

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Spring Town Hall 2016

Unofficial Transcript

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[Video: <http://mediasite.mms.rpi.edu/Mediasite5/Play/2d14f887fe464e5e8d958f3eb5b944411d>]

Dr. Prabhat Hajela, Provost: Good afternoon and welcome to the president's spring town meeting. It is now my pleasure to introduce the 18th president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson.

Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson: Thank you, and thank all of you for coming out, it's good to see so many of you here. You know, I have my usual prepared remarks but actually I'm going to begin by dispensing with them. Because it seems that there are two issues that are extent. One has to do with the Rensselaer Union—the Student Union—and the administration's stance with respect to it. And the other has to do with the financial status of the university, and there's been a lot of misunderstanding, unfortunately engendered by an article that originally appeared in the Washington Post, and so I thought I would spend a few minutes trying to walk you through some of that.

So the first thing I would like to address is the question of the Rensselaer Union. And let me begin by saying that I have great respect for the history and functions of the Rensselaer Union, I always have, and I've met in the past with the leaders of the Union and the Grand Marshal. For various reasons in the last couple of years I've met with them less but I still meet with them. I think it's an important part of the history of the university. It's important in terms of how it operates and what it teaches our students and what they learn and how they grow from it. But there clearly is disagreement regarding the degree of autonomy of the Union. And in fact, one can say, clearly, that the language of the Union Constitution is ambiguous. But there is no ambiguity with respect to the fact that the board of trustees does have the ultimate authority for the Union as it does for the university as a whole. Therefore it is appropriate for the trustees to, in fact, look at the Union Constitution and to decide what independence and autonomy mean. And so I, in fact, have had a meeting with the board's executive committee and I have asked the Board of Trustees through its executive committee to review the Union Constitution and to decide whether any changes are warranted. I've also asked the board to come to the campus to meet with students directly and the board has agreed to do so. And so we will let the process

run its course. And while it runs its course, we will suspend any hiring for the positions of the Executive Director for Student Activities and the Director of the Union until the board concludes its review. So, let me stop there and see if there are any questions anyone may have. Don't be shy because in spite of what people [clapping] in spite of what people say about reprisals and so on, there is no record to show that I have ever done anything like that. A reason that I have town meetings is to be straightforward and to answer your questions, and that's why I've invited everyone to come. Please, sir, yes.

Question 1: You've mentioned that the Union is an important part of our history—

Jackson: Yes.

Question 1: —but you specifically didn't say the future. Where do you think the Union lies in our future as an institution?

Jackson: I said that I have great respect for the history and functions and that means what the Union does. I have no intention of having the Union go away and so I have no idea—none—where that came from, honestly. And so I have never articulated that; I think people have taken from one thing and multiplied it into many other things. And clearly the Union has a role here at Rensselaer and it has a role in terms of autonomy, but the question is one of what does autonomy mean and how much. I think it's very important to the students here, to the university as a whole, and I respect the traditions and what we need to keep doing as an Institute. I hope that addresses your question. Are there others? Please.

Question 2: So, I wasn't... I wasn't particularly worried about the Executive Director of Student Activities. I'm sure the salary was a rounding error in our annual budget. What worries me is that —

Jackson: Well, let me say the following. If we hire someone and there's a new position, then we're going to put the money into the budget for that.

Question 2: And I think that was addressed at the forum, was that, I think our CFO brought that up. But what I think concerned a lot of students was that it seems as though the Institute looked at, you know, what do the students need, and it was more oversight of our activities. And I think if you asked a lot of students, they wouldn't have said that. They would say that we might want changes to facilities, we might want changes to the dining plan, things like that. So are there any other plans in the works, as far as, you know moving forward, expanding or improving services for students like that?

Jackson: Well, we've always through the years looked to expand and improve services for students. And I'm gonna give you an historical one, and then I'm going to speak to what you

asked, because it's an important question. You know, fairly early in my tenure here, I used to walk the campus. I used to walk it from Burdett Avenue to 8th Street at night. And that was long before the Student Union and so on started walking the campus. And I would take the Vice President for Administration and Public Safety and even students to walk the routes that students would walk and look at where it seemed dark, where people would get nervous, and because of that we changed the whole lighting scheme, on the campus, you know, you could argue about whether we need more or whatever, as well as putting more emergency call boxes. And whenever we found from, sometimes coming directly from students, that there are vulnerabilities relative to that, you know, we would try to address them fairly straightforwardly. A second thing was that I would go, you know, sort of invited, sometimes invited, sometimes self-invited, to have dinner in the res halls—freshman, upper class, fraternity, sorority, freshman, upper class, fraternity, sorority. So in doing those visits I discovered things about some of the res halls, and I happened to be in one of the quote unquote freshman res halls and we were talking about how cold the rooms were, but we looked at the fact that there were single-pane windows. So when I went to pull the curtain back to look at one of the windows, it actually crumpled in my hands, and so I was upset—I was livid actually—so I talked to the Vice President for Administration and I said, this is ridiculous. And then I started looking at mattresses—this shows you the extent. So students think I don't care about them, but I'm looking at these mattresses and I said I wouldn't have my son sleep on them. And so, we started trying to have a program to change them out, at least inspect them every year, and so on. Maybe it's not working perfectly, but if there are issues like that, and this gets to your question, then I ask the students and I ask the student leaders, to bring them forward because I cannot fix what I do not know about. I got an email recently from a student about some undergraduate classrooms. Now we've been on a mission here in the last couple of years to improve undergraduate laboratories. So I asked the Vice President for Administration and I got the deans, particularly of the School of Science and School of Engineering, to find out what the story is with the classrooms. And they've come up with a list of about 20 in engineering and science that they feel need particular attention. And as soon as the semester is over, we're going to start work on, you know, a number of these classrooms. But there are 15 that we want to give particular attention to. I mean I could go on in this vein, and the whole dining hall, over at Russell Sage, where you have the expanded dining room that you wouldn't know about, came about because we had this banquet room upstairs in Russell Sage. And whenever I would go over there for some function, it would be students sitting down, essentially eating underneath the steps. And I said, "Why are they eating under the steps with people shuffling along, kicking up dust?" And they said, "Well there's not enough room in the main dining hall." So I said, well, I'm gonna go over there and eat dinner, and I did. And so you had, these kind of, what I called basement style windows. And I said we have to do something about it, and so Claude and I hatched a plan, working with Sodexo, to totally renovate it and blow that space out. It's probably 3 or 4 times the size it was in the start—am I right, Claude?—and it created a balcony upstairs as well. And so, these are some of the things—so I'm not, I don't go around trying to say "Well, look, gee, look what I've done!"—you know, showing you I really care about you. If I see things,

