal presentation had not been prepared. Dr. Ross began by stating that there were apparent misunderstandings and rumors surrounding the Student Life restructuring that he hoped to dispel. He stated that he is planning to host a forum for students to come and ask questions on Tuesday March 29th from 1:30pm-3:00pm. No location was given.

The dialogue began with the explanation that the *Rensselaer Plan 2024* is the plan of the Institute, and that it is the guiding force for all Institute decisions and initiatives. It was emphasized that all work done is supporting the goals of the plan, which was developed across the Institute with input from staff, students, and alumni, and approved by the Board of Trustees. Dr. Ross encouraged those present to read or reread the plan. He talked about the improvements to research facilities and research faculty during the original Rensselaer Plan, and the need to take things to the next level for the next phase. The focus was then turned to the section of the *Rensselaer Plan 2024* focusing on Clustered Learning, Advocacy, and Support for Students (CLASS).

It was explained that the restructuring was aimed at promoting the goals of CLASS and creating a transformative student experience. Dr. Ross then explained what CLASS means to Student Life, and its focuses. He touched on the clustering by location and by class year, and the focus placed on groups like graduate and off campus students. The question was then raised by Dr. Ross to those in attendance as to what currently makes up Student Life. Offices and departments were listed including the Dean of Students, Registrar, Athletics, Residence Life, Rensselaer Union, Class Deans, and Greek Commons among several others. He went on to explain that he desired to change the structure from many offices into five portfolios within Student Life, each with its own Assistant Vice President (AVP) guiding it. This will result in three new AVPs being hired in addition to positions such as the Executive Director of Student Activities. He stated part of the goal was to bring intentionality to their structuring. The five clusters were then explained in more depth:

1. *Student Transitions*: This cluster relates to how students are both brought into and transitioned out of RPI. It focuses on programs such as pipeline initiatives (programs over the summer with middle and high school students with a focus in STEM topics as a way of

pre-matriculation) and expanding the reach of the Institute. It includes support of transfer students, initiatives such as Summer Arch, and offices such as the Registrar.

2. *Student Success*: This cluster focuses on an expansion of the class dean concept and additional help to lift students to success. It looks to expand the staffing of the Archer Center and the opportunities it provides for students through classes such as Professional Development 1, 2 & 3. The cluster includes groups such as FYE and the Archer Center.
3. *Campus Experience*: This cluster is far reaching including the Rensselaer Union, which includes the Mueller Center and Student Government, Greek Life Commons, Residential Commons, and Off-Campus Students. It was noted by Dr. Ross that the Director listing has not been posted yet and he is seeking input for qualities sought in a Director of the Union.
4. *Athletics*: Dr. Ross noted that this is likely self-explanatory.
5. *Student Support and Resource Centers*: This cluster includes offices such as Religious Affairs, the Chaplains Office, the Health Center, the Wellness Center, and Athletic Trainers. Dr. Ross noted he is looking to create new positions such as the Director of Disability Services, Director of Multicultural Affairs, and Director of Veterans Affairs. He hopes that these new, dedicated staff positions can help student groups be supported.

After explaining each new cluster, the conversation was directed to the cluster of “Campus Experience”, the position of “Executive Director of Student Activities”, and the effects of the restructuring on the Rensselaer Union. Dr. Ross noted that if the responsibilities of the Director of the Union need to change due to the creation of this new position they should be adjusted right away, and the Performance Management Tools (PMT) of the position should be retooled. It was emphasized that the job descriptions for Student Life staff must include their relation to CLASS, and that they will emphasize diversity and inclusion when searching for new staff. He noted that he believes this is the best thing for students, even if students may not realize it at the time, and that he would never take action unless he believed it was in the best interest of students.

The President of the Union then requested a brief description be provided, to those attending, of the role of the Executive Director of Student Activities. Dr. Ross noted that it is important to have support for students from staff, and there are new programs coming from Student Life. He emphasized that no services provided by the Union would be removed, but instead existing programs would be expanded upon. He said that there are many initiatives that don’t fit within the Union, and he is seeking a senior member of his staff that can help him look beyond. He stated that he was disheartened to hear students felt shut out from the administration, and that students felt they did not have an administrator they could speak to openly. He hopes this new position is someone student leaders can work with more closely.

