

# Interview with the President

April 16, 2010

On April 16, 2010, members of the *Poly* Editorial Board conducted an interview with President Shirley Ann Jackson. The purpose of this interview was to provide Jackson the chance to respond to questions from the community. Also attending the interview were Provost Robert Palazzo, Chief of Staff and Associate Vice President for Policy and Planning Laban Coblenz, Vice President for Finance and Chief Financial Officer Virginia Gregg, Vice President for Student Life Eddie Ade Knowles, Vice President for Administration Claude Rounds, Vice President for Strategic Communications and External Relations William Walker, and Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education Prabhat Hajela.

Transcription by Holly Steciuk; photos by Sara Melikian.



**Poly:** What do you currently see as the Institute's greatest strength?

**Jackson:** Well, its greatest strength is rooted in its historical legacy, which means that it is founded to educate those who would apply some science to the common purposes of life. And that has given the university its science and technological, science, and engineering focus over the years. It has expanded its academic offerings and its prelude from the academic side greatly since its founding, but it's always remained true to its fundamental roots, and that's why I think all of you come here. And that's whether you study the arts, or whether you study mechanical engineering or theoretical physics, and its strength is that it makes a difference. Both in terms of the students we educate—which means the alums that we send out into the world and what they ultimately do, and if you look over the history of Rensselaer and you look at the lineage of its alumni and alumnae have accomplished both of course personal career achievements—but, as well what, they have done that has been impactful for this country and countries around the world, and the people in those countries. Then it's an astounding story and it's one we continue in terms of our students and the graduates, but it is rooted as well in the work of the faculty; the research they do, the kind of impact they have because of the work they do, and how that then plays into the education they provide in the classrooms and the labs.

Technological universities are unique beings ... There aren't that many of them and we try to strengthen Rensselaer, we try to broaden it as appropriate but remain true to our unique root and mission.

**Poly:** On the other hand, what do you see as the Institute's biggest weakness right now or areas to improve upon?

**Jackson:** You know, I don't see inherent weaknesses in Rensselaer; any institution has challenges, whether it has to do with the issues *du jour*, or what's happening in the larger society. There has been a great economic dislocation in this society, and even though it looks like we are coming out of the great recession, those effects are still with us and will be for some time. But I think we do an excellent job in managing within that context.

If you ask me what I would like most to see at Rensselaer, I would like to see us focus all together more on two things. One is community—internally. Everybody appreciate everyone and what people's relative responsibilities and reasons for being here are; think of additional ways to bring people together through events and other kinds of initiatives, and to seek information as you are, and dispel rumors so that they don't grow legs and end up causing people to be confused or be unduly concerned about things. Whether you would put that as a weakness or just something I'd like to see changed, those are things I think we can all work on together, including me.

**Poly:** You've accomplished a lot since you have been here. Is there one accomplishment that you are particularly proud of?

**Jackson:** Well, I don't look at it that way. Rensselaer is a complex institution, and there are many parts to it. Over a decade ago, when we set out to develop *The Rensselaer Plan*, it was a holistic plan, and if you look at the six broad goals of that plan, they cover the whole waterfront in terms of what the university is. If you look at the specific verbal commitments in the *Plan*, they are very comprehensive. That's why we spend time talking about the hundred and forty commitments statements; the "we will" statements. I would say the greatest accomplishment is the sum total of all the things we have done that have repositioned the university and created a greater understanding of its value proposition and I think we do a better job across all the fronts that we have focused on in the plan.

Undergraduate education, enhancing that, and that means in all regards, obviously academics, but broader opportunities as well as how our students actually live. Research and graduate education; we give them a specific focus in that arena. Scientific and technical entrepreneurship as something that we teach, we research, and we do, has expanded into a broader focus on innovation and that's why things like the recognition that come with things like the Lemelson-Rensselaer Student Prize are important. Diversity—diversity has always had a broad meaning. Obviously gender, ethnic, and cultural diversities, but overall inclusiveness and a broader intellectual and geographic diversity for the Institute as well. Then there is our impact on communities: our internal communities, our alumni communities, the broader national and international communities, and you see that reflected in a number of things that we do and initiatives we've begun and carried out under the *Plan*. And then finally we talk about the enabling activities which have to do with our administrative functions, and we've come a long way down the pike in that regard, whether it has to do with how we handle our physical plant, our communications and messaging—which always is a work in progress at any institution—or how we handle our finances. And so we have worked across that front, and that's why there is no such thing [as one achievement], because the *Plan* was meant to move the whole institution and we think we have done this.

**Poly:** Is there anything you have not been able to accomplish in your time here that you have wanted to accomplish?

**Jackson:** You know, there are a thousand things. I've expressed my focus and intent and that of others through the *Plan*, because that's how I operate, and that is what has allowed us to bring things together and to accomplish as much as we have. But we're not done, and so that's why we have the CLASS initiative. This was the next anchor point to strengthen the undergraduate experience. We've begun our activities on the international front with the international programs and expecting our students to have an international experience. The greater focus on research, strengthening under CLASS and under the academic umbrellas, the Living/Learning Communities. We want to build a new center for science; we still have Phase II of ECAV. There are a lot of things—rejuvenating, rebuilding, and enhancing the faculty with faculty hiring, because the root of the university [is] its tenured and tenure-track faculty and so we still have a fairly robust hiring plan this year, but this is going to go on. We still have facilities to renovate. So that's why ... I don't speak in singular terms, and in many ways, you see, that's the harder way to do things.