then I try to change them. And if I see things that I think are wrong, I try to change them fast. Not everybody likes things to be changed fast, but that's what I do. So I hope that's responsive to your question.

Question 2: Thank you.

Jackson: No, thank you. Please.

Question 3: So, earlier you mentioned that the Board of Trustees is going to be reviewing the constitution of the Union—

Jackson: Yes.

Question 3: —and that the hiring process has been suspended for the Executive Director and Director of the Union.

Jackson: Correct.

Question 3: So my question would be, in the process of reviewing the constitution, does the Board of Trustees intend to make any changes to the constitution or the way the Union is structured and run?

Jackson: I don't know, but that's why we also, I've asked the board to come to the campus, you know, to talk with students, for that reason. So they can get input, and get input from a wider range of students, about the role, you know, role of the Union and so on. But I'm gonna be supporting, certainly, the continuation of the Union and the clubs that it supports. And I don't get involved with what clubs the Union supports, how it supports them, how it recognizes them, how it doesn't recognize them, how it funds them, how much it funds them with. I think there's a lot of misunderstanding, I don't have, you know that's left to the Union, and I don't expect that to change at all. Please.

Question 4: You mentioned earlier when you were talking that early in your tenure you made a point, an effort to walk as the students do everyday and I'm curious as to why that changed and why that stopped, because I feel that the significant lapse that we're seeing here in communication has a lot to do with that we're standing in very different places and I see where it would be beneficial to walk the paths as we do everyday.

Jackson: Well, I do walk the campus, you just may not see me, and I don't always walk it during the class hours partly because I don't want to be disruptive. And so, you know, I've walked around to look at labs and things like that. And, you know, I've, I do all these things kind of quasi-regularly. But a president also has a lot of things to do, and you know, I'm just finishing up

getting another major gift for the university and working with our Vice President for Institute Advancement. That requires travel, it requires a lot of phone calls and work. So there are a lot of things that the president has to do. And so, an important fact, I would argue that I attend more things where students are, and try to interact more, than most university presidents I know. Now that may not satisfy everybody, and you know, we have a different tradition, but the irony is, many of the things people are accusing me of not doing, are things I started in the first place. And so, I've had the, not necessarily do all of them with the same degree of frequency, but they were not here before I came. But now, somehow, people are thinking I don't care because they don't see me doing all these things, obviously, that I did before. And earlier some people thought I was around too much, into too many things, so, you know, it's always, you know, one side or the other. But you know, we'll see what we can do, but you know, if you live somewhere, or you're someplace, invite me, and you know we'll take it from there. Ok? Please, and then I'll come up there.

[Timestamp: 00:15:08]

Question 5: I believe this question has been asked several times and the students have never gotten a straight answer. Could you please elaborate on the specific details of what the Executive Director of Student Activities position entails and where it would fall in the hierarchy?

Jackson: Well, the executive director was going to report through an assistant vice president. The student life portfolio is huge, and ironically, this whole restructuring of it was meant to give more attention to the students and support their various activities. And so this Executive Director for Student Activities was not to supplant or diminish the role or how the Director of the Union interacts with the Student Union and the E-Board and the Student Senate, but rather to provide some degree of oversight, but also to be able to support more people working with the students who were involved in student government and in the Union. In fact, there's a liaison to student government position, and you notice it doesn't say manager of student government, but in the director position also includes the facilities, and the same thing with the recreational activities—their facilities. And so we want to be sure those things get the attention and the coverage that they need. That was the intent of it. Yes please.

Nick Dvorak, President of the Union: Dr. Jackson, with this review process of the Rensselaer Union Constitution, how will student leaders be involved? I know my term is coming to the end as the President of the Union. How will it include those who have engrossed themselves in the Union, have seen how it operates, the positives, the negatives, and move forward, and cooperate?

Jackson: Well, we will see, you know, how we invite those who were most immediately involved. But we also have to look at, especially, the students who will be here and continuing. And it's

very important to hear their voices as well, and so you know, all of this has yet to be worked out. You know, we'll act as the facilitator, but we'll see what the board wants to do. Please.

Question 7: First, I want to say thank you for so quickly going to questions here, I think there was a lot that wanted to be asked and I appreciate that.

Jackson: No problem.

Question 7: Four years ago I had a class in the Troy building and one morning I happened to walk in the same time you did, and we had a very random conversation about the weather and skiing. That has nothing to do with what's being discussed here today. But I think one of the things that would be nice, is that the students should be able to randomly walk into you on campus and just chat. Not needing there to be a formal event like this to be able to interact with you or needing to set up a meeting through the procedure, but just to be able to walk into you or any of the administrators, just on a day-to-day basis, and be able to chat. The second thing that I wanted to ask, specifically regarding the Board of Trustees' review of the constitution. The current constitutional amendment policy requires that the constitution be sent to you and the Board of Trustees before it's sent to the students. The last amendment was last year. I'm curious to what extent the board reviewed the constitution a year ago at this time, and why such a large review would be needed at this time.

