A Letter in Defense of the GSAS Department
(otherwise known as: Yes, Mom, I Promise I'm Not Wasting My Time and Your Money)
(otherwise otherwise known as: Shirley Ann Jackson, You Do Not Need Seven Million Dollars)

Dear President Jackson,

How does it feel to be the highest-paid president of all the universities in the United States? In total compensation, you nearly earn more than the presidents at MIT, Rice, UChicago, Yale, and NYU combined, all of whom are in the top 10 of highest-paid presidents of all the universities in our entire country. Here's what your biography says:

"Since 1999, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson has led an extraordinary transformation of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute of Troy, New York and Hartford, Connecticut into a world-class technological research university. Rankings for Rensselaer among national universities have risen substantially under Dr. Jackson's tenure, and the number of students applying to join the freshman class has tripled."

To that, I applaud you. Your ascendancy to your throne atop RPI has been hand-in-hand with the growing modernization of the surrounding Troy area. More students want to attend this school than ever before. However, news has spread that your salary is driving our school into debt. On January 5, 2017, our long-term and underlying debt ratings were downgraded slightly, and despite it only downgrading to a BBB+, it was something to look out for. According to the Spring 2020 update, our endowment exceeded long-term debt by over $35 million. Since 2018, our endowment has exceeded our long-term debt and the difference between the two has continued to increase. For that, I am thankful. The claim that your contributions to the RPI community have been overall detrimental financially, at least of recent, have been proven false. However, it becomes difficult for any leader to explain shortcomings in the school when their salary is as big as yours. Thus, I lead you to the persuasive part of this letter: an explanation as to why the GSAS curriculum at RPI is not only important, but necessary for the continued thriving of our school on an educational and financial level.

RPI is known as a polytechnic institute, which makes sense: it is one. Polytechnic, adjective, as defined by Merriam-Webster, "relating to or devoted to instruction in many technical arts or applied sciences", is the name of our game. Most people, when they think of polytechnic degrees, think of engineering. However, our tune needs to start changing. Since your tenure started here, the US News and World Report data reports that our graduate engineering program went from 17 to 43 and the undergraduate program from 14 to 29 as of the 2020 rankings. MIT and Rice, whose presidents get paid less than you do, are above us in rankings that are ours to excel in. If you want to get more students to apply and commit to a price tag of $75,000 without calculated financial aid, you can invest in a couple of different options. You could work on improving the engineering program in hopes that it would attract more applicants, or you could start focusing on a different path. I would advise the latter option because RPI freshman enrollment demographics show that the engineering department is dwindling in ratio to

make way for the management, science, and HASS (art and social science) departments. The most logical option is to focus on the growth of these other departments because that is the trend of the incoming student data.

You may still have a big question concerning how the GSAS program fits into this, considering that the HASS department only accounts for about 6% of freshmen. However, the necessary education for game design holds residency in all departments, especially the School of Science whose computer science degree goes hand in hand with that of GSAS. The Princeton Review ranks RPI as 17th in the world when it comes to undergraduate game design programs, and in 2018 the "highly regarded Games and Simulation Arts and Sciences (GSAS) program" ranked No. 9 nationally on the list of top game design programs in the United States and No. 7 nationally among schools offering a bachelor of science degree in game design by Animation Career Review. With the current state of gaming having taken over not just a niche subculture but an entire swarm of casual gamers, the job market is expanding rapidly. More students than ever before are able to take the idea of game design seriously with the knowledge that studios are in high demand, and we are at the forefront of the educational push for this learning.

The Multiplayer and Mixed Reality Classroom and the Cyber-Enabled Discovery and Learning innovations stated in the Rensselaer Plan for 2024 - your plan for investments to grow our community and its reach and impact alike - come naturally to the GSAS program, and the undergraduate and graduate students are both easily able to contribute to this goal. The classes you plan to design as games for student engagement are indicative of the importance of game design. However, the extent of game design is not just about the design alone. What sets our GSAS program apart is that it is one of the few game design programs that involves a writing concentration alongside other interdisciplinary concentrations such as electronic arts, cognitive science, computer science, management, and music. In a way, the GSAS department and its reliance on concentrations as a main part of the major reflects on RPI as an institute that recognizes the different facets of technology and how necessary a varied education is. Most importantly beyond education, the outreach of the GSAS program has extended to the Rensselaer community at large. RPI has done GameFest, which serves as a showcase for student applicants across the Northeast as well as a way to promote both our school and the game design market, for the past 16 years. We are at the forefront of the push for new voices beyond the Triple A game developers to be heard, and this showcase is just one example of this.

The thing I would like to leave you with, President Jackson, is something that you made into the RPI motto: why not change the world? The world as we know it is changing, and now more than ever we are able to acknowledge how important technology is to our daily lives. The GSAS program, despite not being your standard polytechnic program, is a symbol of what technology can be and the many facets it can have. Thus, in order to change the world, we as an institution need to provide more funding for programs like these to give future innovators more opportunity. You have the power to help make that happen. Please consider what you can do - possibly even out of your own pocket - to keep inspiring change in the world.