I could say the Jackson Initiative is [that] I am going to internationalize the student experience. So I get that done and I can say that's my greatest achievement. Or the Jackson Initiative is that I'm going to get a big gift for the university, so I get 360 and I'm done. That's how many people do operate. But that's never been what I thought Rensselaer needed ...

If one talks about internationalizing the Student Experience, then that is part of an overall holistic perspective about how we wish to educate our students—to have people have more of a global view, a broader multi-cultural perspective, an ability to work across disciplines and across sectors. That gets embedded in the academic programs whether you are talking about things in the Swanson Multidisciplinary Design Lab or about how research is done in an interdisciplinary way, or about grappling big issues like sustainability, or energy and the environment. All of these things also broaden the intellectual for our students and faculty, and for all of us. It plays into internationalizing the student experience. It plays into what CLASS is about. So these things are never picked out singularly, and that makes it hard for people sometimes to appreciate the whole picture—because people want to talk about one thing, and the one thing, is a plan to be a top tier,

world class technological research university with global reach and global impact, and it's never changed. But as we've gone along, our view has broadened.

If there is one message, it is that there are multiple streams, but they all are tied together under this overall headline of what it means to be a world-class institution. And Rensselaer has always had a very strong focus on undergraduate education, and we've never abandoned that. In fact, we feel that our play is that we have what I like to call unique undergraduate college embedded within a great technological research university—and that is why we do CLASS. That is why we have the kinds of degree programs we have. So, the message is complex, but there is a unifying theme.

**Poly:** Many students expressed disappointment in the elimination of the traditional language classes. Can you talk a little bit about the future of foreign language at RPI both in the short and long term?

**Jackson:** I think you've got to have context here. Now I went to MIT as an undergrad and I was a physics major. I started out, actually, in electrical engineering, until I took quantum mechanics, and I decided that's what I loved. But I also was taking philosophy and studying existentialism, and I was planning to be a double major in physics and philosophy and I almost went to grad school in a joint physics and philosophy grad program. In the end, I changed my mind, but MIT didn't give tenure to the particular philosophy professors, so I was quite upset. But then I thought about why I was really at MIT, and I was there for the broader technological education that MIT provided, and so I moved on. So that's one part of the context that there are always evolutions that can occur.

But the second is more important. And that is that if you look out strategically, the world is changing. There are emerging economies and emerging nations that 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago nobody really thought about. The world is obviously much more global, and the idea that, as a technological university, we're going cover every language that is strategically important, in the conventional way, is just not obtainable. But that doesn't mean we don't intend to offer the greatest language opportunity we can. There has been a lot of discussion around languages, like French and German. I studied German myself in college ... And then I lived in Switzerland, and so I studied French. But if you asked me would those be the languages I would study [today]—no. I would probably study Mandarin, I'd study Hindi, I would study Swahili, I would study Russian. Nobody has asked me about those languages.

We've got to kind of come along in terms of this broader context of the range of languages that are important in the world; what communication really means. Then you bring it back to who we are as a technological university and say, what then can we do; both to help students in the specific transition away from this traditional but very limited language focus we've had to a broader context, and doing something really important that has to do with ... how people learn cognition in learning. And so with that I'm gonna turn to Robert [Palazzo] and Prabhat [Hajela].

**Palazzo:** I agree with the president that the traditional language instruction is simply not going to be adequate to meet those kinds of challenges. Technology is going to play an extremely important role in language acquisition, retention, and refresh throughout the rest of your life. There is no question about it. Do we even have the technical tools right now that are going to be necessary? We're looking into that, and we're not convinced that the technical capability in the immersion environments—access potential and the methods that are taught in language instruction are adequate—anywhere.

**Jackson:** But we intend to create them.

**Palazzo:** Right, and so, we're looking into this in the deepest way possible, visiting places that claim to be the best language instruction incubators in the world. Our goal is to develop a center for cognition, communications and culture here on the campus not only for the purpose of delivering language instruction opportunity, but to develop the cultural platform where you can have an immersive experience here on the campus with members that are here or travelling through this community from cultures all over the world. [Cultural exchange is] really a wonderful vision. Language opportunity certainly is a component of that vision. But how we learn language and how we teach language as a component of that vision and cultural exchange is also a component of that vision. On the short term Professor Hajela



April 16, 2010

# Interview with the President

has been working to develop three approaches that are available essentially right now to language instruction.