Jackson: The large review is needed because of the very nature of what the, you know, disquiet has been about. That people are saying that the administration is, and the President in particular, is trying to destroy the Union, which is untrue. That their authority derives from the Board of Trustees, et cetera. And so, since that has been put on the table, then, I've asked the board to look at the whole thing, and they've agreed to do that. And then as far as walking around, I agree, you know, kind of random interactions are always interesting and fun, and in some ways you could say best. And, you know, I walk around as much as I can, I'm not a fan of walking around in the winter time and it's winter a long time here, but, you know, I don't know what the vice presidents are doing, besides what urban legend might say. I don't know what they do everyday, all I know is that they're responsible for doing their jobs, but I know that many many of them come out—they come out to athletic events, student activities, and so on. But people are also very busy, they have very important jobs, and a vice president has a huge responsibility, and so, that's why we have an overall infrastructure at the university, that, you know, not everything can come to the President or not everything can come to the vice presidents, even—but, let me take that under advisement. Maybe I'll sit out on a bench somewhere, and you know, do my work a little bit, and and you know so I can see more of you. I mean, I understand the point you're trying to make, so. There was another gentleman, here, please.

Question 8: So yesterday at the student forum, with... the name escapes me at the second.

Jackson: Dr. Frank Ross, the Vice President for Student Life—

Question 8: Yeah, Dr. Ross, so at the student forum with Dr. Ross there were multiple failures of communication in which he avoided answering questions and explicitly blamed students for the failures of communications as well denying responsibility for...

Jackson: Can you give me an explicit example?

Question 8: He said that he wished that the Union reached out to him to communicate more, rather than him reaching out to them.

Jackson: I see. I can't speak for Dr. Ross. Dr. Ross, would you like to speak for yourself?

Dr. Frank E. Ross III: Thank you, is this on? Ok, thank you. First of all, thank you for attending the forum yesterday, we had a really good group of students from across the campus and I really appreciate everyone coming out for the dialogue. I remember that question specifically and we talked about two-way communication being important, right? And, not blaming anybody, but I did talk about, it is a two-way communication and how can we work together better moving forward. You know, I gave some specific examples of ways that I've reached out to your Grand Marshal and President of the Union and suggested that they propose to me ways that we work together. But likewise, it's two-way, it's from me to the students, as well as the student leaders to me as well, so. I don't know if your point was exactly accurate, but I think it's the two-way communication that is going to be the most beneficial for us.

Jackson: And I do encourage, you know, all of the vice presidents to go out and talk with students, and if there is a specific problem or issue, for them to talk with students about it to try to get to the root of it. You know, we hear things about safety concerns, and some things came to my attention recently, and so I actually had the Vice President for Administration and the Director of Public Safety looking into it, so that I can get back to the person who raised the concern. Because again, as I said, if somebody brings things to my attention I try to get to them as fast as I can, and if it's safety I really want to get to them fast but it's been kind of a busy week here, so, but, please, up here. Ah, yes, Heidi.

Question 9: Going forward, have you planned on being more transparent with the problems? I believe a lot of the unrest of the students right now is concerning transparency and not exactly the new things coming into the Institute. I know a lot of people are really upset that these job openings came about without information being sent to the students. And a lot of things are sent to the students. We've gotten a ton of information on Summer Arch, and yet there is nothing sent to us and nothing brought to our attention about the changes happening in the Union.

Jackson: Well I apologize for that, if that occurred, but I guess I had thought that there were discussions and communications about it. But, while we're on the subject, and it picks up on Dr. Ross's point about two-way communications, you know, there's a protest outside. And that's fine. And then you know, we're talking here, and you know I have this town meeting in the spring. And I think people knew. I mean, obviously, it's advertised. But protests do not conversation make. And that's why I do appreciate the questions that people bring up here. And, but if you protest first, and write lots of, you know, letters with all kinds of, and I don't mean you, you know, if one does that, and writes all kinds of things and accusations and how much we hate you Dr. Jackson—or "Shirley," as people like to say—that does not a conversation make. But, if you want to talk to me, there's Lolly Mozersky and she'll work it out. You know, even though I agree with the gentleman up here, that, you know, sometimes the more serendipitous interactions are the better ones. So I'm gonna see about that. And let's see if we can do a better job with, coming forward, you know, earlier, you know. And I understand your point, but I would also ask you to come forward to me as well. That if you really have deep concerns, however much on the surface they may anger you, please come and talk to me, because again I can't fix what I don't hear about. But if people are raising issues that have to do with the fundamental strategic direction of the university as it is embodied in the strategic plan, and as the board has already approved that plan and more than once, then those basic directions are not going to change. People may not like them, but we've been totally transparent and we had a very open planning process that led to both of the Rensselaer plans. And so, I think we want to do a separation between those things that are very specific that people are upset or angry about, and those things that have to do with the strategic direction of the university, which is not going to change. Thank you. Please.

Question 10: Good afternoon Dr. Jackson. So as you know, the university has been accepting more and more students every year. And many programs have been suffering because the number of faculty has not increased with the number of students. For instance the computer science program has doubled, however the number of faculty has remained the same. The engineering program is very low on faculty as well. So my first question is, as an academic institution, isn't our first responsibility to make sure there are enough faculty to teach the students? And to follow that up, if so, why are we focusing on so many other programs to promote CLASS, to promote the student body experience, when we do not have enough faculty to teach our students? And I would argue that that should be our number priority at the moment.

Jackson: Well you know Rensselaer is a residentially based university, so students live here. And there are many elements to learning that occur in the classroom and elements that occur beyond the classroom. We've talked about actually limiting enrollment. Would you like us to do that?

Question 10: Don't we already limit enrollment?

Jackson: We could limit it more.

Question 10: Make it more exclusive?

Jackson: Well, I don't know if you'd call it exclusivity or just restricting enrollment.

Question 10: Well, I think we should limit enrollment, so that students are paying to have enough faculty to teach them. The point of an institution of higher learning, a private institution, is you're selective about who you accept. And so...

