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An Open Response to the Open Letter posted on the Rensselaer website at:

<http://www.alumni.rpi.edu/greekletter.html>

Response on April 20 by:

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Responses are in ***Bold Italics***

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April 2006

Dear Greek Alumnus/ Alumna,

Nearly two years ago, we wrote you about concerns we had with the Greek community at Rensselaer. Our reasons for writing to you at that time were to inform you of issues we were facing with the Greek community, and to ask for your help -- indeed, your partnership -- in dealing with them. You did respond, and a positive outcome was a reconnection of alumni and alumnae to their chapters, resulting in a reasonable discussion within the Greek community.

***[The letter referred to was sent out without any alumni or undergraduate involvement and was as a result of the Spring 2004 issues with the Rensselaer County Underage Drinking Task Force which had gotten extra funding from NY State to be extra vigilant as well as the Theta Xi drug arrest incident. The RPI letter caused a bit of an uproar as it was fairly vague and led to alumni calling their house corporation presidents and chapter advisors to find out what was going on. It was also interesting that RPI was willing to spend close to \$5000 to send out a letter, but not to fund DOSO to do programming (the DOSO Office of Greek Life budget is like \$7000 for the year). It was at the Spring 2004 AIGC meeting that Mark Smith, the Dean of Students at an Institute of higher education, said “education doesn’t work” in regard to alcohol and other drug issues and had yet also been unwilling and unable to attempt true continual programming and peer education for the Greeks either out of DOSO/OGI or through collaborations with other RPI offices). To close this paragraph saying it was nice to have “a reasonable discussion” and then take no actions from those discussions or offerings of change from the IFC/Panhel and the alumni volunteers indicates that the administration really had no intentions of facilitating change. ]***

Unfortunately, over the course of this academic year, several chapters are again facing significant disciplinary actions due to high-risk alcohol consumption, which prompts us once again to ask for your assistance and support. In asking for your help, we want to underscore Dean Mark Smith’s statement that the Institute has no intention, *now or in the future*, to reduce either the size or the importance of Rensselaer’s Greek community. On the contrary, it is the Institute’s aim to elevate Greek life to the forefront of student life.

We want to work with you to overcome obstacles that have led to a declining membership, lower academic performance, and a rising number of incidents related to high-risk alcohol consumption. *[The Student Life Office for more than 5 years has been talking of “model of excellence” and “elevating Greek life” but they have not put any significant dedicated staff or resource to this effort. The declining membership is likely a result of a combination of FYE influence on the student population, the undergraduate Greeks not responding to demographic changes of the students and environment, the alumni not fully comprehending the recruitment issues on campus, and finally the minimal promotion and support by the Rensselaer Student Life organizations to broaden the exposure of the incoming students and parents to the opportunities and benefits of membership in a fraternity or sorority. Simply go to the RPI Student Life website and try to find Greek Life. When you do, try to find any good things to be said about the Greeks beside the parent’s guide. The Relationship Statement has its own page with no context to what is the document’s role for Greek Life and it is also linked under Judicial Resources – a statement in and of itself to how RPI thinks of the Relationship Statement. They feel it is a recognition document for the undergraduates (Poly 01/25/2006) – not what it really is as a statement of rights and responsibilities of the Institute, the alumni, and the undergraduates. Obviously RPI has forgotten the guiding principles that made this document a progressive declaration at the time of its formulation. If DOSO is going to benchmark policies to other schools, let’s also look at their programming efforts. Cornell and Lehigh are typical comparison schools for the Greeks. Their websites have information and resources about their system, an annual report of the school and chapters, and also promotion of the extensive programming they do to elevate Greek Life. RPI has failed in that portion of their metrics for the Rensselaer Student Life Plan over the last 5 years. In fact, it is somewhat unusual that the Student Life or Undergraduate Plans do not appear anywhere on the Student Life website, yet the students and faculty are being heavily influenced by what appears in them. Nor does any information on the self-assessment or progress toward the metrics appear to encourage greater interest and participation in the over-arching visions of the administration.]*

*The lower academic performance of the Greeks is a half truth and a red herring. The overall campus GPA is also down over the period of 2001 to 2006 and this could be related to the response to the apparent grade inflation with the plus/minus grade modifier system . The grade inflation was denied or never reported out {Poly 2/26/2003}, even though RPI did have a 0.15 GPA increase over the decade from 1992 to 2002 which one would have seen if DOSO would have shown the data for that far back. In the same time frame the faculty received a memo for them to seriously evaluate their grade distributions in their classes as some departments were out of alignment with normal class statistics. The grade modifier initiative was passed with 44% of the faculty voting and 75% of them voting yes (for a total of 32% of the faculty) – which the PR people said was resounding support for the grading policy change (Poly 08/31/2005). Also, the difference in the GPAs between Greeks and non-Greeks is well within the statistical bounds for over the last 15 years and is equivalent to less than every single Greek member doing worse by one letter grade in one class relative to their counterparts. Given participation in varsity and JV sports (an Undergraduate*

*Plan {UP} strategy), in community service (another UP strategy) and in clubs/student government (leadership is yet another tenant of the UP), let alone experiencing the true “living and learning” of interacting, following, managing, and leading an organization, doing worse in one class by one letter grade is well worth the skills gained for future ventures in “chang[ing] the world”*