Emphasis was then put on that fact that the Director of the Union position was a large undertaking. He emphasized that he believed it was too much responsibility for one person, and that on most campuses there is a staff member dedicated to dealing with Student Government. He spoke on the fact that when the former Union Communications Specialist vacated her position in December,

her responsibilities were distributed among remaining staff. He wondered if the solution was a temporary or more permanent solution.

Dr. Ross' final emphasis was that the operations within the Union would not change, and that he believes this restructure will ultimately support students. At this point in, the meeting was opened up to discussion between those in attendance and Dr. Ross on the information they had received.

Discussion

The following is the Question and Answer portion of the discussion. Again, these are written as paraphrases as exact wording was not possible to record:

1. Paul: Who reports to who in this structure? How does the position listed relate to the Union and the Constitution? We are not comfortable with such a vague description for the position. This position would not be under our purview and seems as though it would make the Student Union a part of Student Life rather than an auxiliary service that would work in conjunction with Student life. Where do Greek life and the Union exactly lie under this structure?
 - a. Dr. Ross: We will be adding support to different clusters of Student Life. Each Commons will have a Dean position to oversee it.
2. Josh: The power of making decisions in the Union should remain in the Union. The Senate is in charge of making policies, while the E-Board is in charge of the finances. Our Constitution and charter is bestowed by the Board of Trustees. The Director of the Union position is defined within the Constitution, and other than certain legal and risk management decisions, no one outside the Union can overrule a Union decision. Since the Executive Director is not defined by the Union Constitution, do they have the power to overrule the decisions of the Union?
 - a. Dr. Ross: No, that will not happen.
3. Jen: There's been a general lack of communication from the Student Life office to the student body. There was a lot of difficulty communicating information pertaining to the UAR and Athletics, among other challenges. Additionally, there was a promise of student input into the decision making processes of the Student Life office, but there has been none. Trying to communicate has been terrible. Grad students specifically have faced issues where they asked for support from Student Life and they received some support, but were taxed for it through a CLASS fee. There needs to be an increase in the level of communication before changes are made that significantly affect the life of students. Lastly, meetings, such as this one, need to happen preemptively rather than reactionary.
4. Nick T: You said you were disheartened that we felt shut out, but you haven't responded to the vast majority of the emails sent to you. The Executive Director of Student Activities description includes oversight of Student Government and the Union, but has no mention that it is student run. In addition, there is no mention of the Union in *The Rensselaer Plan 2024*. The Director of the Union is an established position with an established role, which is overseen by the Executive Board and defined in the Union Constitution, approved by the

Board of Trustees. Why restructure positions directly affecting us without talking to us or anyone in the [Union] admin office? Or seeking input?

- a. Dr. Ross: It is important that the students help with forthcoming developments. We will be adding new positions such as the Dean of Student Veterans Affairs and the Dean of Multicultural Affairs. There is a need for help for those groups and it doesn't exist right now. Part of the reason you hire professional student life staff is to make some overarching decisions like this. I feel in my heart that this is the best choice moving forward and from my experience and professional background this is the best course of action given our goals to support CLASS.
5. Justin: I'm ok with the idea of helping Union Administration, but why would such a position fall under the umbrella of Student Life and not within the Union organization? Making a higher position is counterintuitive to the goals that have been set.
 - a. Dr. Ross: If you all wanted to make positions in the Union, that is within your purview. There are things that happen in Student Life that aren't directly involved in the portfolio of Student Life. With the Union Communications position that Holly Nelson recently vacated, the responsibilities were shifted onto other staff. Is that a permanent or temporary fix? Is there another use for that funding? The new Executive Director position would be someone who works with the Union but also in other levels of Student Life.
 6. Shannon: Thank you [Dr. Ross] for coming to the meeting. UPAC is the programming arm for the Union as the Union is an arm for the Institute that looks over the campus experience. However, it [the Union] is an independent organization. You should bring a recommendation for looking into more positions in the Union if you feel they are lacking. The main issue is that students feel that this [Executive Director] position would encroach on our authority as we are a partner organization which is rare and special. I have actually worked with former Director of the Union Joe Cassidy in looking into a veterans lounge and an LGBTQ lounge. The lounges have been researched, I've looked at facilities, and I've looked at universities with similar lounges. I wish that before the new Executive Director position had been created that you [Dr. Ross] would have had that conversation with us and have it be a student-led endeavour.
 7. Chip: Dr. Ross, you were talking about how the Director of the Union position was too broad and alluded that the new Executive Director might help with load on the Director's shoulders. Doesn't this new position have even more responsibility? The idea that bringing someone in from outside the Union to work on things within the Union appears to be overstepping the role of Director of the Union. The Union is a great tool for students to work with the Institute. Is the Executive Director position working in positions that the Director of the Union had previously worked in?
 - a. Dr. Ross: There are challenges administratively having a director report to a director within the Union such as the Director of the Mueller Center reporting to the Director of the Union. There shouldn't be a director reporting to another director. There should be a team including the Director of Union and the Mueller Center where they work together. Dr. Ross likened this to a company having multiple CEOs reporting to each other.