Jackson: We are very selective about who we accept. And a lot of what we spend money on is not CLASS, but in fact the technologies and the faculty who teach Rensselaer, teach here at Rensselaer. But when we have people who go to campaigns with alums to get them spun up and say they shouldn't give to Rensselaer, or we tell prospective students not to come here—prospective students do pay tuition, although we do give huge amounts of financial aid—and so the folks who do that are actually hurting the ability of the university to do the very things that you want to have done and that I want to have done. And I'm not going to get into a back and forth with you except to say the following: That tuition alone never closes the budget of a university. Philanthropy plays a very large role and so there are many sources of funds that support what a university does, but philanthropy plays a big role. And so I would just ask those of you that are angry to think about how what you do and say affects the ability to do that. Secondly, if you're looking at things like the Summer Arch and so on, we are going to expand the instructional staff as we go through. And in fact with the advent of the summer semester and with the follow-on semesters where students may be here or not, we in fact plan to address some of the issues that have to do with students not getting into certain classes and over-enrollment in certain classes. And so in fact we're looking exactly at that issue, to look at how we can mitigate some of the difficulties, as well as looking at how we create more classroom and housing capacity as well. So all of these things are part of the major planning that we are in fact doing, to address some of those very things.

[Timestamp: 00:30:16]

Question 10: I think that's great that you're looking to hire more faculty—

Jackson: Mmm-hmm.

Question 10: —for the summer program, but, if I may, my question—

Jackson: But that's more faculty overall.

Question 10: But the summer program isn't slated to start for another, what, three years fully?

Jackson: Yes, and we're hiring faculty as we speak, but faculty come and go. Some people retire, some people leave for other reasons. And so we hire as many faculty as we can every year that we can. And every year I've been here we've hired many new faculty. And in fact we've hired over 350 new faculty during my tenure and so... but faculty do come and faculty go. We try to retain as many of them as we can. One of the big retention mechanisms is to offer faculty members endowed chairs. That requires fundraising. That's why I raised the issue. So, we're hiring as much as we can and as fast as we can. And we haven't especially expanded the student body. Now there's a factor that you don't totally control in terms of how many students accept offers of admissions... of admission, but we do the best job we can in trying to predict what that is. And some of the over-enrollment is not so much an absolute over-enrollment, but discontinuities in enrollment in different programs. Some are over-enrolled, and some in fact are under-enrolled. And, so we are talking about, you know, how one can try to achieve a better balance. So, thank you very much. Are there others?

Question 11: So I have just two sort of, I guess, general questions since the topic of two-way communication and transparency has been brought up and also, the in progress, I guess, protest outside that's also happening. My first question would be if we're striving for two-way communication and transparency, why was the program or town meeting decided to be held in a size-restricted room, as opposed to the really nice concert hall that we have that a lot of budget is going towards?

Jackson: That's because until today, this room wasn't filled for town meetings. So we do the best prediction we can make, so we don't use facilities that are unnecessarily large for meetings. And even now, I do still see a few empty seats, so...

Question 11: And I think along with the empty seats, that goes to say entrance to the room has been cut off. There were lines, and then students were sent away—

Jackson: Well, we're broadcasting it to other places around because, you know, this was the place that was scheduled and, you know, had we changed it at the zeroth hour, I'm sure some people would have been upset, who feel that they wouldn't know where the meeting was.

Question 11: Fair enough. And then additionally with that, with the constitution of the Union being reviewed by the Board of Trustees, one of the points that a lot of members of the protests outside were talking about was having two student alumni serve a two-year term on the Board of Trustees as sort of a student voice.

Jackson: Well, that's a separate issue then the Union Constitution. This thing just came to us and so we'll consider all of it in due time, but the issue of the moment is the Union Constitution and those are two separate issues. Please.

Question 12: Yeah, so there's a whole movement for CLASS going on right now. And while I think that that ultimately is for the benefit of the students, I do worry about the financial upkeep of the institution.

Jackson: I'm going to talk about that in a few minutes, but, you know, it's not for you to worry about it, I would say this to you. We—no, you, you have the right to worry about it, but I'm saying that, you know it's the administration's job to actually manage the university and its finances. And I'm going to explain to you, you know, exactly where things are, but in point of fact I'm going to repeat what I said before. That if you tear down the very institution you're in, you make it harder for us to achieve the very thing you want—namely revenues that come through enrollment, fundraising, et cetera. And so, you know, you have to decide if this is a place you want to be, and if the education you get is beneficial. And we think it is, and we want you here, but that's something you have to decide. Please.

Question 13: I appreciate the second question. The discussion of two-way communication came up and I'd like to give to the best of my knowledge the timeline that at least student government was aware of the Executive Director position. If I'm not mistaken, the first knowledge we had was through a post on an executive search site, at which point we attempted to reach out to gain more information. If the goal here is two-way communication, I'm curious why student government, or at least the student government leaders, were not informed this position before it was put up on the website.

Jackson: Well, I'm not gonna throw him under the bus, but I'm going to ask Frank to speak to that.

Rich: Thank you for your question, and I think this was asked yesterday in our open student forum meeting. Again, as a new vice president, as we look at making some future enhancements to Student Life that support our ability to enhance our transformative student experience and support CLASS. You know, we're putting some new initiatives in place, and these are all things that I feel support what goals are outlined in the Rensselaer Plan 2024. And I brought that up in the meeting yesterday because I think it's important for all student leaders to really understand the Rensselaer Plan 2024 which is the strategic planning document for the entire Institute and ensure that your activities are supporting the goals of that plan. I think that's very important. You know, as I mentioned yesterday, we're making some changes in Student Life. It's, it's customary for me to post positions that we're hiring in Student Life. I don't come to student leaders and have a conversation about every position we're posting, and again I want to be very clear as I said yesterday. We're not talking about the Director of the Union position. That's absolutely different. So different leadership roles within the Division of Student Life that we're moving forward with, absolutely, and I've had conversations with, with the leadership team and I've had subsequent meetings with the leaders and we will continue that dialogue. But what

I think was really important yesterday, and I want to re-emphasize it again for folks who weren't at that meeting, is that it is our practice in Student Life, that we engage students in appropriate ways throughout our process when we hire new staff for the Division and that will continue, so students will have meaningful involvement in any search we do to hire new staff in the Division.