**Hajela:** The kinds of languages covered by the National Association of Self Instruction in Languages are those critical, national-need type of languages that Dr. Jackson just spoke about. So, we are now members of the NASIL Consortium. A student will have the ability to access material. There are eight languages that are available either on the DVD format or online, and we issue you a password, [and] you simply go online and you are able to access the material. And these are languages like Kurdish, Mandarin, and Cantonese included there [in addition to Korean and Brazilian Portuguese]. NASIL was essentially designed to provide language instruction in those areas that are less subscribed on campus. You find the classical languages [everywhere]; you find French and Spanish, you find German available, but these languages are the critical languages. So that facility is available to students if you want to do self improvement; you can go online and start to learn that language. If you want to do it online, the license is issued to you for six months; if you want to do a DVD format, then essentially, it's like purchasing books and supplies, and you have the material. Now we are looking at ways of working with colleges who are part of the NASIL Consortium in the area who will be able to provide instructors or folks who can lead you and a group of students in conversational sessions to improve your speaking abilities. That's one [thing].

Now, the other thing that I am really pushing on hard right now ties in with our international focus. I think that language instruction and cultural immersion, they should go hand in hand. As a result, as part of our study abroad program, during the inter session break and at the beginning of summer starting in 2011, we will be introducing a three-week, intensive language study course. Right now we are looking at Spanish in Costa Rica or Panama. We are looking at Singapore for Chinese instruction, and we are considering India for perhaps a Hindi immersion experience. All of these languages will be available in online format to our students during the fall or spring semester so they might prepare themselves adequately, so that when they get into this intense experience they are not starting from scratch. We should look for it to make its first appearance in the 2011 Inter-session break.

We are continuing our negotiations with a company called INCLEWA, which works with students in groups of six, that's the maximum that they feel they can actually be able to converse with to get the right kind of language assistance to you and understand whether you are learning the right things. So, this is the third program that we are looking at. Hopefully that program also will follow shortly thereafter. It's not quite in place for me to say today that it will be available to students in the fall of 2010, but it might very well be ... I would blast an e-mail over the summer to all the students if this program does become available over the summer.

**Jackson:** And then, if you would look more broadly, people have made the argument [that] it's not the same to do the technology enabled approach, but [as Hajela] has indicated, the real immersion comes from really being there, in the culture. Therefore, it is a key part of the stream of the internationalization of the student experience. You can sit and take classes in the classroom setting or technology-based setting all day long, but unless you go there, or unless you really talk to people who are native speakers in the language, you don't understand the cultural nuance, you don't understand the broad context. But we have a very international campus, and through the CLASS initiative, through the living and learning environment, we have the opportunity to use those as part of a robust approach to creating a kind of beginning cultural immersion as well as ability to acquire conversational and even literary facility in a language.

And so the real message, again, is [that] it doesn't just exist in a vacuum, but it is part of the overall context for how we are looking to evolve the student experience. Robert [Palazzo] mentioned the center for cognition, communication, and culture, and it really relates to this question of how ... we understand cultural nuance within the context of how people learn—how does that play out in terms of communications, and language acquisition, and the nuances that go with it is one stream of that; but it is part of a larger stream that has to do with cognitive science, neuroscience, the technology enabled immersion, and so on, and how all of these things play off of each other. So, what we have in mind in the end is pretty ambitious, and we think that we have the ultimate platform for it, which is EMPAC. And Rensselaer pioneered the studio classroom ... but now the



next evolution of that is to use a platform like EMPAC where you can use everything from the knowledge of how people learn, to game engines, to computer graphics to create unique environments that help people to learn, whether it be language acquisition or something else, like studying interactive proteins. But it also happens to be a living, learning laboratory where you also learn about cognition and perception and the rapidity with which people learn and the retention of what they learn. And so this is appropriate for a place like Rensselaer.

**Poly:** Aside from the '86 Field, the next phases of ECAV, the work related to the science center, and the president's house, what kind of big projects are planned?

**Jackson:** We don't do project planning in advance of program planning. So what we're looking at is stopping and taking stock of where we are in *The Rensselaer Plan*. What the next evolution is, what our big thrusts are, and out of that will come a more broadly based campus, facilities, and building plan. And so I have no hot new projects, but I think what we have done has been pretty astounding in terms of not only the new things we've built, but the general renovation and re-purposing of the facilities and buildings all across the campus.

And so we have CLASS, we have internationalizing the student experience, we have the Chapel + Cultural Center, we have sustainability, orientation, and initiatives, we have the signature thrusts; and in the end, those will drive where we want to go. But the center for science is a linchpin, because doing that allows us to coalesce a lot of dispersed activities, and in bringing those together in a world-class facility it frees up other space ... Having said that, let me give you Claude [Rounds].