*Finally the rate of high-risk alcohol incidents is actually down from the spring of 2004 – the time of the last letter. The IFC has worked as best they could through some of the issues and strengthen their own self-policing, but school has taken no true proactive programming initiatives such as Bacchus-Gamma peer education group, Institute assessment of the current alcohol environment like the CORE survey (which Katrin Wesner is {for used to be} the NY State coordinator of but she and the current dean for Greek Life never felt it was appropriate to do at RPI), environmental management, or social norming. They took no action on these suggestions and opportunities either due to biases against them or unwillingness to seek out these external ideas which are support by the Higher Education Center for addressing issues with Alcohol and Other Drug on college campuses. With DOSO being relegated primarily to judicial matters after the formation of the FYE Office and with the Dean of Greek Life reporting organizationally to the Judicial Dean, the perception reinforced is that the Greeks are under the Judicial organization because they are a judicial problem. Setting and perpetuating that stereotype makes it a reality, much like the perception that incidents are on the rise, because many of the things DOSO deals with are judicial items for the entire campus – not just Greeks.]*

We are seeking a lasting solution to assure the safety and welfare of our students and to restore a sustainable Greek life community. But this solution cannot be achieved unless the Institute, the Inter-Fraternity Council, and chapter leadership commit together to making a difference. As we work toward this solution, Rensselaer, in collaboration with actives, alumni, alumnae, house corporations, and faculty and staff, is taking three important, interrelated steps to help each chapter return to the founding values of brotherhood and sisterhood, scholarship, leadership, service, and philanthropy: *[To say that they are in the present tense working in collaboration with actives, alumni, alumnae, house corporations, and faculty is an outrageous overstatement. With the fuse Mark Smith lit to ignite the pent up frustration of each of the groups with whom RPI now says they are, and have been, collaborating and the resulting explosion of criticism, the school is now playing catch up to try to bring the pieces back together again. To have a play on Mark Smith’s words from the 4/13/2006 evening meeting with the Greek community in DCC 308, “it was unfortunate for [us] to believe [that good relations and cooperation could] be handled by the [administration]. The fear is the ultimate crisis could occur, and we don't want to see that (Times Union 4/14/2006).” Guess what? - the crisis has happened and it is likely not quite what the Student Life Office expected. Perform a search on the Poly website for “faculty” and you will see several articles by faculty and students about Rensselaer’s general disregard for protocol, respect, and collaboration among the faculty and students. It is one thing for the institute to state they want to “enhance student life” or “foster greater collaborations” in a performance plan or an open letter to alumni who may not be in*

*close touch with the current environment, but it is another thing to really learn how to interact and gain consensus for solutions to the root cause of an issue or to create new true initiative and directions – not requirements and regulations hidden in the cloak of the word “initiatives” or “steps.” Being Greek, one learns not by theories or books on how to lead and manage, one learns by doing – the ultimate living and learning experience.]*

- First, effective July 1, 2006, we will extend the Institute’s current campus alcohol policy to include Greek chapters.
- Second, we plan to engage the campus, alumni, and other interested parties in the creation and implementation of a new member recruitment process that better aligns with Rensselaer’s undergraduate plan, first-year experience, and student life initiatives. The new recruitment process will take effect in the fall of 2007.
- Third, we will assure a live-in house director for every chapter with its own residence, whether on or off campus, beginning in the fall of 2007.

*[The response to these is not ready yet, but regardless, many of the implications for implementation and the process by which any discussions and formulation have not been discussed to date with any of the students or alumni. These bullets read somewhat differently than when presented the week of 4/12/2006 and seem to be weaving new justifications for them since the original justifications were found to be weak and artificially conceived. There are many things that, had these “steps” been developed with alumni and students, could have been fleshed out. The President of the Association of Fraternity Advisors said on 4/13/2006 for an interview in the Times Union (04/14/2006), “RPI’s new alcohol policy is stricter than most” and that “the most effective policies are crafted by administrators, students and alums.” The true question is why for more than six months (if not more like 5 years) did DOSO take a secretive and non-inclusive, and ultimately extreme approach in their attempts to solve perceived problems. Problems which, if they had been respectfully and trustingly approached by the Student Life office within the guidelines of the Relationship Statement and the Rensselaer Student Life Plan, could have been worked and solutions piloted in a more rational and scientific method.]*

We acknowledge that these steps are only the beginning of proactive strategies that we must adopt and implement together if we are to succeed in our goals. We believe that you share the values instilled by your experience with Greek life at Rensselaer, and invite you to continue this tradition. Please contact Dean of Students Mark Smith directly at [smithm@rpi.edu](mailto:smithm@rpi.edu) or (518) 276-6266 so that we may begin a dialogue that will enable all of us to achieve the goals of strengthening the Greek community at Rensselaer. We look forward to hearing from you.

*[As a Freudian slip, the letter says to “begin a dialogue,” whereas before it stated collaborations and discussions were already occurring. It also says “our goals” which is read more like the goals and strategies of the Student Life Office that are created in secret and confidentially for the annual Student Life Plans and then unveiled in December at town meetings (The Poly 12/08/2004 & 01/19/06) after all the internal administration goal setting has occurred with no student input. To have the Acting VP of Institute Advancement cosign this letter indicates that they are concerned over the*

*initial feedback they have been receiving from alumni and the campus community. If they ultimately send out another hard copy letter to the alumni, it will be another \$5000 that they could have spent on proactive programming instead of reactive requirements.]*

Sincerely,  
Eddie Ade Knowles, Ph.D.  
Vice President for Student Life

Terri A. Cervený  
Acting Vice President, Institute Advancement