- b. Nick D: As far as titles go, this is not a large issue as the roles are known and well defined. They are a team that work with students for students. From what we've seen over the past few months, it has become blatantly obvious that there has been a great level of cooperation between staff and students in the Union. Titles can change easily to accommodate administrative or operational needs. There are three main clusters to Union staff under the Director: Student Activities, the Mueller Center, and Union Operations. Each works in tandem to support the student body and Rensselaer community.
 - c. Dr. Ross: Staff has told me that maybe they don't need a Director of the Union, but I don't agree with that.
 - d. Nick D: I haven't heard that, but we absolutely want to begin the search for a Director of the Union.

- 8. Michael Han: The Director of the Union is in charge of the organization. Is the Executive director in charge of Union?
 - a. Dr. Ross: The PU is in charge of the Union organization. The Executive Director role would be under campus experience and the Assistant Vice Presidents is over campus experience.

- 9. Greg: I find your language very disturbing. It seems that you are under the impression that students cause problems. That we misunderstand and misinterpret things. That we are children that you do not want to work with. The first time I spoke to you was during the Executive Board bonding (the first weekend before the Fall Semester). Since then it seems like you have only spoken to us when you messed up. We send you questions and get no response. You never shared the job listing. You have canceled and delayed meetings with student government leaders. We are willing and able to communicate. I feel offended. The administration is not listening to the students.

- 10. Conrad: The effort and passion in the elected body can sometimes affect the candor of it. The Executive Board has passed a motion stating that Union funding will not be used to fund any position that the Executive Board has not approved, in accordance with the Union Constitution. We have concerns. The question I have is, how can we remedy this? How can we get to a common point where we get direct communication from the Director of the Union to the VP of Student Life? I worry that the student voice will be taken away and the decision process will be put under another person. This conversation will disappear. This isn't something that will be the be all end all. How do we get through this? Perhaps there is no need for an Executive Director. The best way to continue is to keep the Director or the Union and keep core communication with the VP of Student Life.
 - a. Dr. Ross: I have the same expectations. Whoever comes in to become Director of the Union needs to be the vehicle of the student voice to me. I haven't always been informed, though I have regular meetings with the GM and PU. It's important that the Director of the Union has that direct line to me. I want to support all students through CLASS, and I love to talk to students. I started and ended my day talking to students, I wish it was always like this. In my meetings with Marcus and Nick I have challenged them to be sure to get the opinions of all students.