Jackson: Please.

Question 14: So my question is kind of related to all this. So, as mentioned before, there is a protest outside, going on outside, and it's in response to this change in the Union we're seeing which is a change that—

Jackson: Well, no change has occurred yet.

Question 14: Well, one that was in talks. And it's one that resembles a lot of coll... private institutions across the country.

Jackson: Mmm-hmm.

Question 14: A lot of them, you know, have this sort of system in place. So why do you think that a culture exists at RPI that when we hear RPI is going to have more of an oversight over the Student Union, the student culture reacts in such a way of protest as opposed to, you know, being accepting and trusting that it will go well for us?

Jackson: Why don't you answer the question?

[laughter]

Question 14: For me personally, it's the articles I've seen posted about the Institute recently, whether financially or reviewing where we stand academically. Those are the ones that personally have me concerned.

Jackson: Did you ever ask me, did you ever ask to come see me or the CFO?

Question 14: I didn't know the best way to do that and—

Jackson: If you actually had talked with your Student Life VP, he would send you to either Ginny Gregg, who is our Vice President for Finance and CFO, or to my Chief of Staff, or to me. And we'd be happy to answer the question. And so we're not hiding anything, and in fact all of these things are really in our financial statements if you really know how to read them, and I'm going to walk you through some of that in a minute. And so, you know, when Frank talked earlier about

two-way communication, two-way communication is just that. The Department of Education has done an unfortunate thing, which is putting Rensselaer in a basket with some, you know, for-profit institutions that give students degrees that don't mean anything, that use student loan programs as part of their business model, and the students can't pay those loans back and so there's this big brouhaha. And Rensselaer because of an interpretation that the accounting profession and the financial accounting standards, they do not agree with this, our own auditors. And I'll tell you what that means in a minute, that it catches us in an unfortunate position. But again, it has nothing to do with our ability to pay our bills and in fact, we have to go through ratings by bond rating agencies that look at the university's debt, and they have us as an A rated university. And someone made a comment about we went from A2 to A3. And the biggest reason that drove that was a pension plan that existed when I came here. It's called a defined benefit pension plan. And it was a pension plan that for 13 years before I came, \$10 million had been put into it. Since I've been here, we've put \$210 million into it. And so, you kind of have to understand the whole picture, and if, you know, I would encourage you, if you have questions, to come and ask. You know, I'm not unwilling to talk about it. But we don't put, you know, you don't put all your postings from your checkbook online. Or maybe you do, most people don't. But, so let me talk to you a little bit about the financial piece. Yes, you had a last question.

Question 15: Yes, can you just mention the policy that you have on open administration meetings and the recording of those meetings?

Jackson: What do you mean by open administration meetings?

Question 15: So like if a staff member has an open meeting with students what is your policy on recording of those meetings?

Jackson: I think it's up to that person, because it's that persons meeting. But let me say this about open meetings, because it happens to me all the time, it's just that I don't stop it because I was a government official, so I've had people put microphones in my face, and cameras in my face, you know, a large part of my career. But it is unfair, so people talk about transparency, it is unfair to have a meeting and the person has a meeting and you do not talk to that person before the meeting and that person walks into the meeting and there are these cameras, and oh by the way you're on TV. And then to say that, oh, this person does not want transparency. So ask yourself what fairness is, that's all.

Question 15: It's not necessarily illegal.

Jackson: It's not if it's illegal, it's courtesy. It's courtesy. And that's all we're talking about. You know, we're a big and complex university and you have to be, we have to have degrees of civility. And that's all I'm asking. I don't, you know, tell you I hate you. I love you, actually, believe it or not. And, you know, and do all of this vilification. That doesn't do anybody any good, and I

wasn't raised to hate people. You can disagree with people, and you can disagree with them very strongly. But hatred is not something, we're all part of the human race. Please, Marcus.

Marcus: Thank you, Dr. Jackson. So today, we've heard a lot about two-way communication, and after our meetings with the Vice President of Student Life, he asked us to look at the Rensselaer Plan 2024 and see what we think of it. And so we did exactly that. And we looked through line-by-line and we saw where the Student Union supported the Rensselaer Plan 2024. And as student leaders, we spend most of our time trying to get to know the students around us —trying to become the best possible first-hand source for information. And so hearing a lot of issues with people saying they want two-way communication, and being an engineering student and seeing that structure and systems are some of the best ways we can handle that, I would like to ask if you'd be interested in quarterly meetings with the student leaders so that way we can hopefully bridge these gaps in communication and move forward together.

[Timestamp: 00:44:50]

Jackson: Well, I'm glad you applaud because I want you to applaud my statement, which is don't vilify me at the press and then say you want to come and talk to me. Ok, don't sign on to, you know, nasty emails and say you want to come talk to me. Don't start the whole protest with misleading information about where I stand on the Student Union and then say you want the communication. I'm happy to talk to you Marcus, anytime. But I will talk with people when they bring suggestions and when they're respectful. I don't want you to kiss the ring, that's not what I'm talking about. But I'm going to treat you with respect and so I expect the same. And that's all. And then with that, you know, we can meet. But I'm not going to promise that I'm going to go back to a specific periodicity that we had before. I started that whole process of meeting with the Grand Marshal and PU on a regular basis. I started Pizza with the President. I started Pizza with the Cabinet. But it went awry. And so, and people accuse me of not communicating even with that regularity. So it caused me to think it through. And I think, sometimes, you know, and we all do this to some extent, when we're most upset we confuse disagreement with what we hear with lack of communication. And sometimes the communication just says you to me or me to you is clear. We may not agree, but it doesn't mean we haven't communicated. So that's all I ask, that there is a mutuality of respect. And so, it's interesting, people probably think I don't communicate much, but I'm not going to get into the media and into the social media channels and try to do tit for tat. You know, that's, you know, not becoming of a president. It doesn't do anything, and it's wrong. And so, you know, that's what I can say to you. So let's see where we go from here. And if people want to meet and they have real agendas and they have constructive things they wish to talk about and they come to me before the fact and not after the fact, then I'm more than happy to meet with people, because I want to solve problems and head things off at the pass if we can, so that we don't get to this kind of a point. But all I can say is don't believe everything people say and you hear because most people don't really know me