**Rounds:** We really are at a point where we're looking for a comprehensive strategic look at the programs of the future, so we would design facility and capital plan accordingly. But, nevertheless, this upcoming fiscal year we're doing \$4.5 million worth of deferred

maintenance and work to upgrade our safety systems. We'll be starting shortly after commencement with the first phase of restoration of some façades, the light colored brick on the Low Center. We'll be starting the first phase, the replacement of that brick, this summer. We'll be doing work on fire alarm systems—upgrade the fire alarm systems mostly in the area of our network capabilities. Upgrade on the network capabilities; we're gonna be starting the first phase of a program to replace some of the emergency call phones and the call lights. The first generation of these phones has outgrown their useful life, so we're going to replace those. We're going to ... develop a digital computer lab for the School of Architecture. We're also going to invest in and develop a bridge in the School of Science and science programs and science labs while we continue to plan forward for the new center for science. We're going to make some short-term investment in equipment and facility upgrades on a priority basis in the School of Science so that some of the priorities will not necessarily wait until we start construction on the new building.

We are going to continue the phase in our landscaping improvement; the '86 Field and that area being the focus this particular year. We're also gonna invest several hundred thousand dollars in some maintenance upgrades, cosmetics, refurbishment in resident halls, but there is not a single focus resident hall project. And we have a number of projects designed to support some of the ongoing research initiatives. We're currently working on a project to facilitate the Social and Cognitive Science Networks Program in the substantial grant we got from the Army. So, Dr. Jackson is crystal clear in terms of where we go. There's going

to be a lot of discussion over the next 10 years at Rensselaer, but at the same time we still have a physical play here that we are going to continue to invest in from a deferred maintenance and safety viewpoint for the next phase of our planning.

**Poly:** The Requiem Performance that happened was a wonderful display of RPI's talented performers and was very well attended. What is your opinion on student access to and use of EMPAC?

**Jackson:** Well, my opinion has been [that] I built it for the entire Rensselaer community, and I'm always amazed, I really am, whenever these questions come up. Now that's not to say that there haven't been bumps in the road, but there is never any intent, you know, that EMPAC is some special thing that nobody gets to use or touch. The same is true, by the way, of the East Campus Athletic Village. I've been clear that those were to provide world-class facilities for our varsity athletes, but to provide world-class facilities and gathering spaces for the whole Rensselaer community. And when we talk about the Rensselaer community, first and foremost, we always start with our students. But it also takes time to gear up and evolve programs and facilities for the broader use, and I think what the Requiem Performance demonstrated is that we are beginning to do that. But having said that, let me let Laban [Coblentz] and Eddie [Ade Knowles] speak more specifically to that.

**Knowles:** OK, I would just say that before [it] was actually a building—before the first shovel went in the ground—we agreed that we needed to start thinking about how the students would be connected to EMPAC. And some of you are closer to this than others, but you know that [Managing Director of the Union] Rick Hartt and I really partnered with [Director of EMPAC] Johannes [Goebel] to start designing ways to create the opportunities for student engagement in EMPAC in a very formal way, and over time witness that evolution. Just a few examples: several weeks ago, there were major performances by a number of groups here in the Union, in the McNeil Room. That will be repeated again, but it's going to happen at EMPAC. And so we're doing what I call the showcasing of our performing arts groups in a number of venues, EMPAC being one of them. You know that we did a signature event last year with Béla Fleck. We're doing another one this year [with Girl Talk], but it's not going to be at EMPAC, it's gonna happen at ECAV.

The point I'm getting at is that EMPAC is an important venue for us, but it's one of many that we have on campus and I'm really—I don't want to shift away from your question, but I want you to see in the broader perspective, the president and the cabinet focus on, "How do we create multiple venues on campus that provide opportunities for students to really have artistic activity occur on a number of levels?" If you think about it, we have over 18 performing arts groups now, they're performing all over campus, they're doing noontime concerts, some of them take place in Academy Hall, some take place at EMPAC, some take place at ECAV, and more will actually occur there now that the first phase is completed. So, from the vantage point of what Rick and I envisioned of the Student Life Arts Initiative is to continue joining with Johannes in how we plan high-quality events that are appropriate for EMPAC, but at the same time, how do we take advantage of all the other venues that we now have so that we are showcasing the arts across the spectrum of what exists today?

**Coblentz:** The only thing I would add, I guess, is to say that the answer to your question is continuously evolving; it's one we take really seriously. The last time we talked about this as a cabinet—in terms of what could we do to enhance the student musical experience at Rensselaer, because we have a lot of people who come here and perhaps are engineers by trade or they are arts by trade, or whatever, but they have a musical interest and EMPAC is a drawing point for them—the last time that we really talked about that as a cabinet was this morning. And it's something that a group of us have been talking about repeatedly. Dr. Jackson's made it clear that she wants to dig into it in more detail this summer. So the point there is that it's actively on our minds. I'd say, in addition, we've kind of loosely



# Interview with the President April 16, 2010

divided student interests into three areas, and these are not hard categories, but it helps to sort of frame the question: People who have an interest in performance—and that of course that ranges across a wide spectrum. Those who have an interest in, sort of, theory—the classic way of approaching music or art or those sorts of things. And then people who have an interest in particular in what you might call music engineering or the connection between—particularly with the electronic arts strength that we have here—the connection between the performing arts and how those performing arts are technologically supported. So in that arena, as many of the programs at EMPAC have evolved, student involvement in those areas has evolved with it.