11. Nick D: This morning you said that the Executive Director would have “broad oversight over a wide array of co-curricular activities”. You talked about changing the responsibility Director of the Union relative to the Union Building to be similar to how the Director of the Mueller Center is to the Mueller Center.
 - a. Dr. Ross: There are two large student focused centers on campus: The Union and the Mueller Center. The Directors of those facilities should be more of a team and more similar.
 - b. Nick D: The Union is an auxiliary service in the portfolio of Student Life. Auxiliary services are supporting organizations that work as partners with their portfolio. Why is it necessary for the Rensselaer Union to be focused under a single cluster and not as a supporting service to greater portfolio of Student Life? Why not have it exist as a cluster itself? The Union is CLASS because it is students learning, advocating, and supporting one another organically in the cluster that is the Union. The Rensselaer Union touches almost every cluster in the restructure. This feels like it is a movement to break up Union rather than expand it.
 - c. Dr. Ross: Undergraduate class deans ask why cluster and where. We need greater levels of collaboration for CLASS. We can’t have people working in silos. There has not been the cross collaboration that they need. We need Student Life to collaborate across clusters.
12. Josh: There seems to be some confusion on the organization of the Rensselaer Union that I’ll try to clear up. The Rensselaer Union is an organization run by and for students. It is housed in the Student Union building among other facilities around campus. The administrative staff of the Union run the day to day operations of three different categories: Student Activities, the Mueller Center, and Union Operations. They function under the three bodies of student government: the Student Senate, Judicial Board and Executive Board. The Director of the Union is the overarching manager for the organization, and they report to the Executive Board and are advised by the VP of Student Life. Under their leadership, they help steer the direction of the Union. That position is currently defined under the Union Constitution. If the Executive Director position were created and had any powers previously given to the Director of the Union by the Union Constitution, to take any of these powers away from the Director of the Union would require a vote of the student body and an amendment to the Union Constitution. To do otherwise violates the Union Constitution and the Board of Trustees’ decision when they approved it.
13. Tommy: Why not recommend splitting the workload of the Director of the Union rather than creating a new position? There seems to be a distrust that this new position is both out control of students and above the union. This does not appear to be a lateral move or a move of support, but an effort to further place the Union under administrative oversight and control. Dividing up the Union doesn’t make sense and can’t happen, since it defeats the purpose of its name: the Rensselaer Union.
14. Shannon: Where do we go from here? As student leaders, we love helping students and would love to help the Institute in their endeavors. Include us in the goals that you want to see us achieve. We would like to know where you are trying to go and walk hand-in-hand. We are not comfortable with this description and its posting right now.

- a. Dr. Ross: There are other things happening. There is discussion in the Faculty Senate about the core curriculum. What are the requirements? Classes in math, humanities, science and so forth. There is a proposal that students would have a required number of out of class activities in order to graduate. This is the workings of adding intentionality and structure to the out of class experience. What does that look like? It will stress the importance of leadership and civic engagement and lead to a bigger conversation about core curriculum. We want to talk about it.
15. Paul: We have been around for 125 years, and our Union is different than everyone else, whether in the US or internationally. Rensselaer is different. We do things in a unique way that stands out from our peer institutions, and it is part of what makes RPI unique. Students have a history of truly owning their experiences here. When change comes and we are not included, we have an issue with that when it may damage the student experience we get here. There is a trend of the Union being slowly chipped away and broken down. This will ultimately result in a loss of that experience which made RPI so great to so many. When there is unilateral change directly to the student experience without student input, we get a deluge of upset alumni and current students. You talk to us about the restructuring involving the Archer Center, whose staff among other things teach PD1, and everyone always mentions how smart Rensselaer students are. When we are tasked by them to create with descriptions or metrics, if we used vague and nebulous like 'broad' and 'wide', like are listed in this they would tell us to change it, since nobody knows what that means. We don't know what the position entails because its description is so vague, and that is part of the reason why we are uncomfortable. So what exactly do 'broad' and 'wide' mean, and what power does this position have, in relation to who is under/supervised by who, why couldn't the restructuring in the Union take place inside the Union like Tommy mentioned, with something like having co-directors or several positions under the director?
16. Marcus closing remarks: Diversity of opinion is essential when considering any information. In that respect we have strength of flexibility of the union. We aren't other universities. We can't be following them we need to set our own path and lead other schools. However, students are concerned about these changes and how they have compounded on each other. We have to try to have that line of communication. The only choice we have when we are left with an information vacuum is to speculate. If students want something done they do it. Just one example is in the fact that we have the largest student run career fair happens here every year. Every student knows to go to the Fall career fair if they want to find an opportunity for employment, and it is run by students in NSBE and SHPE. Students at Rensselaer are making their own way and have been for almost two centuries.
17. Dr. Ross closing remarks: Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I ask that you digest the information you've received here today. I know as an ENFP I need to take time to absorb and process when I'm given large amounts of new information. There is significant possibility of student input. Specific to the Union, come back at me and talk about it. You're very creative people. Think about it for a day. Talk about next steps.

18. Nick D. closing remarks: Thank you again for taking the time to meet with us today, Dr. Ross. I'd like to invite everyone to hang back for a few minutes to talk through anything you would like to before we disperse and enjoy the remainder of our Friday. For my closing remarks, I want to reiterate a piece of wisdom I learned regarding the role of Student Government and shared governance. We are not a complaint vehicle, we are the "Critical Friend". We advocate and we care. We do not want to offend, but we want change. We are partners: not marginalized, not trivialized, not shut out. We look forward to working together.