and people say that, you know, that people don't see me, they'd like to see me more. But you can't say you don't know me, but then you know that I'm this great evil and autocratic person. I have a complex university that I'm responsible for and I try to do the best job that I can, and I think we have pretty good results to show for it. But my concern is that you all learn things that can be helpful to you in your lives. So I hear you, and we'll see if we can turn the page on this. And so I want to thank you for bringing that up.

Marcus: Thank you Dr. Jackson, and I want to let you know, I offer you nothing but the utmost respect as leader of the students.

Jackson: Well thank you, I appreciate that and I respect you Marcus. This is the true last question here please.

Question 17: [unintelligible]

Jackson: No, no, no. I called on this person over here. Please. Thank you.

Question 17: This is a little bit of a response to the question about student culture. I think for most students the fact that the Union is student-run and student-led is a huge point of pride and any—

Jackson: And I don't expect that to change.

Question 17: Yeah, as a former club officer my experience as an officer with a lot of autonomy was probably the singular most important experience of my entire career. Earlier you said that the Board of Trustees has the final authority—

Jackson: They do.

Question 17: —over how much autonomy we have. My question is, what has changed to make the Board of Trustees want to decrease the amount of autonomy? Why can't we have more, and —

Jackson: The board has not said that it's going to decrease anything. We said review the degree of autonomy. That's all.

Question 17: I, I definitely—

Jackson: The Student Union itself, and others who have part of the swirling about us, put the question on the table and so since the question's on the table then I have a responsibility to take it to the board, and that's what I've done. That's all. But there's no intent to not have the Union

run, but there are issues whether there's any oversight by the administration and so forth. And so, we just are gonna clarify some of that, but you know, you're having your club and as I told you in the beginning, the Union deciding what the clubs are, how they recognize them, what ones they recognize, how they support them, how much money they get—I don't get involved in that. That's your business. OK, as long as, you know, there's a risk management approach, that, you know, there isn't discrimination and blah blah blah, because in the end, who do you think is ultimately, legally responsible? You think it's the students? No, who do you think it is?

Question 17: Assuming this isn't a rhetorical question—

Jackson: No it's not. [laughter]. Not at all.

Question 17: I would definitely say that you are responsible.

Jackson: Exactly. But you know, but, but I'm not looking to have how you guys operate change. It's a specific set of issues that have been raised and we're asking the board to look at them. That's all.

Question 17: Thank you.

Jackson: Thank you. There was a question over here, it was young lady, I thought it was somebody else in green. OK, please, yeah, sure.

Question 18: Thank you. I think one of the concerns that a lot of the students have is that we see—I don't know, you know, how much of this is true—we see a bureaucracy, and we would like to talk to you, I think, but—

Jackson: But why? Why do you really want to talk to me? Remember, I'm really not a really good person.

[laughter]

Question 18: We recognize that you have the power here and we want to be able to see change, but I think a lot of us are afraid because we think there's a treacherous path to get to talk to you.

Jackson: But I don't know—see, I guess—and I'm really trying to be as straightforward with you as I can be—I don't understand this treacherous path stuff. I mean, where do you see the hazards in the path?

Question 18: It's not that it's, maybe treacherous isn't the right word, but there's many steps between you and I—

Jackson: There aren't, because I've always said, here is my Chief of Staff. Please stand up. This is Elisha "Lolly" Mozersky, OK? Mozer@rpi.edu. And if you want to see me, call her or email her. There's, now I say that at every public forum I can. Maybe we'll put it on the web, OK?

Question 18: But there's also concerns when, I'm not, again, I'm not—

Jackson: No, it's ok.

Question 18: When we have a problem we start with the lowest administrator.

Jackson: And you should, because that's what they're there for.

Question 18: Right, I think the concern is that sometimes there are problems that don't make it past the lowest administrator.

Jackson: You mean they don't get fixed.

Question 18: Unfortunately.

Jackson: If they don't, then yes, you should elevate them. But maybe they don't have to all come all the way to the President.

Question 18: I understand that.

Jackson: But I do want to know if there are issues and they don't get resolved and you can't seem to get, you know, responses quickly, and hopefully resolution, then yes. I want to know where there are those bottlenecks, so that we can do something about them, and that's where I invite you to talk to Lolly. I call her Elisha however. Please.

Question 19: [unintelligible, appears to be referring to protest turnout] I've been here over 25 years as a professor and I've never, ever seen anything like it.

Jackson: Well, I have no idea how many students are outside. As I said, we set the room based on what the turnout has been for at least the last, you know, five or more years. And I, I don't have any idea of who's a protester and who wanted to come in, but we've tried to accommodate as many people as we can. It's not some attempt to leave people out. But we also want to make

sure that the room is filled in the right way relative to, you know, fire codes and all of that kind of thing. But there's no desire to leave people out.

Question 19: Though that wasn't my question at all.

Jackson: Where are you, anyways, up there? Oh there you are, you're in the light. Hi.

Question 19: My question was, actually, when I saw them, I saw that on their signs it said, "End the Culture of Fear," and I was wondering, what do you think that means?

Jackson: You have to tell me because—

Question 19: What do you plan to do in response?

Jackson: What do you think ought to happen? How do you see this culture of fear manifested other than it being a repetitive assertion? And a repetitive assertion does not make something true.