So you're seeing, for example, classes that have been held at EMPAC on acoustics, and on music theory and so forth, that [are put] there as a particular professor says, "I would really like to do this particular thing." Then you have research that's going on. So when Barbara Cutler does her work from an architectural perspective, she's got a whole crowd of grad students that are using that. Rich Radkey, with his camera trucking, with the same sort of thing. In the performance that you named, Mozart's Requiem [Mass in D minor], we have what Johannes talked to me afterward about it as a milestone. Because that was behind the scenes, actually, the very first time that everything associated with the hi-tech audio/video equipment that EMPAC runs was entirely run by RPI TV. And they were doing a recording, a re-purposing, which they'll digitally master and release and so forth, but what's important there is that with the level of equipment that EMPAC has, obviously that's something that we

don't take lightly, to have students on there, but that reflects a long program of bringing various students in different skill sets up to speed to the point that the EMPAC engineers felt comfortable that they could do that independently.

So that's a sampling, and I think that the last point that I would make is that—well, two points. One is that when you look at the actual cluster of events at EMPAC we've programmed around 30 percent of what goes on at EMPAC does not originate from necessarily the EMPAC programming, but from different parts of campus that use EMPAC for different things. That could be an enrollment event, it could be something that is originated by students, it could be something [like] faculty coming in and doing classes. And in almost all these situations, students have directed a fairly heavy involvement. And then the last thing is that, in connection to what Eddie said, when we sat down maybe two months ago with the Rensselaer Music Association, we also agreed that we would try to help with the fees associated with students putting on a certain number of performances or things throughout the year at EMPAC to try to make sure that if isn't an inhibitor for the RMA when they have particular events they want to do.

**Palazzo:** [EMPAC has only been available for] about a year-and-a-half at most. In that time, I would say that it's pretty clear to me that there are multiple points of student interaction, interfacing, and access. The points that have all been made here—experimental points at the graduate and undergraduate level facilitated through faculty engagement. Media points—students using the media opportunities and capabilities there in it either with faculty or through student-based events. Performances, whether they are put on by students, for students, student-attended, or more general student performances. Alumni—people who aren't really here are coming back to visit events there. So it's really serving the whole community in a full spectrum of activity with multiple points of access and now even growing into departmental-level access in some of their exhibitions, getting now into the visualization activities, haptic activities more related to research. So it's blossoming, I would say, with many, many, many opportunities for students to engage.

**Coblentz:** I should have added one thing, actually. Because it's an important one. Dr. Jackson made it mandatory, when we were talking about the artists in residence contracts and how we handled that, that part of any artist in residence visiting, unless it's not actually a physical interaction at EMPAC, would include in some form, workshops or interactive opportunities so that students could be engaged. [Vice President for

Information Services and Technology and CIO] John Kolb and Evan Douglas, the Dean of Architecture, and I snuck into an example of that. When Laurie Anderson was here as an artist in residence she had three specific short increments that she was here working on the performance piece for—I think it was for the winter Olympics—but in any case, if we looked at the population of who was sitting in on those workshops it was almost entirely graduate and undergraduate students. There were a few administrators who tried to sneak in because we wanted to have a chance to see what was happening there. But that's also a built-in feature.

**Poly:** So, kind of on a similar note, is there going to be a vendor in Evelyn's Café soon? And what's the timeline on that?

**Jackson:** Yes. Yes. Soon, just very soon.

**Rounds:** Matter of fact, we had a meeting yesterday and ... we're gearing up the deli operation in the café to begin in mid-August, but that doesn't mean they are going to wait until mid-August to start having a presence in the building.

**Jackson:** We've made a decision to take on a vendor—we'll announce it at the appropriate point. By the time the academic year opens next year it'll be fully operational.

**Poly:** In light of the on-campus housing requirement for sophomores, are there planned upgrades to residence halls and any residence halls in specific?

**Rounds:** Yeah, I mean, generally our work will

occur throughout the campus. So at this particular point in time there is no single project.

**Jackson:** But we do a lot of work on the Res. Halls over the summer.

**Poly:** On a similar note, are there any planned renovations for classrooms?

**Rounds:** Certainly, [though] rather than talk about classrooms, we'd like to talk about academic infrastructure, because the labs and the studios have to be [treated] in the same perspective as the classroom. Right now we're focusing on some of the science facilities including the science labs. We also have some recommendations; there is a task force that gives us recommendations, and a facility committee; the Student Senate offers me input as well based on observations and feedback that they get from the student population. And that input is now being looked at on the scope of work and priority perspective to determine what areas we're gonna be working on. And the folks in the School of Science are helping to identify which labs we prioritize. That information is not available yet for an announcement.

**Jackson:** On the other hand, if you have specific classrooms that have specific problems, you should make sure to transmit that through FIXX to Claude [Rounds]'s folks.

**Hajela:** I personally walked through most of the classrooms on campus during the fall semester and we prepared a list of what needed to be done and where. And that's how these prioritized lists are prepared. We try and see, even down to the aesthetics ... looking at the seats in the classrooms and seeing ... do they match?

