

From: Justin Etzine

Date: Mon, Nov 13, 2017 at 10:46 PM

Subject: [RAA Board] Recent news around protests, the Student Union, and administration actions

To: RAA Board

Hi, all. I had tried to send this earlier today, but I'm hearing that it was never delivered to the Board. Please see the message below.

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Dear RAA Trustees,

I have reviewed the 'talking points' document provided by the Dean of Students Office and SCER, which was sent to the Board earlier today. I believe it is my duty as Grand Marshal to provide insight into what I view as a dishonest attempt to delegitimize student concerns.

Firstly, and most alarmingly, the document quotes former Director of the Union Rick Hartt as saying that the process used by the Executive Board to "put forward the candidates they find acceptable" has always been a recommendation. This quote is used to justify the claim that the Union is running no differently "than it was two or five or ten years ago."

However, this is not what Mr. Hartt said. In actuality, he explained how the "process was so student-driven from the get-go," and that the group of students participating in the hiring process would ultimately submit a recommendation to the Executive Board. As he put it, "the Executive Board would vote to either approve or disapprove the recommendation. Now, there would be a number of people from student government who would be involved in that process. A lot of Executive Board members would be involved in that process, and those individuals who were involved would make that presentation to the Executive Board." The claim that the Union is not run any differently than it was two, five, or ten years ago is not only inaccurate, but it serves to both downplay and undermine the extent of student governance that existed historically. For 127 years, the Union was—but is no longer—student-run. The student body wants to see their Union continue with a student-run future, and we have proposed means by which this can occur.

In another talking point, AVP Apgar references "several conversations" and an email sent from SCER on October 12 as proof of notice to the community that barriers would be established. I would like to note that not only was the email vague regarding the details of the "event boundary"—mentioning only that it was "near the south side of campus"—but also that the October 12 email didn't arrive in my inbox until just before 4 pm that day, as was apparently the case for most students with whom I checked. As this amounts to no more than a day's notice in advance of the peaceful demonstration while in the midst of a busy academic week on campus, I think it was unreasonable to expect most students to have viewed the email by October 13. Furthermore, prior to this, posters and social media in support of the capital campaign week had clearly advertised the best viewing location for the fireworks to be within the newly-established "event boundary," and these posters and social media with conflicting information had been published and circulating for weeks. Expecting a very late notice about an event barrier—which

makes no mention of the area being “restricted”—to become common knowledge literally overnight after weeks of promulgating a procedure that is directly contrary to the former seems unfair at best. I would also like to add that “leading” the demonstration is neither commensurate with moving the barrier nor encouraging crossing of the barrier.

Additionally, to AVP Apgar’s point about anonymity, I believe the students coordinating the “Save the Union” efforts are hiding behind anonymity for legitimate reasons, first and foremost being a concern for their academic safety. The students who have been adjudicated as “leading” the October 13 protest have been hit with steep judicial charges in response to their participation. As a student leader who has personally experienced frightening ramifications as a result of merely representing my peers—which has included comments from administrators explicitly referencing expulsion—I understand all too well from where their concerns stem.

Much of this so-called “twisted information” is no fault of the students; rather, the information being disseminated by students is supported by references, research, facts, and eyewitness accounts. Given this hard work, I have to commend my fellow classmates for their research and their fact-based points. If the administration continues to point to misinformation as a major issue for discrediting students’ concerns and marginalizing students’ voices, then I ask: what misinformation is being spread? What ulterior motives could students possibly have? If any recent situation would give rise to the question of ulterior motives, I would point to the choice of each and every administrator present at the capital campaign launch event to not approach a single protester and ask them to “modify their conduct so as to comply with regulations,” per the Rules for Maintenance of Public Order section of the *Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities*, especially considering the administration now unilaterally authors the policies in the *Handbook*.

Our nation is clearly in a state of political contempt, and a number of universities and cities have sadly fallen victim to viciously dangerous and destructive protests. In sharp contrast, our students demonstrated poise, respect, calmness, and inclusivity in their October 13th demonstration. This could have served as a fantastic opportunity for positive attention for RPI, given how refreshingly passionate yet respectful our students are. Unfortunately, it has become apparent that free speech is not a right afforded to current RPI students, let alone one that is celebrated.

Respectfully,  
Justin

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**Justin Etzine**  
152nd Grand Marshal  
Student Body President  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Talking Points from Dean of Students, Travis T. Apgar

Good morning,

Below are talking points you may use in response to inquiries on judicial matters from the campaign launch event. The talking points were sent to us from SCER. Below is what was shared by Travis Apgar with The Poly last week. They didn't print his full statement (leaving out the first two sentences) but you can find his full statement below.

The Poly article: <https://poly.rpi.edu/2017/11/09/dean-of-students-office-begins-judicial-inquiries-into-protest-participation/>

From Travis:

**Here is the full statement, which you can use to inform your responses should you have students or alumni contacting you.**

“It would be inappropriate for me to comment on any individual student’s situation related to the incident on October 13, 2017 in which individuals breached security barriers as part of an unauthorized demonstration which took place near the VCC. There is ample information to show that persons who have since been identified as current students, were participants in the conduct. The area was partitioned off to accommodate an event that was taking place in multiple buildings in that area of campus on that evening. It is our duty to address such violations, and to determine the extent to which there may have been violations of Institute policies and standards. One of our goals in doing this is to educate our students, using every interaction as a growth and learning opportunity; and to respond with any appropriate consequences for the type and magnitude of the infraction. There are times that we accomplish these goals with simple non-judicial meetings and dialogue, and there are times when the conduct is serious enough that it is managed by the Rensselaer judicial process.

In this particular situation, I had several conversations prior to the 13th in which I shared that if people were to gather that day and comply with security procedures, including staying behind the partitioning, there would be no action necessary. That is not what transpired when the group made the decision to push through the partitioning and walk to the area of the event. I am incredibly thankful that no physical harm resulted from any of this group’s actions. There were highly tense moments during the time those individuals took the previously described actions as it was unclear what they would do next. Thankfully, the Rensselaer Public Safety Officers, Troy Police, and other Rensselaer staff on the scene handled the matter with commendable calmness in the face of a crowd that did not seem to respect the boundaries.”

#### **Additional talking Points**

- It is our responsibility to enforce our policies. In this case, we gave multiple and specific notices to the community that barriers would be established, only those authorized can enter the partitioned area and that we will enforce the perimeter. (See my statement above, and October 12, 2017 email from Strategic Communications Re: Safety for Reunion & Homecoming)
- The follow up with individuals identified as being present in the demonstration crowd is not likely to reach the level of judicial, these are educational conversations
- Those leading the unapproved demonstration, or encouraging the crowd to cross the barrier and enter the event area will face appropriate judicial action

- Those who hide behind anonymity or have an ulterior motive have grossly twisted information to deliver a disinformation campaign
- **The Union is not running any differently than it was two or five or ten years ago**
  - Students have and will continue to be central to hiring of staff, including the Director position
  - The process the Union Executive Board uses to put forward the candidates they find acceptable, in other words, make a recommendation...is no different than the days when Rick Hartt was here (See: [https://poly.rpi.edu/2017/11/08/former\\_union\\_director\\_interviewed/](https://poly.rpi.edu/2017/11/08/former_union_director_interviewed/)) It was a recommendation then, it is a recommendation now.

**Travis T. Apgar**

*Assistant Vice President for Student Life*

*Dean of Students*

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