Question 19: I'm really, I really would like to hear from you what you—

Jackson: Well, because, I don't see it. You see, that's the point. I don't see it. And so, if I don't get people telling me what they think is causing them the fear, then there's nothing I can do about it. And that's what I'm asking you, where is the root of the "culture of fear"? Where do people see that? Now, if you want to know whether I'm straightforward, I am direct if you ask me a question. I'm not trying to be disrespectful, I'm just trying to be straightforward, and everybody who knows me knows that. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear from you. I wouldn't be here if, you know, standing here if I didn't want to hear from you. And so I don't know where this culture of fear comes from. Now, you know, if there are people who've left Rensselaer, who've lost their jobs, or left for whatever reason—they have an advantage, which is that we're not going to talk about personnel matters. And we don't talk about student matters. So people can say and tell things the way they wish. I can't do anything about it because I'm not here to put all the business in the street or to violate laws. And, we have our retained attorney here in the room. And so, he wants to be sure I do that, but I'm not going to do it anyways. And so, so when people make accusations, then, you know, they have to be willing to say what's at the root of those things. And all I ever see are the assertions, the accusations.

Question 19: Are you asking me?

Jackson: I'm asking you to ask these people who say there's this culture of fear.

Question 19: I would guess that the culture of fear comes from a fear of freedom of expression within the academic institution. So, what do you think is the role of freedom of expression within higher education and Rensselaer in particular.

Jackson: You know, I'll try to answer your question with an example, and you can tell me whether you would have liked to have been the object of this. There used to be a student publication called Statler & Waldorf. And it used to talk about something called the something "b - - - h ratio," having to do with the ratio of women to men at Rensselaer, and how that affected the, you know, how women behaved here. And so we told them they were stepping across a line, but we didn't shut them down. And then along the way, during the publication of this magazine, and maybe you don't appreciate this if you haven't lived through a certain era, there was a cover story, a cover, and it said "brown sugar," and it had my picture on the front. And then it went on to say some fairly derogatory and racially tinged things. We didn't shut 'em down. So that's why I ask you: Where is the culture of fear?

And if you know anything about racial history in this country, you'll know that referring to an African-American woman as "brown sugar" is very denigrating. We didn't shut them down. Yes, please.

[Timestamp: 00:59:40]

Question 20: Hello, yes, you keep asking, "Where is this culture of fear coming from?"

Jackson: Mmm-hmm.

Question 20: And I would like to quote an article from... Vice News, I believe.

Jackson: Oh, that—they're reputable. [laughter]

Question 20: Well, regardless of whether or not they're reputable, they do have several interesting quotes in here, such as—

Jackson: What are the quotes?

Question 20: The environment was becoming intolerable. She simply would not listen to people who had a contrary bit of data. This is in reference to the disbanding of the faculty senate in 2007.

Jackson: Yes

Question 20: So you can see that this culture of fear does exist. You can look up several articles of it online. So my question to you is given the ability to research this, as a researcher, what are you going to do to specifically address the culture of fear that the students see about you?

Jackson: Well, I again fail to see what you think you see. I would invite you to set up a meeting with the provost to talk about the history of what happened with the faculty senate. Because it didn't occur the way you seem to think Vice News has led you to believe that it occurred and, and—

Question 20: [unintelligible] Vice News was just the first—

Jackson: Well, it may be several articles, but people propagate points of view, and there is a lot of history. But there included in that history are faculty senate meetings, minutes, Board of Trustee resolutions, and so again I would simply invite you to talk with the provost and when the Board of Trustees comes to the campus, you can talk to them about it. And so, and for the record, the Board of Trustees suspended the faculty senate, not the President. And so, that is one of the urban legends that are out there. And I did not.

Question 20: If I may, regardless of whether or not it is an urban legend, it's an urban legend surrounding you, and therefore—

Jackson: Well it is, but, but all I can say is, as they like to say, I run on my record, you know, I know what I've done for the university, for the students in the university, across a broad front. And people can feel the way they want, personally, about me, but I don't get involved in most of the things people think I do. And so this assertion of a culture of fear is not something that I think I subscribe to, and I think there are a lot of falsehoods. But if you ask me do I hold the people who work for me accountable for what they do and for how they perform their jobs, and am I a tough taskmaster in that way? I absolutely am. And that's because of what I want to do for this university. And so it has nothing to do with being venal or going after students or individual faculty and anybody who tells you that, unfortunately—and they can repeat it and repeat it and repeat it—it's just not true. And again, all I can talk about is how I run, and try to run, the university.

Jackson: So let me talk a little bit about the monetary piece and, and I don't know if Trish is still here to talk about, let me bring up this question about the billion dollars in debt.

So the university, you know, there's a thing called a balance sheet, you have different liabilities on that balance sheet, and then you have your real long-term debt. And the university has about \$754 million in long-term debt. Now, \$134 million of that debt is related to the defined benefit pension plan. And this is the amount we actually borrowed to help fund that plan, but as I told you at the beginning, we've put approximately \$210 million into the plan since 1999 as

compared to \$10 million in funding for the prior 13 years between 1986 and 1999. Now that leaves remaining long-term debt of \$620 million, and we borrowed approximately \$330 million for construction of key new facilities and that leaves about \$290, we say approximately \$300 million for other things—upkeep and upgrades to residence halls, to classrooms and labs, for faculty startup and hiring, for new infrastructure, a new boiler plant, a new underground electrical substation to bring more electrical power into the campus, for investments in the student experience. And then, there is this remaining liability, which is not a debt, but it's \$117 million. And so if you add all of that up, that comes to something that's on the order of a little less than \$900 million. So that's where the university is. But before I go on, I'm gonna ask Claude to tell you more about what we've actually spent under the Rensselaer Plan, including that that we did not borrow.