**Palazzo:** It's an annual surveillance activity to gauge the infrastructure in the classrooms and labs. For instance, coming in the

next fall, Professor Hajela and I will look at what are the classrooms, what are the outfitting needs, we'll go into the summer session making sure those needs are met. We also have longer term needs that go into our performance planning and capital requests that the president would receive, which is a combined result of all that activity which is always pretty much ongoing.

**Jackson:** When I came to Rensselaer, I inherited a very huge deferred maintenance backlog, and we still have a deferred maintenance backlog that's large, but we made a lot of progress because as we've made renovations of facilities, by definition, we've fixed a lot of other related things. And what many people don't see are the big infrastructural things that we've done on the campus, whether you're talking about steam lines, electrical conduits, and provision for the campus fiber optic backbone, communication systems ... Most of them actually occur over the summer, so most people don't see them unless they happen to be around in the summer. Sometimes we have surprises, and so we have to deal with them then. We've replaced, over the time of the plan, the roofs on 22 different buildings here on the campus, and so these are things, what I call the non-pretty projects that ... make a big difference in terms of the functionality of various places. But I think it's fair to say we've systemized more carefully and continue to systematize the assessments we make of classrooms, Res. Halls and the major facilities try to do upgrades every year as well as having the specific approach through FIXX to do specific things that may cause a problem during the year.

**Rounds:** And student input is an important part; I [get] significant student input through the facilities committee. The Student Senate is very aggressive in sharing information, Lee Sharma has been very helpful in that. You participate in meetings, Pizza with the President, Pizza with the Cabinet, [which] are excellent sources of information. I get a lot of feedback from the president as she has spoken to the students from time to time and has feedback, and then the president just asked for your feedback, so please participate in the process, because it does affect the decisions.

**Jackson:** From time to time, I actually walk through the residence halls, not always when you all are around, and sometimes that plays a role in things instantaneously being on the list, such as Sharp Hall a couple years ago. And, I intend to do more of that as well, to make sure we're covering things and keeping things at a baseline level.

**Poly:** As national and international interest in RPI increases, the admissions process has become more selective. Can you comment on how this affects the student body profile?

**Jackson:** Well, I think the generalized statement is, yes, it is more selective, so it is harder to get into Rensselaer. In the end, that translates into those who increasingly apply and those whom we admit having ever escalating academic credentials, in terms of the usual measures. But we are also always on the lookout for unique individuals that we think can contribute to Rensselaer, and the academic credentials don't tell you everything. Our [student] body is people coming with stronger language arts skills, and people have a broader range of interests beyond science and engineering. We certainly have a greater geographic spread, and we have an increasing—significantly increased—gender diversity, a more slowly increasing ethnic diversity, and an increasing international representation. This relates mainly to the undergraduate body. On the graduate side, a huge percentage of our graduate students are international students anyway, and what we've really focused on is trying to have, as well as attracting the best students overall, more women graduate students, minorities,

[and] underrepresented minorities. We never have any specific quotas or things like that, we just feel that, if we reflect, if we want to impact the world and impact the nation, we should reflect that.

**Poly:** With these new world-class facilities we have like ECAV, [will there be] a move of the rest of the athletic department to the Division-I level, joining men and women's hockey?



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# Interview with the President

**Jackson:** It's the kind of thing where discussion comes up from time to time, but we have no specific plans to make such a move at this point. We're reserving and preserving our split division sets. It makes us unique. There are only eight colleges and universities in the country that have split Division I/Division III sports, and it's served us well. And, it's interesting, because, our perspective, and certainly mine, for building ECAV was simply to provide world-class facilities for our students, not because there was some inherent plan behind it to go to Division I status. And we are making renovations in the Houston Field House over the summer that will make a substantial change; you probably won't recognize it much when you come back in the fall. And I do ask you to remember that the village is just that, so it does include the Houston Field House. It's not just the new facilities. But no, we don't have any specific plans to change the divisional status of our athletics teams.

**Poly:** We were wondering if you could talk about the CLASS initiative, especially since it's kind of modeled off a liberal arts school's experience. Could you talk about how it integrates with the RPI community?

**Jackson:** Well, the original college model came out of places like Cambridge [University] and Oxford [University]. Those two [are] very venerable higher educational institutions, in the UK, [and] some people might argue that Oxford is more on the side of the liberal language arts. But Cambridge is very strongly focused, and very famous in the sciences. Both of them have college systems. Yale is a major research university and it spans the full spectrum, and it is the grand-daddy, so to speak, of the college system. And it really is a mixed model. It's not just a residential college model, because the clustering is not just residentially based, that's the commons, that we talk about with the live-in deans and ultimately the faculty dean of the commons and to have living, learning, and different kinds of opportunities and programming through that. But it also is time-based clustering based on your class year, and that's why we have the class deans. And just as we have a dean of the First-Year Experience, because students, as they are transitioning into Rensselaer from high school to college and through the first year, they have unique needs, unique experiences, and unique ways in which we can help them grow and enjoy and become anchored at Rensselaer. When they then become sophomores and start to move into majors and more specific experiences and thinking about career opportunities, there's a difference in what those needs would be, and that's why we will assign, beginning with the freshman class in the fall, a class dean. And so these things are [not only] meant to cover and be an advocate for the student, but also create new and specialized programming that will play through things that the students do as a class, as well as what specifically happens in the residence halls and through that system; [It will] also [be] working to bring the faculty and students together in ways beyond just the classroom and the laboratory, which is why we have a faculty dean of the commons to try to build on that, and ultimately faculty fellows who will be affiliated with the given residential commons.

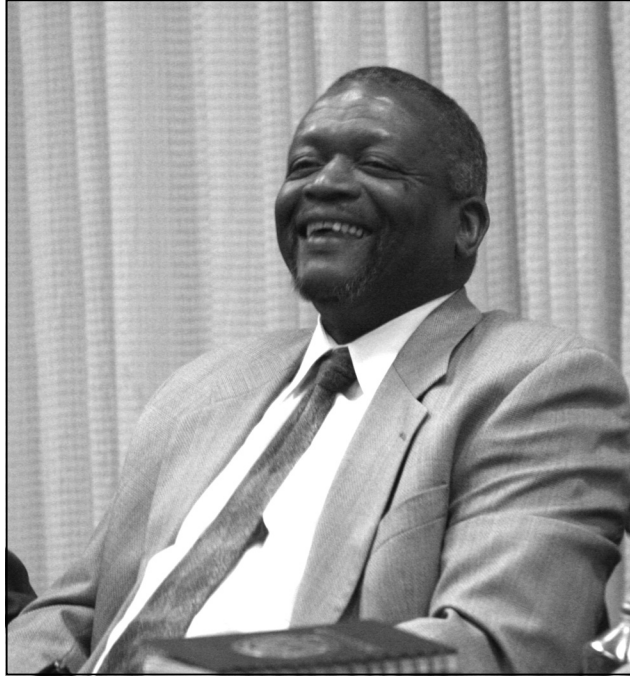
**Knowles:** Yes, I would add to what the president said that the model that we're creating is uniquely Rensselaer in that we've gone beyond what I would call the real classically defined residential college model that speaks primarily about the students who live in the residential campus. If you will, we're embracing fraternities and sororities.

**Jackson:** And off-campus students.

**Knowles:** Our students who are in the greek life community are now part of the Greek Life Commons, and students who live off-campus are considered part of the Off-Campus Commons. And that, in and of itself, is unique within the whole Residential College Model. I think our student leaders who went off to visit some of these institutions that have these models in place did not find that type of fully embracing model that says, wherever our students live, they are being embraced within our residential college model.

The other aspect of this that I think is unique for us is that there are aspects of what we are embedding within all of our commons, some core themes that you have heard me talk about at Pizza with the Cabinet, that focus [on] some of our strategic areas in terms of signature thrusts for us in our academic programs, in media and the arts. We talked earlier about EMPAC, we think about what we've done in creating an extraordinary venue, but it speaks to the hundreds about the opportunities for students in media and the arts. No Rensselaer student should graduate from this institution without having some type of experience in media and the arts, whether it's a major, or to engage in an activity as an artist in media or the broader arts, or just experiencing by virtue of having a chance to be engaged as an observer as members of the community. But when you think about some of the other core elements that we're focused on, in terms of personal development, individual roles, this

should occur over the course of the student experience whether you're living in the residential, the greek life, or the off-campus commons. Or the focus on leadership development, you've got, yes, leadership activities, but now we're challenging the Archer Center to think about leadership development [as time-based].



What should that look like over the course of four years, and how does that play into broadening perspective of leadership development as potential global citizens?

The third aspect of this, in terms of professional development, is to really turn the concept as we've traditionally thought about it at Rensselaer, which is, I'll come here, I get a degree and then I go out and get a job. Prabhat and I are partnering on a much broader view of professional development that involves international experiences abroad, co-op experiences, international think tanks, national think tanks, professional development that begins to challenge you in ways that take you beyond your current major and links you to other opportunities that lead to pathways that you may not have considered coming to Rensselaer.

And then, of course, Communiversality, which is something that comes right out of *The Rensselaer Plan*. Think about the community of Rensselaer, but beyond that, how do you become engaged in the community of Troy, the state, the federal, and beyond, again, focusing on that over the course of four years as undergraduates?

We've asked the deans, the faculty deans, the assistant deans who are living in the commons, and then the class deans as they come on board, to rally around these core themes and to begin to think of ways to create from their vantage points robust opportunities that really infuse their student experience. When we went out to benchmark the other schools, we used it as an opportunity to learn about what they did. But we didn't use it as an opportunity to come back and say we're going to duplicate what they did, we've asked ourselves, what is it that we can take from that experience [in order to] create something that is uniquely Rensselaer? We believe that we are on to something that's unique for us, and it also positions us as the first technological research university to start, if you will, a residential college model.