Claude Rounds: Under the Rensselaer Plan, through today, we have spent \$755 million on new facilities, \$755 million on new facilities, physical facilities, technology, and cyber infrastructure. In the process of doing that, we have identified, across the Institute, investments in every area that was necessary to elevate the bar here—to improve our facilities, but also to make our programs stronger and to make the student experience better. We've spent money on deferred maintenance, and I know deferred maintenance is always important, but we've spent \$57 million on deferred maintenance. We've spent \$49 million on resident halls, dining facilities, and investments to make the living experience here better. We've spent another \$25 million on facilities to improve student life, the CLASS experience, and the athletic facilities.

Jackson: And that's separate and apart from what was spent—

Rounds: It's all separate. That's right.

Jackson: —for the East Campus Athletic Village, and, and upgrades to the Houston Field House.

Rounds: Yeah, and I don't want to miss it because the kind of facility we have and the responsibility we have, especially to you students who are here, we've spent \$17 million on safety, security, and safety. So as you look across the full spectrum of our capital budget, we've invested in every area that's important, the drive, the success of the Rensselaer Plan. \$61 million worth in research facilities, including about \$8 million just to support the hiring of new faculty to do renovations and fit up for new faculty. And I'd be glad to offline, to offer you more information, and in fact if you, if you have a chance, on the Rensselaer website, there is an inventory of the accomplishments of the Rensselaer Plan. In that inventory, many of the things that I am generalizing here are more specifically itemized to give you a good idea of how the investments have been distributed across the Institute, and how they've really driven the success of the Rensselaer Plan.

Jackson: Thanks. So, the basic point is that Rensselaer's finances are fundamentally sound. Do we have the \$754 million in debt? Yes. The defined benefit pension plan was here when I got here. And so, we're working to keep it funded, where it needs to be funded. So we put \$134 million of borrowed money into that plan, but that meant that we've spent over \$70 million otherwise, most of it coming through cash flow through the university to put the money into that plan. Nonetheless, you know, we balance our budget every year and people say, well, you have this operating deficit. And by that we submit a cash budget to the Board of Trustees every year for their review and approval. And we balance that budget every year. But when we have to report external results, those results include the pension liability that's calculated in a given way according to what the accounting profession wants. And it does have deferred maintenance. Now we have what we call a risk-informed deferred maintenance approach as opposed to a straight line depreciation. So that shows up but that's not cash out the door. And so that's what we mean when we say a balanced budget. You know, we get rated, as I said by these rating agencies, S&P and Moody's, and they quote our stable market position, improved operating performance, stronger debt service coverage, and growth in our cash and investments. And then if we go on they talk about our having strong and stable leadership that we did complete a \$1.4 billion capital campaign so if you ask the difference between the \$1.25 billion what we net net have spent, this is beyond, you know, including the capital, that all of it obviously didn't come from borrowing, about half of it did. And that's what a capital campaign does for you.

We have strong demand from students. We've had consistent growth, even though some people don't always like that, in enrollment. And in our net tuition revenue, we've improved our fundraising, and with Greg Easton, we're doing even better, and so forth. And so, that is what is said about us.

So let me go on, and say well what then have we accomplished with it. Well, I mentioned that we've hired, over 350 new tenured and tenure-track faculty, and that's also in addition to, hiring lecturers and professors of practice, and then normalizing the pay and benefits of our faculty who are in the lecturer and professor of practice lines. And that's something that didn't happen before. We even have benefits for adjunct professors, which is not usually the case across the country. We've enhanced student financial aid, we've increased the pot, and we actually have an emergency fund for students whose families fall into financial difficulty during the year. We've created, you know, obviously we've built world-class platforms, including our supercomputer center—that's the CCI—and many many faculty and students use that. But we've created new academic and research programs, we have new partnerships, and we have that supercomputer center because of our partnership with IBM, and we've launched unique new ones.

And so the investments that we're making if we could move on, are paying off. You know, we do have strong student demand, You know, back in 2005, we had about 5,500 applications per year. 55-56 hundred. Today we have over 18,500 applications. And it's important. Our job placement rates for our students the day they graduate, for those who are going directly to work

have increased. We have strong starting salaries. People measure what graduates make 10 years after they start in college and we're second only to MIT, and ahead of the other schools that you see listed here. We have an increasing number of graduate entrepreneurs. And as a consequence, we have an extremely low default rate. That's what the federal government worries about. What the default rate is on federal student loans. Do you have any idea of what it is across the country generally? What's your guess? Please. I beg your pardon?

[audience member response is inaudible]

Jackson: For private regular public and private universities, it's 7-9%, but if you count all the proprietary and for profit, then you can run as close to 50%. But you're right, I mean for public and private regular four-year and beyond colleges and universities it's 7-9%. But Rensselaer is 1.3%. And so, the people can't pay off debts if they don't have the jobs and the pay. And we've attracted and we do retain world class faculty, and as a consequence, the research funding has tripled as well over the time.

And so, I just want you to understand that with the New Polytechnic, with, you know, unique initiatives that we've undertaken and that does include the Summer Arch, it includes the data intensity because data science and data analytics, you know, are driving so many things in all professions. And we have the HASS inquiry courses, we have the institute-wide research centers and initiatives that are focused on what we call the hard problems. The Rensselaer idea, the Jefferson project, et cetera. And of course there's CLASS. And so we don't apologize for what we're doing, because we think we have made the Rensselaer degree more valuable. The demand for our graduates is high. Now, any given year, a given person can say, "Well, I didn't get a job when I graduated." But in the end we do pretty well. But that's because we start out very well in terms of the students who come here and choose to come here. So in spite of what you might feel are difficult discussions and so on, we're delighted that you're here and we're glad that you've chosen to be here. And if there are ways we can make the experience even better for you because that's what we wanna do, educationally and otherwise, then please tell us. And so I wanna thank you for coming out this afternoon and thank you for all the time and attention. Thank you very much.

[applause]

[Timestamp: 01:15:49]