**Hajela:** I think that from my perspective I can just add two more things to this. This is a unique opportunity to bring faculty and students into greater contact with each other in settings outside of the traditional classroom, and that's what I'll be working really hard at trying to accomplish through the CLASS system. That is, faculty will come in and talk about things that are of interest to them, but also at the same time learn about what interests you. And I think this is a great opportunity to do that. Number two is, this is a fantastic opportunity to re-think a support system for the students in the form of advising, in the form of supplemental instruction. Supplemental instruction goes on at Rensselaer right now, but we can do it much better, we believe, in this new model; and that's the other thing we are going to be introducing as part of this.

**Poly:** There has been a little tension lately with the issues of fire codes at the VCC and the use of RPIAlert, so we were wondering if you would comment on the relationship with Troy as it stands and any steps that either we or Troy could take to improve it.

**Jackson:** When you say Troy you have to parse it in a little more subtle way. There are a lot of people who work at Rensselaer, a lot of students who themselves live in Troy, so they themselves are Troy residents. There's a relationship with other major institutions in Troy. [With] Emma Willard School, Russell Sage [College], the hospitals, and the business community, I would say that, in those instances, our relationships are quite good. And then you look more broadly at the political environment as well as the officials of the city, we've had a particular rub with the fire chief and I've spoken with the

Mayor about that. There are a lot of things that have gone on there that have been unpleasant, and frankly, unfair. I think with the incident that occurred, when we had the lock down a week or so ago, there were some communications issues with Troy that, again, I have spoken with the Mayor about, but I think we shouldn't overplay or underplay what happened. If we see that there's a potential danger to the university community and our students in particular we're going to take various steps; that can go all the way from the lockdown, to using an audible alert system, to other steps, but, we work hard to work with the officials in Troy.

A historical perspective is always instructive as well. There have been a lot of changes in Troy over a multi-year period, over longer than a decade, and I've seen many [changes] since I've been here ... Have you ever heard of a program called TAP? It stands for the Troy Architecture Project [and] involved a group of Rensselaer faculty and staff who worked for many years with people in the neighborhoods, particularly in South Troy, to look at how they could rebuild their homes, revitalize their neighborhoods, and even going after joint money to get federal funds and funds from the state; there has been an evolution in South Troy that has come about as a consequence of that and a number of other efforts. And those were things that started long before I ever got here. The Children's Museum; I don't know if any of you were aware of that—it used to be called the Junior Museum when I got here, and it was in the Winslow Building, which originally belonged to Rensselaer, because Rensselaer sold it to the Junior Museum. Now the state ended up putting money into it and helped to improve the infrastructure, but the museum was still struggling financially. Rensselaer has made a number of direct grants to the Children's Museum and then ultimately we bought the Winslow Building back at a market price which helped the Children's Museum to eliminate their debt. We moved them and absorbed the cost of moving them to the Tech Park, and then we leased them space in the Tech Park at our lowest possible rent structure so that they could expand what they were doing and have a more appropriate venue for bringing children. We then ourselves, of course, are using the Winslow Building.

Rensselaer developed a local area network, and helped lead the development of a local area network for Troy and had them come through our portal to interact and be able to have an enhanced internet access. John Kolb is our CIO, led this whole thing in the greater region, working with the state CIO and CIO's from other colleges and businesses to create a Capital Area Wide Area Network. And these things are very important for attracting and entertaining businesses and improving international flow, including providing more access to people in Troy. We've had a number of programs over the years with Troy High School, with tutoring, with having people come here for classes, up to and including paying for stringed instruments so they could reinstate the string instrument program in the elementary schools. In the earliest days of my being here, we would give \$1,000 grants to homeowners to deal with code issues with their properties; and then we graduated it to giving them \$5,000 grants, and then we graduated it to giving out thirty \$8,000 grants for people to make more substantial improvements to their properties. And so, I could go on. We ended a program with Rehab America, where we gave them money to renovate houses, and instead of having them give it back to us, we let them keep the money to keep renovating. Claude can talk about any number of things we have done for the fire department, but, I can't give you an exact answer for all the hostilities or the source of them, and I don't particularly find it productive to worry about it. But [we must] keep doing what we can ... and should, do for Troy to make it stronger, because it's the right thing to do, and because it helps us. And, I don't get into political fights, and so the only time you'll hear me talking is when you all publish what you are going to publish in *The Poly*, because I don't play the game of talking through the media. I believe in talking to people directly and just getting things done.

**Walker:** Just in direct response to the question about the emergency incident last week, and the use [and] the deployment of the RPIAlert System: Since then, we have done an elaborate debrief on that incident and analyzed everything that worked well and analyzed things that might need improvement. I think during the course of that we have recognized that, some of the communication issues need a little more attention. So coming at this from the point of view of communication, especially in a situation like that [of] being a two-way proposition, there are things that we'll be discussing the officials of the City of Troy to make sure that in an instance like that in the future, the communication between the officials of Rensselaer and the officials of the City of Troy is more effective than it might have been in that case. I think we can all go back to the recognition of what the president said, and that is that any time there is any threat to the life and safety of the students and other members of this community, that trumps everything else in terms of how we conduct ourselves during that sort of a situation.